An Inquiry into: "The Red-Headed League"

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""The Red-Headed League" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in July 1891. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

If the case took place in 1890, as the majority of our chronology scholars state, then at the time Holmes was 36 years old and Watson 38.

The Red-Headed League	
Chronologist	Date of the Adventure
Canon	June 27 or October 9, 1890
Baring-Gould	Saturday, October 29, to Sunday, October 30, 1887
Bell	Saturday, October 4, 1890
Blakeney	Saturday, October 11, 1890
Brend	October 1890
Christ	Saturday, October 18, 1890
Dakin	Saturday, October 11, 1890
Folsom	Saturday, October 19, 1889
Hall	October 11, 1890
Keefauver	October 11, 1890
Klinger	1890
Zeisler	Saturday, October 19, 1889

Please note that Canon chronologists may differ on pivotal dates and comparative periods between cases, thus a simple majority is not necessarily correct. Most Canon scholars settle on a single chronologist's results for their research framework.

Main Characters:

Jabez Wilson, Vincent Spaulding, John Clay, Mr. Merryweather, Inspector Peter Jones.

Notable Quotes:

"For strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination."

"As a rule the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be. It is your commonplace, featureless crimes which are really puzzling, just as a commonplace face is the most difficult to identify."

"It is quite a three pipe problem."

"I observe that there is a good deal of German music on the programme, which is rather more to my taste than Italian or French. It is introspective, and I want to introspect."

"And now, Doctor, we've done our work, so it's time we had some play. A sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then off to violin-land, where all is sweetness and delicacy and harmony, and there are no red-headed clients to vex us with their conundrums."

All the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music, while his gently smiling face and his languid, dreamy eyes were as unlike those of Holmes the sleuth-hound, Holmes the relentless, keen-witted, ready-handed criminal

agent, as it was possible to conceive. In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented, as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him. The swing of his nature took him from extreme languor to devouring energy; and, as I knew well, 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. Then it was that the lust of the chase would suddenly come upon him, and that his brilliant reasoning power would rise to the level of intuition, until those who were unacquainted with his methods would look askance at him as on a man whose knowledge was not that of other mortals. When I saw him that afternoon so enwrapped in the music at St. James's Hall I felt that an evil time might be coming upon those whom he had set himself to hunt down.

I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbours, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, I had seen what he had seen, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque.

"My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so."

A Most Pleasant Read

This is one of the Canon stories invariably chosen as a favorite. This is understandable; it is a pleasant, familiar old companion, the kind one enjoys spending an evening with.

Here we witness the Great Friendship is at its best—Holmes is dazzling in his deductions and Watson, although perpetually puzzled by his friend's conclusions, is ever-ready to join him as he pockets his old service revolver. Witness how the Great Detective tells us all about Jabez Wilson, his rotund, red-haired new client: "Besides the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labor, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

Here, too, we learn for the first time that our sleuth measures the difficulties of solving a case based on the amount of tobacco consumed in unraveling it: "It is quite a three-pipe problem." We also learn that he has authored a monograph (alas, long-lost) dealing with tattoos.

This is one of the few cases that begin by looking into something seemingly unimportant, even hilarious, only

for it to develop into an outrage of considerable magnitude.

Once again Holmes helps the official police shine, while viewing their abilities somewhat unfavorably: "I thought it as well to have Jones with us also. He is not a bad fellow, though an absolute imbecile in his profession. He has one positive virtue. He is as brave as a bulldog and as tenacious as a lobster if he gets his claws upon anyone."

Contrast this to what Jones thinks (with reservations) about Holmes: "You may place considerable confidence in Mr. Holmes, sir. He has his own little methods, which are, if he won't mind my saying so, just a little too theoretical and fantastic, but he has the makings of a detective in him. It is not too much to say that once or twice, as in that business of the Sholto murder and the Agra treasure, he has been more nearly correct than the official force."

The Deductive Physician

I must always grin when considering Watson's examination of Jabez Wilson and his unflattering deductions: "[Wilson] bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow."

This tells us more about Watson and his time, than about Wilson.

The reference to the "average commonplace tradesman," shows that the Good Doctor was firmly entrenched in the upper middle class; he might have counted—possibly former—minor nobility amongst his ancestors. The penury he experienced when invalidated from the Army, did not alter his view of someone who was "in trade." Even had Wilson had been successful to the level of considerable wealth, socially he would have still been eyed askance—if not as an outcast, surely as a social inferior.

It is a notable peculiarity of the Victorian Age that although Great Britain's exponential growth and success as an Empire was solidly based upon trade, those actually involved in it were viewed as being not quite gentlemen. This is well illustrated in John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, which chronicles the fortunes of members of a large commercial upper-middle-class English family, slightly removed from their farmer ancestors, and deeply aware of their "new money" status."

Watson belonged to that higher class. As a surgeon (and therefore meriting the honorific "doctor"), he was a professional whose status was well above that of tradesmen. Most of those belonging to Watson's class and above tended to display a disdain for those "in trade." Years before, Napoleon Bonaparte had dismissively referred to England as "a nation of shopkeepers."

Thus, Holmes' perennial admonition, "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear," resulted more from the Good Doctor's place in the social scale of his time than flaws in his observations. There was nothing wrong with Watson's observation of Wilson; he took in all the clues that Holmes saw and upon which he based his deductions. Watson's disadvantage was an inability to observe the facts in an unprejudiced manner. This made it nigh impossible for him to get to the next level and derive correct deductions from his observations.

An Unobserved Occurrence

Sometimes Watson leaves too many details out of his writings. In this case, I wish he had cleared up the mystery of the absence of the press in the matter of the Red-Headed League's supposed recruitment effort.

According to Jabez Wilson, when he went to apply for the position the streets near the League's location were overflowing: "Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope's Court looked like a coaster's orange barrow."

How can it be that such a singular occurrence escaped the press' attention?

This is rendered more strange, considering that at the time a majority of London newspapers had their offices on Fleet Street. It is nothing short of incredible that not one reporter appears to have noticed such a remarkable gathering and did not try to get an interview with Duncan Ross. Someone as clever as John Clay would have realized that such an advertisement would had to result in such a flood of applicants, focusing too much unwanted attention on his scheme.

Like the dog that didn't bar in the night, the absence of the press is mystifying.

The Nominal Crib

Watson was not too off on his description of Mr. Jabez Wilson as "slow." A wise old Spanish saying warns that "Even the saints distrust overly generous alms." Although unquestionably Wilson was one brick short of a load, it seems inconceivable that he would not have been just a tad suspicious of the League. He received a munificent £4 (≈$1,500) a week for copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in longhand yet the League was would not provide an additional shilling's worth of paper, pen, and ink? Plus the absolute (and absurd) prohibition about leaving the office—regardless of illness, business reasons, or bathroom breaks!

P.T. Barnum observed correctly that "There's a sucker born every minute."

What Became of Jabez Wilson?

Generations of Canon *aficionados* have puzzled over Clay's exclamation, "Jump, Archie, jump, and I'll swing for it!"

Although Jones describes Clay as a "murderer, thief, smasher, and forger," some canonical scholars, such as D. Martin Dakin, have suggested that Clay was not referring to his past crimes; instead his reference to swinging for it was an allusion to Jabez Wilson's murder.

In the beginning, the felons lured the foolish pawnbroker with the promise of £4 a week to get him to leave his shop and work copying the encyclopædia for four hours each day, enabling them to work on the tunnel unmolested and undiscovered. Compared to what they expected to gain from the robbery, the £32 (≈$12,000 today) spent was a mere pittance. It is puzzling then why they stopped paying him to keep him away at the most critical time of all, when they were about to reach their goal? The pawnbroker would have been considerably more than just an embarrassment.

If one cold-bloodedly considers the whole affair, it would have made more sense to have provided Wilson with a second-hand set of angel's wings from the very beginning. That way, they would not have been limited to a four-hour work period and it would have eliminated any chance of Wilson accidentally coming across the finished tunnel or, worse, to stumble upon the two thieves as they were transferring their loot from the bank.

Although perhaps Watson did not think it important enough to mention, it appears as if Holmes did not warn the pawnbroker to keep quiet. If this was so, it is almost a certainty that the garrulous Wilson would have told Clay all about his visit to 221B. It therefore seems logical that as the crucial moment approached, the burglars, (particularly Clay, who despised anyone below his stratospheric rank) would have decided that the best thing to do was bury what was left of Wilson in the tunnel rubble.

Clay's warning to his accomplice is somewhat revealing. "Swing" implies hanging. He could not have referred to the attempt to rob the bank, because by then British law no longer hanged robbers. While it is true that Clay is originally described to us as being a murderer, it seems unlikely that he referred to that when he warns his accomplice to escape lest he also "swing" for it.

There are a couple more loose threads one wishes that Watson had eliminated. But then, through the years these seemingly loose ends have provided boundless material for long and entertaining discussions. For instance:

What became of the girl who did the cooking and cleaning? She, too, lived there, and there was no "Red-Headed League" for her. Did Clay bribe her to keep quiet about the goings-on? Or worse?

How could it be that the cellar of a functioning pawnshop would have been so unused that Wilson did not go down into it in months?

Deep waters indeed!

A Few Tunneling Considerations

For most of history tunneling has been a hit-or-miss affair. Structures built based on empirical experience (i.e., learning from others' mistakes) usually worked; for example, Ancient Rome's sewers. The *Cloaca Maxima,* built in 600 B.C., is still functional, as are many Roman bridges and roads. Lacking the mathematics and data to calculate materials' tensile strengths and stress limits, ancient engineers tended to overbuild, which is why so many of their efforts have lasted until today.

Time and resources were at a premium for John Clay (alias Vincent Spaulding) and his accomplice Duncan "Archie" Ross. So what kind of tunnel would they have dug? Again, Watson

is unrevealing. All we know is that it began in Jabez Wilson's pawnshop's basement and that between it and the bank was a much-traveled two-way street.

For purposes of a back-of-the-envelope calculation, let us posit that the tunnel was five feet tall (1.5 meters), five feet wide, and 120 feet (37 meters) long. At first glance these dimensions appear excessive, but this was not a simple escape tunnel which only needed to be large enough to allow a single person at a time to crawl through it. It had to be sufficiently spacious to enable the two would-be robbers to haul several heavy bags of gold coins—they had already realized the impossibility of towing the original boxes as each of the 20 would have weighed over 180 pounds (82 kg).

A Napoleon was a 20-franc, 1.5-ounce gold piece. The 30,000 Napoleons were equivalent to £24,000 back then, or about $9,000,000 today. It would have taken some time to shuffle them through the tunnel, considering they had a total weight of some 2,813 pounds (1,300 kg). Not a bad haul.

Dragging out 30,000 gold Napoleons across to the other side required a sizable tunnel to enable the back-and-forth trips required to quickly lug out over 2,800 pounds of loot. Crawling through the darkness on one's knees while dragging behind a heavy bag of gold would have been impossible; hence, the theorized tunnel dimensions.

Lacking today's power tools, the would-be robbers had to dig their tunnel much like those escaping from a prisoner of war camp did during World War II— with mattock and shovel.

The soil beneath London is composed of alluvial blue clay weighing some 90 pounds (≈41 kg) per cubic foot. An experienced worker might remove about 35 to 70 cubic feet (1 to 2 cubic meters) of clay per day. This assumes continuous work with short breaks over an 8-hour workday. Construction would have required digging out some 212,100 pounds (≈96,200 kg) of clay—which was well within the eight-week period allotted. However, this would have resulted in a major disposal problem. Piled up, the tunnel debris would form a 2,356-cubic-foot (67 m^3) cube, some 14 feet (4 meters) per side; not easily hidden in a cellar's dark corner, behind a few old baskets, or flushed down the sewer.

Before the Red-Headed League decoyed Wilson from the premises, Clay would have been unable to do much serious digging during his "photographic" interludes. During this time, he probably was performing sightings and other calculations, to determine the tunnel's alignment and length.

Thus while the distracted pawnbroker was busily copying the *Encyclopædia,* over the following eight weeks the two criminals had to dig—and dispose— of some 3,800 pounds (1,700 kg) of dirt per day, to have the tunnel ready in time. There may also have needed to shore the walls and ceiling to avoid the risk of collapse every time a heavy cart drove over the busy, two-lane street above. This would have required shoring timbers to be stealthily brought in.

Small wonder they had to get Wilson out of the building!

Listing Winners and Losers

Obviously, Spaulding and Clay top the list of losers, having failed to successfully carry out their nefarious business and ending in jail,

Holmes evidently received no fee. As he put it, "I have been at some small expense over this matter, which I shall expect the bank to refund, but beyond that I am amply repaid by having had an experience which is in many ways unique, and by hearing the very remarkable narrative of the Red-headed League." (It would have been interesting to learn to which expenses he refers.)

Considering that Holmes kept the bank from losing £24,000 during a time when governments did not support banks or guaranteed their losses one would think that there should have been a more concrete sign of appreciation on the management's side.

Ten percent or £2,400 of the total sum our detective saved from being stolen would have been well-deserved. Even half such an amount would have been justified.

While *Ars gratia artis* is a worthy ideal, it does not supply the cheese to go with the bread.

Paradoxically, (assuming he was still living) the sole beneficiary of the whole sorry affair appears to have been Jabez Wilson. The putative Red-Headed League benefitted him by paying him a total of £32 for his encyclopædic copying efforts.

What else happened in 1890:

Empire

Helgoland ceded to Germans.

Work of Rhodes Pioneers begun in Southern Rhodesia.

Britain annexes Uganda.

Britain recognizes French Protectorate over Madagascar.

Treaty of Busah: improved Franco-British relations in West Africa.

Zanzibar Settlement: Tanganyika becomes Imperial Germany Colony; Germany excluded from Upper Nile; British Protectorate over Zanzibar.

Britain

Parnell vindicated of Phoenix Park murder charges; ruined by O'Shea divorce petition; rejected as leader of Irish Nationalists in Commons, resigns.

Omnibus strike in London settled on basis of 12-hour day.

Cardinal John Henry Newman dies. He was one of the founders of the Oxford movement, leading the propaganda effort for High Church doctrines.

January 4, *Daily Graphic* launched, first daily illustrated paper. Merged with *Daily Sketch* in 1926.

Horniman Museum opens.

First part of Rosebery Avenue opened.

Dulwich Park, gifted by Dulwich College, opens.

Vauxhall Park opens.

City and South London Railway from Stockwell to William Street, first deep level tube railway.

London-Paris telephone line opened.

Financial panic in London and in Paris.

Lunacy Act gives management of asylums to visiting committees.

Housing of Working Classes Act.

◄ Sir B. Baker and Sir J. Fowler complete cantilever Forth Bridge (for railway) at Queensferry, near Edinburgh; length 1.3 miles.

Charles Booth writes, *In Darkest England*.

Sir Richard Burton dies at Trieste. Famous for his visits to Mecca and Medina disguised as a Muslim pilgrim, the explorer served in the Crimean War and, with Captain Speke, discovered Lake Tanganyika. Renowned also for his books of travel and magnificent *History of the Sword*. He is best remembered as the translator of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Caine writes, *Bondman,* a novel.

Sir James George Frazer writes, *The Golden Bough*.

Morris writes *News from Nowhere*.

Sir William Watson writes, *Wordsworth's Grave*.

World

Africa is repartitioned among the European powers. England receives the sultanate of Zanzibar and an extensive strip of territory to the north of the German West Africa possessions. France is placated by dominion over all the oases of the Sahara and the northwest portion of the Sudan extending as far as Lake Tschad. In return for German concessions, Heligoland is ceded to that country.

◄ German Dowager Empress Augusta dies at the Royal Palace at Berlin. The Queen, later Empress, devoted her time and energies to the reorganization of guilds of women under the Red Cross. Under her guidance, 677 general hospitals, 286 private lazarettos were established.

North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana and Washington are admitted into the Union.

Fall of Bismarck; the Prussian Prime Minister is made to resign. General von Caprivi de Caprera de Montecuculi is appointed as successor to Prince Bismarck. This event marks the beginning of William II's disastrous personal rule.

The five republics of Central America unite under one president with a five-member cabinet and diet of 15.

Workmen in France allowed compensation for contracts broken by employers.

William III of Holland dies; Luxembourg passes to Duke of Nassau.

Zemstva Law in Russia; limited franchise in local government; excluded intellectual professions.

Russia attempts to limit Finnish Control over customs and money.

First meeting of Japanese Legislature under new Constitution. First great national election to the new Parliament in Japan and the provincial assemblies are held. Nearly 85% of eligible voters cast ballots. Results show that almost all the candidates that received some sort of government employment had been repudiated by the people.

Italy annexes Eritrea.

French miners to elect delegates to supervise safety while working.

Numerous arrests made at Paris in anticipation of expected Socialist demonstrations. Among them, the Marquis de Mores, a French Royalist of American cowboy fame on charge of inciting soldiers to revolt and of furnishing funds to Socialist organs. In May several labor riots occur.

Workers' agitation in London, as result of the goings-on in Paris. More than 20,000 workmen attend a mass meeting in Hyde Park.

In Chicago, the first entirely steel-framed building erected. The city is chosen as the site of the 1892 World's Fair.

U.S. signs extradition treaty with Great Britain.

Cholera again strikes pilgrims at Mecca.

French Explorer Monteil's journey Niger-Kano-Tchad-Tripoli; completed 1892.

First Chinese cotton mill constructed.

Students of the University of St. Petersburg University and the Academy of Agriculture demand the reestablishment of the more liberal regulations of 1863. Five hundred are imprisoned. This results in the police closing of the University and Technological Institute of St. Petersburg.

The Tsar issues imperial edicts against the Jews. They are forbidden to hold land, are directed to reside in towns, and are excluded from certain cities where until then they had been unmolested.

government's refusal to submit to the people the question of a revision of the constitution.

Turkish outrages reported from Armenia. Atrocities committed by the Kurd against the Armenians, half of Salonica burned down.

Heinrich Schliemann German archaeologist, discoverer of Troy, died at Naples.

Art

Franck, Belgian organ composer dies.

Degas paints *Dancers in Blue*.

Gilbert writes, *Original Comic Operas*.

Barry writes, *My Lady Nicotine*.

Pietro Mascagni writes *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Prince Igor, commenced by Borodin (dies 1887), completed by Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov.

Whistler writes, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*.

Ibsen writes, *Hedda Gabler*.

Zola wites, *La Bête humaine*.

Science and Technology

Bertillon publishes *La photographie judiciare,* in which he explains his anthropometry.

Emil von Behring, German bacteriologist, discovers immunity to tetanus can be given by use of serum; introduces name "antitoxin."

Lockyer's theory of stellar evolution.

Halstead, at John Hopkins Hospital, first to use rubber gloves in surgery.

Moving-picture films, precursor of cinematography shown in New York.

Cyanide process of preparation of gold from crude ore developed in South Africa.

Application of pneumatic tires to bicycles makes popular craze of that sport.

P. Rudolph's anastigmatic camera lens.

Discovery of Cleopatra's tomb.

First use of the electric chair as a method of execution.

The cardboard box is invented.

Next week's case: IDEN.

Respectfully submitted,

Murray, the Courageous Orderly

(a.k.a. Alexander E. Braun, Master of Hounds)
"I should have fallen into the hands of the
murderous Ghazis had it not been for the
devotion and courage shown by Murray,
my orderly..."

All Sherlock Holmes photos have been published by courtesy of ITV Granada.

If you would like to join the Hounds of the Internet, email us at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

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