

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE

By Arthur Conan Doyle

My name is Dr. John Watson. Some years ago, I retired from my position as a medical officer in the British army and settled in London. Since that time, I have followed the casework of my remarkable friend and associate, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Holmes has applied his scientific method to the solution of countless crimes across the length and breadth of England, and I have had the honor of writing the stories of these criminal investigations. In that sense, one could call me the professional biographer of this most famous of detectives.

Holmes' cases are generally difficult and often interesting. One of the most interesting arose from a very funny situation with a man who had joined a strange gentleman's club -- a club with membership based, incredibly, on the color of one's hair!

Read on to learn how this seemingly humorous little mystery unfolded into an enormous criminal effort, an effort masterminded by Holmes' greatest and most brilliant enemy -- Professor Moriarty.

It all began in an unlikely way. I arrived at Holmes' Baker street apartment one day in the autumn of last year and found him talking to an overweight gentleman with pale skin with fiery red hair. Holmes pulled me abruptly into the room and closed the door behind me.

"You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson," he said.

"I was afraid that you were busy."

"So I am. Very much so."

"Then I can wait in the next room."

"Not at all. You must meet my newest client, Mr. Jabez Wilson, a small businessman with an unusual problem."

Holmes then led me into the room where his new client sat with a confused and uncomfortable posture.

"Now, Mr. Wilson, said Holmes, "let me introduce my friend and colleague, Dr. Watson. Watson has been a partner in many of my most successful cases, and I have no doubt that he will be of the utmost use to me in yours also."

The man half rose from his chair and gave a greeting, with a quick little glance from his small fat-encircled eyes.

Holmes continued. “I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is outside the routine of everyday life. Mr. Jabez Wilson here has been good enough to call upon me this morning, and to begin a narrative which promises to be one of the most interesting I have listened to for some time. As far as I have heard, it is impossible for me to say whether the present case is an instance of crime or not, but the course of events is certainly among the strangest that I have ever listened to. Perhaps, Mr. Wilson, you would have the great kindness to repeat your story.”

Wilson puffed out his chest with pride and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his coat. As he glanced down the advertisement column, I took a good look at the man. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average British shopkeeper - - dull, self-satisfied, and fat. Look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man except his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme discontent upon his face.

Sherlock Holmes went into his usual analysis. “Beyond the obvious facts that Mr. Wilson has at some time done manual labor, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else.”

Mr. Jabez Wilson started up from his chair. “How, in the name of good-fortune, did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?” he asked. “How did you know, for example, that I once did manual labor. It’s true! I began as a ship’s carpenter.”

“Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed.”

But the writing?”

“What else can be indicated by that right cuff so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk?”

“Well, but China?”

“The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist could only have been done in China. That trick of staining the fishes’ scales of a delicate pink is quite peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple.”

Mr. Jabez Wilson laughed heavily. “Well, I never!” said he. “I thought at first that you’d done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all.”

“I begin to think, Watson,” said Holmes, “that I make a mistake in explaining. Once things are explained, they seem simpler than they really are!”

Wilson, who appeared not to understand Holmes, proceeded to shuffle through the paper, looking for the item in question.

“Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?” asked Holmes.

“Yes, I have got it now,” he answered with his thick red finger planted halfway down the column. “Here it is. This is what began it all. You just read it for yourself, sir.”

I took the paper from him and read as follows:

“TO THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE: On account of the donation of the late Ezekiah Hopkins, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, U. S. A., there is now another vacancy open which entitles a member of the League to a salary of £4 a week for purely nominal services. All red-headed men who are sound in body and mind and above the age of twenty-one years, are eligible. Apply in person on Monday, at eleven o’clock, to Duncan Ross, at the offices of the League, 7 Pope’s Court, Fleet Street.”

“What on earth does this mean?” I asked after I had twice read over the extraordinary announcement.

Holmes chuckled and wriggled in his chair. “It is a little off the beaten track, isn’t it?” said he. “And now, Mr. Wilson, tell us all about yourself and the effect which this advertisement had upon you. You will first make a note, Doctor, of the paper and the date.”

“It is The *London Morning Chronicle* of April 27, 1890. Just two months ago, I said.”

“Very good. Now, Mr. Wilson?”

“Well, it is just as I have been telling you, Mr. Holmes,” said Jabez Wilson, mopping his forehead; “I have a small pawnbroker’s business in Coburg Square, near the center of London. It’s not a very large business, and it has not done more than just give me a living. I used to be able to keep two assistants, but now I only keep one; and I would have a hard time paying him if it were not that he is willing to come for half wages -- so as to learn the business.”

“Half wages, said Holmes. Strange... What is the name of this generous young man?” asked Sherlock Holmes.

“His name is Vincent Spaulding, and he’s not that young, either. It’s hard to say his age. But I could not wish for a smarter assistant, Mr. Holmes; and I know very well that he could better himself and earn twice what I am able to give him. But, after all, if he is satisfied, why should I put ideas in his head?”

“Why, indeed? You seem most fortunate in having an employee who comes under the full market price. It is not a common experience among employers in this greedy age. I don’t know that your assistant is not as remarkable as your advertisement.”

“Oh, he has his faults, too,” said Mr. Wilson. “There never was such a fellow for photography -- 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. That is his main fault, but on the whole he’s a good worker.”

“He is still with you, I presume?”

“Yes, sir. He and a girl of fourteen, who does a bit of simple cooking and keeps the place clean—that’s all I have in the house, for I have no immediate family.

“Please continue,” said Holmes.

“The first thing that put us out was that advertisement. Spaulding, he came down into the office just eight weeks ago, with this very paper in his hand, and he says:

“ ‘I wish to the Lord, Mr. Wilson, that I was a red-headed man.’

“ ‘Why is that?’ I asks.

“ ‘Why,’ says he, ‘here’s another vacancy in the League of the Red-headed Men. It’s worth quite a little fortune to any man who gets it, and I understand that there are more vacancies than there are men, so that the trustees are at their wits’ end what to do with the money. If my hair would only change color, here’s a nice little job all ready for me to step into.’

“ ‘Why, what is it, then?’ I asked. You see, Mr. Holmes, I am a very stay-at-home man, and as my business came to me instead of my having to go to it, I was often weeks on end without leaving the shop. In that way I didn’t know much of what was going on outside, and I was always glad to get a bit of news.

“ ‘Have you never heard of the League of the Red-headed Men?’ Spaulding asked with his eyes open.

“ ‘Never, I said.’

“ ‘Why, I’m surprised, for you are eligible yourself for one of the vacancies.’

“ ‘And what are they worth?’ I asked.

“ ‘A couple of hundred pounds a year! And the work is easy, and it need not interfere very much with one’s other occupations.’

“ ‘Well, you can easily think that that kind of money made me pick up my ears, for the business has not been over good for some years, and an extra couple of hundred pounds would have been very handy.

“ ‘Tell me all about it,’ said I.

“ ‘Well,’ said he, showing me the advertisement, ‘you can see for yourself that the League has a vacancy, and there is the address where you should apply. As far as I can make out, the League was founded by an American millionaire, Ezekiah Hopkins, who was very peculiar in his ways. He was himself red-headed, and he had a great sympathy for all red-headed men; so, when he died, it was found that he had left his enormous fortune in the hands of trustees, with instructions to apply the interest to the providing of easy jobs to men whose hair is of that color. From all I hear, it is splendid pay and very little work.’

“ ‘But,’ said I, ‘there would be *millions* of red-headed men who would apply.’

“ ‘Not so many as you might think,’ he answered. ‘You see, it is really confined to

Londoners, and to grown men. This American had started from London when he was young, and he wanted to do the old town a good turn. Then, again, I have heard it is no use applying if your hair is light red, or dark red, or anything but real bright, blazing, fiery red. Like yours, Mr. Wilson. Now, if you cared to apply, Mr. Wilson, you would just walk in; but perhaps it would hardly be worth your while to put yourself out of the way for the sake of a few hundred pounds of easy money each year.’

“Now, it is a fact, gentlemen, as you may see for yourselves, that my hair is very very red, so that it seemed to me that, if there was to be any competition in the matter, I stood as good a chance as any man that I had ever met. Vincent Spaulding seemed to know so much about it that I thought he might prove useful, so I just ordered him to put up the shutters for the day and to come right away with me. He was very willing to have a day off work, so we shut the business up and started off for the address that was given us in the advertisement.

“I never expect to see such a sight as that again, Mr. Holmes. From north, south, east, and west, every man who had a shade of red in his hair had tramped into the city to answer the advertisement. Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk. I should not have thought there were so many in the whole country as were brought together by that single advertisement. Every shade of red headed color they were—straw, lemon, orange, brick, but, as Spaulding said, there were not many who had the real vivid flame-colored red tint that I have. When I saw how many were waiting, I would have given it up in despair; but Spaulding would not hear of it. He pushed and pulled and butted until he got me through the crowd, and right up to the steps which led to the office. There was a double stream on the stairway, some going up in hope, and some coming back dejected; but we wedged in as well as we could and soon found ourselves in the office.”

Holmes could not suppress a laugh. “Your experience has been a most entertaining one,” remarked Holmes as his client paused and refreshed his memory with a huge pinch of snuff. “Pray continue your very interesting statement.”

End of Part One

Part Two
of
The Red Headed League

With a deep sigh, Mr. Wilson continued his story about the League of Red Headed Men.

“There was nothing in the office but a couple of wooden chairs and a table, behind which sat a small man with a head that was even redder than mine. He said a few words to each candidate as he came up, and then he always managed to find some fault in them which would disqualify them. Getting a vacancy did not seem to be such a very easy matter, after all. However, when our turn came the little man was much more favorable to me than to any of the others, and he closed the door as we entered, so that he might have a private word with us.

“ ‘This is Mr. Jabez Wilson,’ said my assistant, ‘and he is willing to fill a vacancy in the Red Headed League.’

“ ‘And he is admirably suited for it,’ the other man answered. ‘He has every requirement. I cannot recall when I have seen anything so fine.’ He took a step backward, tilted his head on one side, and gazed at my hair until I felt quite bashful. Then suddenly he plunged forward, shook my hand, and congratulated me warmly on my success.

“ ‘It would be foolish for me to hesitate,’ said he. ‘You will, however, I am sure,

excuse me for taking an obvious precaution.’ With that he seized my hair in both his hands, and pulled until I yelled with the pain. ‘There is water in your eyes,’ said he as he released me. ‘I perceive that all is as it should be. But we have to be careful, for we have twice been deceived by wigs. And I could tell you tales of red hair dye that would disgust you with human nature.’ He stepped over to the window and shouted through it at the top of his voice that the vacancy was filled. A groan of disappointment came up from below, and the other applicants trooped away in different directions until there was not a red-head to be seen except my own and that of the manager.

“ ‘My name,’ said he, ‘is Mr. Duncan Ross, and I am myself one of the pensioners upon the fund left by our noble rich man -- the man whose money supports us. Now, when will you be able to enter upon your new duties?’

“ ‘Well, it is a little awkward, for I have a business already,’ said I.

“ ‘Oh, never mind about that, Mr. Wilson!’ said Vincent Spaulding. ‘I should be able to look after that for you.’

“ ‘What would be the hours?’ I asked.

“ ‘Ten AM to two PM.’

“Now a pawnbroker’s business is mostly done in the evening, Mr. Holmes, especially Thursday and Friday evening, which is just before pay-day; so it would suit me very well to earn a little in the mornings. Besides, I knew that my assistant was a good man, and that he would see to anything that turned up.

“ ‘That would suit me very well,’ said I. ‘And the pay?’

“ ‘Is £4 a week.’

“ ‘And the work?’

“ ‘Well, you have to be in the office, or at least in the building, the whole time. If you leave, you lose your position forever. The will is very clear upon that point. You don’t comply with the conditions if you budge from the office during that time.’

“ ‘It’s only four hours a day, and I should not think of leaving,’ said I.

“ ‘No excuse will do,’ said Mr. Duncan Ross; ‘neither sickness nor business nor anything else. There you must stay, or you lose your job.’

“ ‘And the work?’

“ ‘Is to copy out the **Encyclopedia Britannica** word for word. There is the first volume of it in that book case. You must find your own ink, pens, and paper, but we provide this table and chair. Will you be ready tomorrow?’

“ ‘Certainly,’ I answered.

“ ‘Then, good-bye, Mr. Jabez Wilson, and let me congratulate you once more on the important position which you have been fortunate enough to gain.’ He bowed me out of the

room and I went home with my assistant, hardly knowing what to say or do, I was so pleased at my own good fortune.

“Well, I thought over the matter all day, and by evening I was in low spirits again; for I had quite persuaded myself that the whole affair must be some great hoax or fraud, though what its object might be I could not imagine. It seemed altogether past belief that anyone could make such a will, or that they would pay such money for doing anything so simple as copying out the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Vincent Spaulding did what he could to cheer me up, but by bedtime I had reasoned myself out of the whole thing. However, in the morning I determined to have a look at it anyhow, so I bought a penny bottle of ink, and with a quill-pen, and seven sheets of paper, I started off for Pope’s Court.

“Well, to my surprise and delight, everything was as right as possible. The table was set out ready for me, and Mr. Duncan Ross was there to see that I got fairly to work. He started me off upon the letter A, and then he left me; but he would drop in from time to time to see that all was right with me. At two o’clock he told me “Good-day,” and then he locked the door of the office after me.

“This went on day after day, Mr. Holmes, and on Saturday the manager came in and planked down four golden one-pound coins for my week’s work. It was the same next week, and the same the week after. Every morning I was there at ten, and every afternoon I left at two. By degrees, Mr. Duncan Ross took to coming in only once of a morning, and then, after a time, he did not come in at all. Still, of course, I never dared to leave the room for an instant, for I was not sure when he might come, and the job was such a good one, and suited me so well, that I would not risk the loss of it.

“Eight weeks passed away like this, and I had written about Abbots and Archery and Armor and Architecture and Attica, and hoped with diligence that I might get on to the B’s before very long. I had pretty nearly filled a shelf with my writings. And then suddenly the whole business came to an end.”

“To an end? Holmes asked. ”

“Yes, sir. This very morning. I went to my work as usual at ten o’clock, but the door was shut and locked, with a little square of cardboard hammered on to the middle of the panel with a tack. Here it is, and you can read for yourself.”

He held up a piece of white cardboard about the size of a sheet of note-paper. It read in this fashion:

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE
IS
DISSOLVED.
October 9, 1890.

Sherlock Holmes and I looked at this ridiculous announcement -- and the sad face behind it -- until the comical side of the affair so completely overtopped every other consideration that we both burst out into a roar of laughter.

“I cannot see that there is anything very funny,” cried our client, flushing up to the

roots of his flaming red head. “If you can do nothing better than laugh at me, I can go elsewhere.”

“No, no,” cried Holmes, shoving him back into the chair from which he had half risen. “I really wouldn’t miss your case for the world. It is most refreshingly unusual. But there is, if you will excuse my saying so, something just a little funny about it. Now, what steps did you take when you found the card upon the door?”

“I was staggered, sir. I did not know what to do. Then I asked around at the nearby offices, but none of them seemed to know anything about it. Finally, I went to the landlord, who is an accountant living on the ground floor, and I asked him if he could tell me what had become of the Red-headed League. He said that he had never heard of any such body. Then I asked him who Mr. Duncan Ross was. He answered that the name was new to him.

“ ‘Well,’ said I, ‘the gentleman at No. 4.’

“ ‘What, the red-headed man?’

“ ‘Yes.’

“ ‘Oh,’ said he, ‘his name was William Morris. He was a lawyer and was using my room as a temporary convenience until his new premises were ready. He moved out yesterday.’

“ ‘Where could I find him?’

“ ‘Oh, at his new offices. He did tell me the address. Yes, 17 King Edward Street, near St. Paul’s Cathedral.’

“I started off, Mr. Holmes, but when I got to that address it was a factory of artificial knee-caps, and no one in it had ever heard of either Mr. William Morris or Mr. Duncan Ross.”

“And what did you do then?” asked Holmes, who was fighting to keep from laughing.

“I went home, and I asked the advice of my assistant. But he could not help me in any way. He could only say that if I waited I should hear from the Red Headed League by mail. But that was not quite good enough, Mr. Holmes. I did not wish to lose such a job without a struggle, so, as I had heard that you were good enough to give advice to poor folk who were in need of it, I came right away to you.”

“And you did very wisely,” said Holmes. “Your case is an exceedingly remarkable one, and I shall be happy to look into it. From what you have told me I think that it is possible that more important issues hang from it than might at first sight appear.”

“Important enough!” said Mr. Jabez Wilson. “Why, I have lost four pound a week!”

“As far as you are personally concerned,” remarked Holmes, “I do not see that you have any grievance against this extraordinary league. On the contrary, you are, as I understand, richer by some £30, to say nothing of the minute knowledge which you have gained on every subject which comes under the letter A. You have lost nothing by them.”

“No, sir. But I want to find out about them, and who they are, and what their object was in playing this prank—if it was a prank—upon me. It was a pretty expensive joke for them, for it cost them thirty-two pounds.”

“We shall endeavor to clear up these points for you. And, first: one or two questions, Mr. Wilson. This assistant of yours who first called your attention to the advertisement—how long had he been with you?”

“About a month then.”

“How did he come?”

“In answer to an advertisement.”

“Was he the only applicant?”

“No, I had a dozen.”

“Why did you pick him?”

“Because he was handy and would come cheap.”

“At half wages, in fact.”

“Yes.”

“What is he like, this Vincent Spaulding?”

“He’s small, very quick in his ways, no beard on his face, though he’s not short of thirty. He has a white splash of discoloration upon the skin of his forehead.”

Holmes sat up in his chair in considerable excitement. “I thought as much,” said he. “Have you ever observed that his ears are pierced for earrings?”

“Yes, sir. He told me that a gypsy had done it for him when he was a lad.”

“Hum!” said Holmes, sinking back in deep thought. “He is still with you?”

“Oh, yes, sir; I have only just left him.”

“And has your business been attended to in your absence?”

“Nothing to complain of, sir. There’s never very much to do in the morning.”

“That will do, Mr. Wilson. I shall be happy to give you an opinion upon the subject in the course of a day or two. Today is Saturday, and I hope that by Monday we may come to a conclusion.”

“Well, Watson,” said Holmes when our visitor had left us, “what do you make of it all?”

“I make nothing of it,” I answered frankly. “It is a most mysterious business. What

are you going to do?" I asked.

"To smoke," he answered. "It is quite a three pipe problem, and I beg that you won't speak to me for fifty minutes." He curled himself up in his chair, with his thin knees drawn up to his hawk-like nose, and there he sat with his eyes closed and his black clay pipe thrusting out like the bill of some strange bird. I had come to the conclusion that he had dropped asleep, and indeed was nodding myself, when he suddenly sprang out of his chair with the gesture of a man who has made up his mind and put his pipe down upon the mantelpiece.

"What do you think, Dr. Watson? Could your patients spare you for a few hours?"

"I have no patients today. "

"Then put on your hat and come. The great Sarasate, the finest violinist in London, plays today at the concert hall. Let us go take a look at the neighborhood around our pawnbroker's shop, and then we'll go off to hear some wonderful music."

I agreed to go -- as interested by this mystery as I was by the idea of some well performed Beethoven.

We traveled by the Underground train as far as Aldersgate; and a short walk took us to Saxe-Coburg Square, the scene of the strange story which we had listened to in the morning. It was a shabby little neighborhood, where four lines of dingy two-storied brick houses looked out into a small railed-in enclosure, where a lawn of weedy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel bushes made a hard fight against a smoke-laden and uncongenial

atmosphere. Three gilt balls and a brown board with “JABEZ WILSON” in white letters, upon a corner house, announced the place where our red-headed client carried on his business.

Sherlock Holmes stopped in front of it with his head on one side and looked it all over, with his eyes shining brightly between puckered lids. Then he walked slowly up the street, and then down again to the corner, still looking keenly at the houses. Finally he returned to the pawnbroker’s, and, having thumped vigorously upon the pavement with his stick two or three times, he went up to the door and knocked. It was instantly opened by a bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow, who asked him to step in.

“Thank you,” said Holmes, “I only wished to ask you how you would go from here to the Strand.”

“Third right, fourth left,” answered the assistant promptly, closing the door.

“Smart fellow, that,” observed Holmes as we walked away. “He is, in my judgment, the fourth smartest man in London, and for daring I am not sure that he has not a claim to be third. I have known something of him before.”

“Evidently,” said I, “Mr. Wilson’s assistant counts for a good deal in this mystery of the Red-headed League. I am sure that you inquired your way merely in order that you might see him.”

“Not him.”

“What then?”

“The knees of his trousers.”

“And what did you see?”

“What I expected to see.”

“Why did you beat the pavement?”

“My dear doctor, this is a time for observation, not for talk. We are spies in an enemy’s country. We know something of Saxe-Coburg Square. Let us now explore the parts which lie behind it.”

The road in which we found ourselves as we turned round the corner from the retired Saxe-Coburg Square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. It was one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the City to the north and west. The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the footpaths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realize as we looked at the line of fine shops and stately business premises that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square which we had just quitted.

“Let me see,” said Holmes, standing at the corner and glancing along the line, “I should like just to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer’s, the tobacconist, the little newspaper

shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane's carriage-building depot. That carries us right on to the other block. 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."

My friend was an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit. All the afternoon he sat in the music hall 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.

“You want to go home, no doubt, Doctor,” he remarked as we emerged.

“Yes, it would be as well.”

“And I have some business to do which will take some hours. This business at Coburg Square is serious.”

“Why serious?”

“A considerable crime is in contemplation. I have every reason to believe that we shall be in time to stop it. But today being Saturday rather complicates matters. I shall want your help tonight.”

“At what time?”

“Ten will be early enough.”

“I shall be at Baker Street at ten.”

“Very well. And, I say, Doctor, there may be some little danger, so kindly put your army revolver in your pocket.” He waved his hand, turned on his heel, and disappeared in an instant among the crowd.

I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, 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. As I drove home to my house in Kensington I thought over it all, from the extraordinary story of the red-headed copier of the Encyclopedia down to the visit to Saxe-Coburg Square, and the ominous words with which he had parted from me. What was this nocturnal expedition, and why should I go armed? Where were we going, and what were we to do? I had the hint from Holmes that this smooth-faced pawnbroker's assistant was a formidable man—a man who might play a deep game. I tried to puzzle it out, but gave it up in despair and set the matter aside until night should bring an explanation.

End of Part Two

Part Three of The Red Headed League

It was a quarter-past nine when I started from home and made my way across the park, and so through Oxford Street to Baker Street. Two carriages were standing at the door, and as I entered the passage I heard the sound of voices from above. On entering his room, I found Holmes in animated conversation with two men, one of whom I recognized as Peter Jones, the official police agent, while the other was a long, thin, sad-faced man, with a very shiny hat and oppressively respectable frock-coat.

“Ha! Our party is complete,” said Holmes, buttoning up his pea-jacket and taking his heavy hunting crop from the rack. “Watson, I think you know Mr. Jones, of Scotland Yard? Let me introduce you to Mr. Merryweather, who is to be our companion in tonight’s adventure.”

“We’re hunting in couples again, Doctor, you see,” said Jones in his consequential way. “Our friend here is a wonderful man for starting a chase. All he wants is an old dog to help him to do the running down.”

“I hope a wild goose may not prove to be the end of our chase,” observed Mr. Merryweather gloomily. “You’re making me miss my Saturday card game. I don’t see the purpose of following amateur detectives in the wilder theories.”

“You may place considerable confidence in Mr. Holmes, sir,” said the police agent loftily. “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, he has been more nearly correct than the official force.”

“Oh, if you say so, Mr. Jones, it is all right,” said the bank director. “Still, I confess that I miss my card game. It is the first Saturday night for seven-and-twenty years that I have not had my card game.”

“I think you will find,” said Sherlock Holmes, “that you will play for a higher stake tonight than you have ever done yet, and that the play will be more exciting. For you, Mr. Merryweather, the stake will be some £30,000; and for you, Jones, it will be the man upon whom you wish to lay your hands.”

“John Clay -- the murderer, thief, blackmailer, and forger. He’s a young man, Mr. Merryweather, but he is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my handcuffs on him than on any criminal in London. He’s a remarkable man, is young John Clay. His grandfather was a royal duke, and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford. 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.”

“I hope that I may have the pleasure of introducing you tonight. I’ve had one or two little turns also with Mr. John Clay, and I agree with you that he is at the head of his profession. But more importantly, this Clay has recently been working for the true

mastermind of London crime -- Professor Moriarty. He is the one I truly want to apprehend. He is the power that stands behind this crime. I can only hope that he raises his evil head tonight.

Jones was puzzled. "Moriarty? Who?" Evidently, Inspector Jones did not understand what Holmes was saying.

Holmes was not surprised by Jones' ignorance of the matter, and he continued, talking more to himself than anyone else. "Well, we shall see ... Anyway, it is past ten, and quite time that we started. If you two will take the first carriage, Watson and I will follow in the second."

Off we went, toward the presumed scene of the crime. Sherlock Holmes was not very talkative during the long drive, and he lay back in the cab humming the tunes which he had heard in the afternoon. We rattled through an endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets until we emerged into Farrington Street.

"We are close there now," my friend remarked. "This fellow Merryweather is a bank director, and personally interested in the matter. 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. Here we are, and they are waiting for us."

We had reached the same crowded thoroughfare in which we had found ourselves in the morning. Our cabs were dismissed, and, following the guidance of Mr. Merryweather, we passed down a narrow passage and through a side door, which he opened for us. Within

there was a small corridor, which ended in a very massive iron gate. This also was opened, and led down a flight of winding stone steps, which terminated at another formidable gate. Mr. Merryweather stopped to light a lantern, and then conducted us down a dark, earth-smelling passage, and so, after opening a third door, into a huge vault or cellar, which was piled all round with crates and massive boxes.

“You are not very vulnerable from above,” Holmes remarked as he held up the lantern and gazed about him.

“Nor from below,” said Mr. Merryweather, striking his stick upon the flags which lined the floor. “Why, dear me, it sounds quite hollow!” he remarked, looking up in surprise.

“I must really ask you to be a little more quiet!” said Holmes severely. “You have already imperiled the whole success of our expedition. Might I beg that you would have the goodness to sit down upon one of those boxes, and not to interfere?”

The solemn Mr. Merryweather perched himself upon a crate, with a very injured expression upon his face, while Holmes fell upon his knees upon the floor and, with the lantern and a magnifying lens, began to examine minutely the cracks between the stones. A few seconds sufficed to satisfy him, for he sprang to his feet again and put his glass in his pocket.

“We have at least an hour before us,” he remarked, “for they can hardly take any steps until the good pawnbroker is safely in bed. Then they will not lose a minute, for the sooner they do their work the longer time they will have for their escape. We are at present, Doctor—as no doubt you have divined—in the cellar of the City branch of one of the

principal London banks. Mr. Merryweather is the chairman of directors, and he will explain to you that there are reasons why the more daring criminals of London should take a considerable interest in this cellar at present.”

“It is our French gold,” whispered the director. “We have had several warnings that an attempt might be made upon it.”

“Your French gold?”

“Yes. We had occasion some months ago to strengthen our resources and borrowed for that purpose 30,000 napoleons from the Bank of France. It has become known that we have never had occasion to unpack the money, and that it is still lying in our cellar. The crate upon which I sit contains 2,000 napoleons packed between layers of lead foil. Our reserve of bullion is much larger at present than is usually kept in a single branch office, and the directors have had misgivings upon the subject.”

“Which were very well justified,” observed Holmes. “And now it is time that we arranged our little plans. I expect that within an hour matters will come to a head. In the meantime Mr. Merryweather, we must put the screen over that dark lantern.”

“And sit in the dark?”

“I am afraid so. I see that the enemy’s preparations have gone so far that we cannot risk the presence of a light. And, first of all, we must choose our positions. These are daring men, and though we shall take them at a disadvantage, they may do us some harm unless we are careful. I shall stand behind this crate, and do you conceal yourselves behind

those. Then, when I flash a light upon them, close in swiftly. If they fire, Watson, have no compunction about shooting them down.”

I placed my revolver, cocked, upon the top of the wooden case behind which I crouched. Holmes shot the slide across the front of his lantern and left us in pitch darkness—such an absolute darkness as I have never before experienced. The smell of hot metal remained to assure us that the light was still there, ready to flash out at a moment’s notice. To me, with my nerves worked up to a pitch of expectancy, there was something depressing and subduing in the sudden gloom, and in the cold dank air of the vault.

“They have but one retreat,” whispered Holmes. “That is back through the house into Saxe-Coburg Square. I hope that you have done what I asked you, Jones?”

“I have an inspector and two officers waiting at the front door.”

“Then we have stopped all the holes. And now we must be silent and wait.”

What a time it seemed! From comparing notes afterwards it was but an hour and a quarter, yet it appeared to me that the night must have almost gone, and the dawn be breaking above us. My limbs were weary and stiff, for I feared to change my position; yet my nerves were worked up to the highest pitch of tension, and my hearing was so acute that I could not only hear the gentle breathing of my companions, but I could distinguish the deeper, heavier in-breath of the bulky Jones from the thin, sighing note of the bank director. From my position I could look over the case in the direction of the floor. Suddenly my eyes caught the glint of a light.

At first it was but a lurid spark upon the stone pavement. Then it lengthened out until it became a yellow line, and then, without any warning or sound, a gash seemed to open and a hand appeared, a white, almost womanly hand, which felt about in the centre of the little area of light. For a minute or more the hand, with its writhing fingers, protruded out of the floor. Then it was withdrawn as suddenly as it appeared, and all was dark again save the single lurid spark which marked a chink between the stones.

Its disappearance, however, was but momentary. With a rending, tearing sound, one of the broad, white stones turned over upon its side and left a square, gaping hole, through which streamed the light of a lantern. Over the edge there peeped a clean-cut, boyish face, which looked keenly about it, and then, with a hand on either side of the aperture, drew itself shoulder-high and waist-high, until one knee rested upon the edge. In another instant he stood at the side of the hole and was hauling after him a companion, lithe and small like himself, with a pale face and a shock of very red hair.

“It’s all clear,” he whispered. “Have you the chisel and the bags? Great Scott! Jump, Archie, jump, or we’ll hang for it!”

Sherlock Holmes had sprung out and seized the intruder by the collar. The other dived down the hole, and I heard the sound of rending cloth as Jones clutched at his clothes. The light flashed upon the barrel of a revolver, but Holmes’ hunting whip came down on the man’s wrist, and the pistol clinked upon the stone floor.

“It’s no use, John Clay,” said Holmes blandly. “You have no chance at all.”

“So I see,” the other answered with the utmost coolness. “I fancy that my pal is all

right, though I see you have got his coat-tails.”

“There are three men waiting for him at the door,” said Holmes.

“Oh, indeed! You seem to have done the thing very completely. I must compliment you.”

“And I you,” Holmes answered. “Your red-headed idea was very new and effective.” Was it your idea? Or was it the idea of your master, Professor Moriarty?

“Be careful what you say, Mr. Holmes. When Professor Moriarty learns of your role in ruining this beautiful crime, your life won’t be worth more than a penny.

“We shall see,” said Holmes grimly.

Officer Jones, who appeared not to understand what Clay and Holmes were talking about, directed his attention to Clay. “You’ll see your pal again presently,” said Jones. “He’s quicker at climbing down holes than I am. Just hold out while I fix the derbies.”

“I beg that you will not touch me with your filthy hands,” remarked our prisoner as the handcuffs clattered upon his wrists. “You may not be aware that I have royal blood in my veins. Have the goodness, also, when you address me always to say ‘sir’ and ‘please.’ ”

“All right,” said Jones with a stare and a snigger. “Well, would you please, sir, march upstairs, where we can get a cab to carry your Highness to the police-station?”

“That is better,” said John Clay serenely. He made a sweeping bow to the three of us and walked quietly off in the custody of the detective.

“Really, Mr. Holmes,” said Mr. Merryweather as we followed them from the cellar, “I do not know how the bank can thank you or repay you. There is no doubt that you have detected and defeated in the most complete manner one of the most determined attempts at bank robbery that have ever come within my experience.”

“I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr. John Clay,” said Holmes. “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.”

“You see, Watson,” he explained in the early hours of the morning as we sat over a glass of whisky and soda in Baker Street, “it was perfectly obvious from the first that the only possible object of this rather fantastic business of the advertisement of the League, and the copying of the Encyclopedia, must be to get this not over-bright pawnbroker out of the way for a number of hours every day. It was a curious way of managing it, but, really, it would be difficult to suggest a better. The method was no doubt suggested to Clay’s ingenious mind by the color of his accomplice’s hair. The £4 a week was a lure which must draw him, and what was it to them, who were playing for thousands? They put in the advertisement, one rogue has the temporary office, the other rogue incites the man to apply for it, and together they manage to secure his absence every morning in the week. From the time that I heard of the assistant having come for half wages, it was obvious to me that he had some strong motive for securing the situation.”

“But how could you guess what the motive was?”

“Had there been women in the house, I should have suspected a mere vulgar intrigue. That, however, was out of the question. The man’s business was a small one, and there was nothing in his house which could account for such elaborate preparations, and such an expenditure as they were at. It must, then, be something out of the house. What could it be? I thought of the assistant’s fondness for photography, and his trick of vanishing into the cellar. The cellar! There was the end of this tangled clue. Then I made inquiries as to this mysterious assistant and found that I had to deal with one of the coolest and most daring criminals in London. He was doing something in the cellar—something which took many hours a day for months on end. What could it be, once more? I could think of nothing save that he was running a tunnel to some other building.

“So far I had got when we went to visit the scene of action. I surprised you by beating upon the pavement with my stick. I was ascertaining whether the cellar stretched out in front or behind. It was not in front. Then I rang the bell, and, as I hoped, the assistant answered it. We have had some skirmishes, but we had never set eyes upon each other before. I hardly looked at his face. His knees were what I wished to see. You must yourself have remarked how worn, wrinkled, and stained they were. They spoke of those hours of burrowing. The only remaining point was what they were burrowing for. I walked round the corner, saw the City and Suburban Bank abutted on our friend’s premises, and felt that I had solved my problem. When you drove home after the concert I called upon Scotland Yard and upon the chairman of the bank directors, with the result that you have seen.”

“And how could you tell that they would make their attempt tonight?” I asked.

“Well, when they closed their League offices that was a sign that they cared no longer about Mr. Jabez Wilson’s presence—in other words, that they had completed their tunnel. But it was essential that they should use it soon, as it might be discovered, or the bullion might be removed. Saturday would suit them better than any other day, as it would give them two days for their escape. For all these reasons I expected them to come tonight.”

“You reasoned it out beautifully,” I exclaimed in unfeigned admiration. “It is so long a chain, and yet every link rings true. But what about this Professor Moriarty, of whom you have spoken several times? Where does he stand in this case?”

Holmes’ face went from happy to grim in a moment. “Professor Moriarty stands behind, the mastermind in the shadows. He has had an extraordinary career. He is a man of phenomenal mathematical ability. At the age of twenty-one, he wrote a treatise upon the Binomial Theorem. On the strength of that discovery he won the Mathematical Chair at one of our smaller universities, and had, to all appearances, a most brilliant career before him. But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers. Moriarty turned to crime, and came ultimately to control the better part of organized criminal activity in London.

“As you are aware, Watson, there is no one who knows the higher criminal world of this town so well as I do. I tell you, Moriarty is the Napoleon of crime in London. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker. He sits motionless, like a spider in the center of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of

them. He does little himself. He only plans. But his agents are numerous and splendidly organized. This John Clay -- he is one of his agents. Now, Clay goes to prison; but the central power which uses the agent is not caught—never so much as suspected. This is the Moriarty organization, an organization which I devote my whole energy to exposing and breaking up.

“Can you not bring him to trial,” I asked.

"The Professor is fenced round with safeguards so cunningly devised that, do what I will, it has proven impossible to get evidence which would convict in a court of law. You know my powers, my dear Watson, and yet at the end of my efforts I am forced to confess that I have at last met an antagonist who is my intellectual equal. My horror at his crimes is lost in my admiration at his skill. This time, he has stumbled a bit -- only a little -- but more than he can afford; so I am so close upon him. But I do not have him. I had hoped to meet and defeat Moriarty tonight, but again he has escaped. Now that he has slipped away, I must begin again to set the trap that will catch this spider.

“Well, Holmes, you have at least stopped this John Clay; you have saved the bank’s depositors from a great loss; you have Moriarty on the run. Oh -- and you have saved our friend Jabez Wilson from the clutches of the Red Headed League.”

Holmes laughed. “Yes, our fine Mr. Wilson -- an expert on all things that go under the letter “A.”

“Holmes,” I said, you are a benefactor of the human race.”

“My work saves me from boredom,” he answered, yawning. “My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so. Perhaps this work of mine is of some little use,” he remarked.

I agreed that it was. But as I spoke, I noticed a shadowy figure in the distance, apparently watching us. Holmes had already seen the man.

“Come Watson,” said Holmes. “We are being observed. And if the observer is the man I think it is, we have every reason to watch our backs.”

Holmes would explain no more. But as we hurried away, losing ourselves in the endless ally-ways of London, I could not help thinking that we were in grave danger. I could not help thinking about Professor Moriarty.

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... Next: Holmes and Moriarty meet in the story of ...

THE FINAL PROBLEM