

The Return of SHERLOCK HOLMES

By A. CONAN DOYLE,
Author of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," "The Sign
of the Four," "A Study in Scarlet," etc.



ILLUSTRATED
BY F. D. STEELE

"I don't know whether you are playing a game with me, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," said he. "If you know anything you can surely say it without all this謢oofing."

"I assure you, my good Lestrade, that I have an excellent reason for everything that I do. You may possibly remember that you chaffed me a little some hours ago when the sun seemed on your side of the hedge, so you must not grudge me a little pomp and ceremony now. Might I ask you, Watson, to open that window and then to put a match to the edge of the straw?"

I did so, and, driven by the draft, a coil of gray smoke swirled down the corridor, while the dry straw crackled and flamed.

"Now we must see if we can find this witness for you, Lestrade. Might I ask you all to join in the cry of 'Fire?' Now, then—two, three!"

"Fire!" we all yelled.

"Thank you. I will trouble you once again."

"Fire!"

"Just once more, gentlemen, and all together."

"Fire!" The shout must have rung over Norwood.

It had hardly died away when an amazing thing happened. A door suddenly flew open out of what appeared to be solid wall at the end of the corridor and a little wizened man darted out of it like a rabbit out of its burrow.

"Capital!" said Holmes calmly. "Watson, a bucket of water over the straw. That will do! Lestrade, allow me to present you with your principal missing witness, Mr. Jonas Oldacre."

The detective stared at the newcomer with blank amazement. The latter was blushing in the bright light of the corridor and peering at us and at the smoldering fire. It was an odious face—earty, vicious, malignant, with shifty, light gray eyes and white lashes.

"What's this, then?" said Lestrade last. "What have you been doing all this time, eh?"

Oldacre gave an unctuous laugh, shrinking back from the furious red face of the angry detective.

"I have done no harm."

"No harm? You have done your best to get an innocent man hanged. If it wasn't for this gentleman here I am not sure that you would have succeeded!"

The wretched creature began to whimper.

"I am sure, sir, it was only my practice."

"Oh, a joke, was it? You won't find the laugh on your side, I promise you. Take him down and keep him in the sitting room until I come. Mr. Holmes?" he continued when they had gone. "I could not speak before the cameramen, but I don't mind saying in the presence of Dr. Watson that this is the brightest thing that you have done yet, though it is a mystery to me how you did it. You have saved an innocent man's life, and you have prevented a very grave scandal, which would have ruined my reputation in the force."

Holmes snuffed and clapped Lestrade upon the shoulder.

"Instead of being ruined, my good sir, you will find that your reputation has been enormously enhanced. Just make a few alterations in that report which you were writing and they will understand how hard it is to throw dust in the eyes of Inspector Lestrade."

"And you don't want your name to appear?"

"Not at all. The work is its own reward. Perhaps I shall get the credit also at some distant day, when I permit my zealous historian to lay out his

large elegies to a certain Mr. Cornelius, who is, I imagine, himself under another name. I have not traced these checks yet, but I have no doubt that they were banked under that name at some provincial town, where Oldacre from time to time led a double existence. He intended to change his name altogether, draw his money and vanish, starting life again elsewhere."

"Well, that's likely enough."

"It would strike him that in disappearing he might throw all pursuit of his track and at the same time have an ample and crushing revenge upon his old sweetheart if he could give the impression that he had been murdered by her only child. It was a masterpiece of villainy, and he carried it out like a master. The idea of the will, which would give an obvious motive for the crime, the secret visit unknown to his own parents, the retention of the stick, the blood and the animal remains and buttons in the wood pile—all were admirable. It was a net from which it seemed to me a few hours ago that there was no possible escape. But he had not that supreme gift of the artist, the knowledge of when to stop. He wished to improve that which was already perfect, to draw the rope tighter yet round the neck of his unfortunate victim, and so he ruined all. Let us descend, Lestrade. There are just one or two questions that I would ask him."

The malignant creature was seated in his own power with a policeman upon each side of him.

"It was 'joke,' my good sir, a practical joke, nothing more," he whined incessantly. "I assure you, sir, that I simply concealed myself in order to see the effect of my disappearance, and I am sure that you would not be so unjust as to imagine that I would have allowed any harm to befall poor young Mr. McFarlane."

"That's for a jury to decide," said Lestrade. "Anyhow, we shall have you on a charge of conspiracy, if not for attempted murder."

"And you'll probably find that your creditors will impound the bankbook as a count of Mr. Cornelius," said Holmes.

The little man started and turned his malignant eyes upon my friend.

"I have to thank you for a good deed," said he. "Perhaps I'll pay my debt some day."

Holmes smiled indifferently.

"I fancy that for some few years you will find your time very fully occupied," said he. "By the way, what is it you put into the wood pile besides old trousers? A dead dog, or rabbits, or what? You won't tell?"

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