

# The Seventeen Steps

*Discussion questions for investigating Mr. Sherlock Holmes*

## The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

### Adventure IV – The Red-Headed League

*Seventeen thoughts for further ponderance of "The Red-Headed League" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.*

#### 1. Who Gets The Settee?

As Holmes interviews Jabez Wilson, Dr. Watson wanders in. The courteous pawnbroker, Wilson, half-rises. He looks at somebody with a question in his "fat-encircled eyes." Next Holmes utters the words, "Try the settee."

In every previous reading of this tale, I assumed Holmes was speaking to Watson. This run-through, however, I found myself wondering if the question in Wilson's "fat-encircled" eyes was "Can I take a roomier seat?"

Who do the Hounds think wound up in the settee? Watson or Wilson?

#### 2. The Ship's Carpenter's Second Career

Sherlock Holmes makes some great deductions about Jabez Wilson, and as a result we learn that Jabez Wilson worked as a ship's carpenter long enough to actually build his right hand up larger than his left. (And remarkably, those built-up hand muscles stayed with him while the rest of his physique seems to have gone to fat.) His travels took him to China, which he was impressed enough with to get a tattoo and a watch-chain coin as mementos. He appears to have had quite a good career as a ship's carpenter, but now he's a pawnbroker.

Would it be possible for a ship's carpenter in that day and age to save enough money to buy a pawnbroker's shop when he retired from the sea? Or did Wilson's shop come to him through some other route, like inheritance or gambling winnings?



### **3. That Elderly Redhead**

Jabez Wilson is “elderly” according to Dr. Watson. Jabez Wilson also has a prize head of fiery red hair, that, if we are to believe what follows, must be completely natural. Not a trace of gray is mentioned, and as the Smash himself is finding an amazing number of grays among the brown these days, he wonders what old Jabez’s secret is. Had Wilson retained his hair color to an elderly age, or is Watson, still fairly young at this point, over-exaggerating Wilson’s elderliness? Or was “elderly” younger back then than it is now?

### **4. Photo Study Of A Pawn Shop**

Vincent Spaulding, Jabez Wilson’s half-pay assistant, loves photography.

“Never was such a fellow for photography,” Wilson reports. “Snapping away with a camera when he ought to be improving his mind, and then diving down into the cellar like a rabbit into its hole to develop his pictures.”

From Wilson’s description, Spaulding seems to have been taking pictures in the place where he should have been studying his trade: the pawn shop. And one would think he had some developed pictures to show for all his “developing” efforts. So what was he taking pictures of? Pawned watches? Obese pawnbrokers? That fourteen-year-old servant girl? With all the time that Spaulding spent developing, you’d think he’d have been very, very bored of every person, cubbyhole, and inanimate object in Wilson’s pawn shop. And if he left the premises to take his pictures, Wilson surely would have complained of that more than the developing. So what were all the pictures of?

### **5. In A League Of His Own**

Now, if you were scheming to convince a red-headed man that you were going to induct him into a “League” of red-headed men, don’t you think you’d find more than one other red-headed man to fill out your faux league for a bit? Sure, there was a crowd of them on Fleet Street and Pope’s Court the day of the applications, but those were the rejects. During the boredom of his daily copying routine, wouldn’t you expect Wilson to wonder about the rest of the league, spread across London in individual offices, copying away? An enterprising fellow like Wilson, looking to move up in the League to a Duncan Ross level position, might suggest that the League save massive amounts of rent money by consolidating all its little offices into one building. All these red-headed men are Londoners, after all, aren’t they?

How would you get around these questions, were they to come up?

## 6. The Snuff Memories Are Made Of

Jabez Wilson “paused and refreshed his memory with a huge pinch of snuff.” Okay, was this Watson taking literary license, or was snuff actually held to have memory-refreshing abilities in those days?

## 7. Professional Or Amateur?

Wilson holds up his “THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE IS DISSOLVED” card and makes a sad face, and \*both\* Holmes and Watson start roaring with laughter. It would seem distinctly unprofessional, but then, is Wilson really a paying client?

“I had heard that you were good enough to give advice to poor folk who were in need of it,” Wilson says to Holmes, and the detective tells the pawnbroker that an opinion will be given in a couple of days. Shouldn’t Wilson be seeing a lawyer? How many of these odd little matters of urban curiosity came Holmes’s way? By the time of “Copper Beeches,” he’s complaining of advising boarding school girls about lost pencils, so you have to wonder how many neighborhood walk-ins he actually had?

“It saved me from ennui,” Holmes says of the matter at the tale’s end. “Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence.” And while the U.S. Army got much mileage out of the slogan, “It’s not just a job -- it’s an adventure” in recent decades, it would seem Holmes was operating under something much the same, long before. It’s not just a job. It’s entertainment.

## 8. The Speed Of Smoke

The classic “three pipe problem” occurs in this, the fourth published case of Sherlock Holmes. “It is quite a three pipe problem,” Holmes tells Watson, “and I beg that you won’t speak to me for fifty minutes.”

Okay, smoking Hounds, three pipes in fifty minutes . . . about right? Too fast? Too slow? An added note: he never actually seems to make it through all three pipes. (And for you mathematicians in the group, how does the REDH rate figure in the upcoming tale TWIS and its all-night smoke?)

## 9. Hanging Out With Holmes

One of the friendlier moments of REDH sounds a lot like this:

"Sarasate plays at the St. James's Hall this afternoon," he remarked. "What do you think, Watson?"

Watson decides his practice can spare him, and the two friends go out to lunch and a concert. Not off to a murder scene. Not to listen to some client. Just out to have a good time. They’re much closer now than when Holmes went to see Norman Neruda alone in STUD, and this is a nice glimpse of the pair when they’re

not on the clock. Any other ideas what Holmes and Watson might have done when they were just taking a day and enjoying each others' company?

### **10. Vacation, Or Tuning The Racing Engine?**

Watson tells us of Holmes, "He was never so truly formidable as when, for days on end, he had been lounging in his armchair amid his improvisations and his black-letter editions." Did improvising on his violin or reading antiquarian books hone Holmes's skills, preparing him for detective battle in some way?

Or was it just the vacation from the detective routine, using his brain in a completely different manner for a time, that improved Holmes's abilities when he had to turn and focus on a criminal investigation?

### **11. Jones's Napoleon Of Crime**

"John Clay, the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger . . . he is at the head of his profession . . . His brain is as cunning as his fingers, and though we meet signs of him at every turn, we never know where to find the man himself. He'll crack a crib in Scotland one week, and be raising money to build an orphanage in Cornwall the next. I've been on his track for years and have never set eyes on him yet."

Now, that's a pretty impressive testimonial from Inspector Peter Jones . . . at least until we hear Holmes tell Watson that Jones is "an absolute imbecile in his profession." If Jones is that stupid, can Clay be quite so clever? And as we'll learn in a future story, a certain mathematics professor is operating behind the scenes in London's criminal world, helping the common criminal look much brighter than he was. So what is the Hounds' verdict on Clay? Criminal genius or candidate for a COPS episode with Moriarty's help?

### **12. What The Finer Criminals Are Wearing**

We all know John Clay claims royal blood in his veins, and demands appropriate treatment from the police. But what sort of things did "His Highness" demand from his accomplice? When Archie, Jones's partner in crime, tries to make his escape, Peter Jones grabs his coat-tails and actually rips them off. Now, all cheap tailoring aside (and it must have been pretty poor to actually have pull-off coat-tails), did Clay make Archie wear a tail-coat on a bank job?

### **13. Paper Or Plastic?**

While we're considering Clay's genius, or lack of it, why does he wait until he actually emerges in the bank vault to ask Archie, "Have you the chisel and the bags?" Might that not have been a better question on the other end of the tunnel? And just what sort of bags would one use to transport large amounts of gold,

anyway? 30,000 Napoleons kept in 15 crates . . . that's quite a few carpet-bags. Do the Hounds have any ideas how the bags might practically fit into this scheme?

#### **14. Gypsy Ear-Piercers Strike!**

When Vincent Spaulding's new boss asks him how his ears came to be pierced, Spaulding tells him that "a gypsy had done it for him when he was a lad."

Was this a valid Victorian excuse for having pierced ears? Did lads often run off to see the gypsies and get their ears pierced? Was there any truth to it, or was it a fanciful tale covering some darker ear-piercing secret . . . and what would that be, anyway?

#### **15. The Red-Headed Stats**

One of the memorable moments of this tale is the great mass of red-headed men filling the streets around Pope's Court, and rightly so! How often does one see a dozen red-heads in one place, much less packed streets of them? In fact, what kind of numbers would we expect for the red-headed population of London at that time? And of that number, how many would have been otherwise unoccupied and able to come downtown to check out some bizarre ad? My point here is this . . . was Wilson's description of the crowds statistically believable?

#### **16. Peanut Butter And Jelly Sandwiches?**

Jabez Wilson has one servant in his house, a girl of fourteen who cleans and does "simple cooking." Like many statements in the Canon, it sounds good enough, but what does it really mean? What sort of meals would "simple cooking" encompass? And how did Wilson make do with such faire? Did he eat out a lot? Supplement it with things like bakery bread, cheese, and sausages?

Hungry Hounds want to know!

#### **17. The League Rules And The Men Who Obey Them (Barely)**

While the League of Red-Headed Men was said to have been set up to help out red-headed men, one has to wonder about that little fact after listening to the rules of the position:

- 1) You have to be in the office, or at least in the building, the whole time.
- 2) No excuse will avail. Neither sickness nor business nor anything else.
- 3) Copy out the Encyclopaedia Britannica. You must find your own ink, pens, and blotting-paper, but we provide this table and chair.

And while it's not the model position, neither is Jabez Wilson the model employee. He is told to come copy the encyclopedia for four hours. And how many sheets of paper does he think he'll need in that four hours time? Seven.

Okay, Hounds, be honest. Your business, like Wilson's, can spare you from ten to two each day, without affecting your income. You get offered \$500 American per week and a berth in the Red-headed League, with all the League's rules. Do you take it? And if you do, how many sheets of paper do you show up with on the first day?

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