

# The Red-Headed League



For the coming week, the Hounds will draw the cover of “the fourth smartest man in London,” John Clay, as he schemes to deprive a bank of its 30,000 gold napoleons.

He dupes an unwitting accomplice, his employer Jabez Wilson, into leaving him free to undertake what can only be called “skuldiggery” as he tunnels from Wilson’s pawn shop basement to the subterranean vault of the adjoining Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank.

This Adventure is one of two which involve both a forger and a fraudulent will.

In both stories, forgery has nothing to do *per se* with the will. The forger in “The Red-Headed League” is John Clay, alias Vincent Spaulding, who is described as being a “murderer, thief, smasher and forger.”

Clay is the well-educated grandson of a royal duke.

He is about 30 years old, small, stout-built and clean-shaven, with a white acid splash on his forehead and pierced ears.



It is a tribute of sorts to his intellect and cunning that police all over the British Isles knew his description minutely but were unable to apprehend him.

Even Holmes “had one or two turns with him” but had never laid eyes upon John Clay until this story.

Which gives rise to my first question: If Holmes crossed swords with Clay on one or two occasions and had yet to lay eyes on Clay; and Clay is still at liberty, could one or both of these occasions have been included among those in which Holmes admitted to having “been beaten”?

What also puzzles me is why Clay and his agile accomplice Archie saw fit to dissolve the Red-Headed League?

By October 9, 1890, they had finished their tunnel, or very nearly so, and were ready to “crack the crib.”

Why should they risk that Jabez Wilson would go looking for answers when his billet was lost so abruptly? Wouldn’t it have been preferable to just continue playing out the charade, give Wilson his four sovereigns on the Saturday on which the heist was planned, and be long gone on the Monday when he arrived at Pope’s Court to continue his copying of the Britannica?

This leads me to another question: Why didn’t Clay change his trousers when the digging was finished? He wasn’t digging when Holmes came calling because Clay opened the door “instantly” when Holmes knocked.

And so far as Clay knew, Wilson might well have come storming back to the shop from Pope’s Court without following the red herring that was intended to lure him to King Edward Street.

Speaking of King Edward Street, was there such a crying need for artificial kneecaps in Victorian England that they had to be mass-produced?

There were fifteen crates containing 2,000 gold napoleons apiece, packed between layers of lead foil. Why the lead foil?

Gold doesn’t tarnish or rust like many other metals.

At an estimated half-ounce per napoleon, the boodle would have weighed nearly a half-ton in the aggregate.

How did Clay and his accomplice plan to make off with 469 pounds of gold coins apiece?

It would have taken a weary length of time to drag (the tunnel surely was crawl-space only) all of that weight back through the tunnel and out of the pawn shop — without disturbing Wilson or the live-in teenage housekeeper.

Even in hundred-pound loads (and Clay and Archie both are described as small men), it would have taken five trips per man to make off with the loot.

What did the dastardly duo do with the dirt from digging the tunnel?

Just leave it in Wilson's pawn shop basement?

Did Jabez Wilson never descend to his cellar?

And are we to believe that a major bank branch would have a storage vault with a floor composed of paving-blocks laid on bare earth?

If they had been set properly in cement, it would have taken a lot longer to break through the floor of the vault and a great deal more noise would be made in breaking through it.

Finally, what did Clay mean when he shouted to Archie, "Jump, Archie, jump, and I'll swing for it?"

Bank robbery is not a capital crime in itself.

Was Clay just using underworld argot for "take the rap?"

Or did he believe that he would pay the ultimate price for having been, in another time and place, a murderer?