



"A singular set of people, Watson."

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.

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

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

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.

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.”



Watson's Deductions

It is always interesting to consider how revealing Watson's examination of Jabez Wilson and the deductions that he derives as a result are. According to our medico, Wilson “bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow.” Although this tells us little about Wilson, it discloses much about not only Watson, but his time as well.

The reference to the “average commonplace tradesman” establishes Watson's societal rank, which was firmly entrenched in the upper middle class; marking him as the probable descendant family of a



professionals and, possibly, even former minor nobility. His season of penury, experienced immediately after being invalidated from the Army, did not alter his view of those who, like Wilson, were “in trade.” Even if Wilson had been successful enough to become wealthy, socially he would have still been eyed askance, as a social inferior.

This is a somewhat contradictory peculiarity of the Victorian Age. Although Great Britain's enormous growth and success as an Empire was solidly based upon commerce, those who were involved in the actual trade were considered not quite gentlemen. An example of this way of

thinking is well-illustrated in *The Forsyte Saga*, by John Galsworthy 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 “*nouveau riche*” status.”

Watson was a member of that higher class and socially would have looked down upon the likes of someone like Wilson. As a surgeon (therefore meriting “doctor” in front of his name), he was a pro-

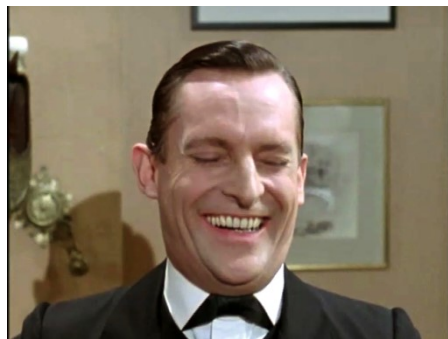
fessional whose status was far above that of a tradesman. In fact, socially and professionally speaking, he was above those whom today we would have considered as his colleagues. I call your attention to James Mortimer's response in HOUN when addressed as "Doctor" Mortimer: "Mister, sir, Mister—a humble M.R.C.S."

According to the *Medical Casebook of Doctor Conan Doyle*, by Alvin E. Rodin and Jack D. Key, British physicians graduated with degrees of M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) and M.C. (Master of Chiurgy; i.e., surgery). Further study, experience, and a thesis were required to earn the title of doctor—a graduate degree similar to today's Sc.D. or Ph.D. Physicians with the title of doctor were considered gentlemen and remunerated in guineas rather than pounds, whereas an M.R.C.S. was viewed as being at the level of tradesmen, and expected to use the tradesman's entrance.

It is therefore amusing to observe that when Watson decides to use Holmes' methods on Jabez Wilson, Holmes' perennial admonition ("You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear.") is correct. Watson's examination of the troubled pawnbroker took in all the clues that Holmes saw and upon which he based his deductions, but the Good Doctor (like the rest of us) although he saw everything the Great Detective did, he simply could not get to the next level and put everything together in order to extract the necessary information and additionally was tripped by his disdain of Wilson.

The Nominal Crib and Jabez Wilson

Aside from the fact that Mr. Jabez Wilson was not exactly renowned for his acuity, it borders on the incredible that he was not the least suspicious regarding the reality of the Red-Headed League. How in the name of everything that is logical could he so blithely accept that he was being paid £4 a week for copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in longhand? And that he had to provide his



own paper, pen, and ink? Add to this the absolute prohibition about leaving the office—regardless of illness, business reasons, or calls of nature! Was there even an umbrella stand in the room where he worked?

Considering how ridiculous the whole situation that Wilson related was, it is not strange that this is the only case in

the entire Canon in which we witness Holmes and Watson bursting in laughter over a client's troubles.

Then again, I am perennially favored with emails from comely Russian ladies who are lubriciously anxious to meet me, as well as from Chinese bankers requesting the use of my bank account as a transference point for \$50 million unclaimed dollars. Unbelievably, some people reply to such entreaties in great hopes for a night of revelry or reaping such a fabulous profit.

Which brings us to the next mystery: Whatever became of Jabez Wilson? For generations Canon students have puzzled over Clay's exclamation, "Jump, Archie, jump, and I'll swing for it!" Some, like the admirable D. Martin Dakin have suggested that Clay was not referring to his past crimes—



although Jones describes him as a “murderer, thief, smasher, and forger”—insisting that Clay’s reference to swinging for it was meant instead to the murder of Jabez Wilson.

The felons paid Wilson £4 a week for working on the encyclopædia, to keep him away from the premises for four hours each day, thus enabling them to work on their tunnel. Considering that the £32 (≈\$12,000) that this finally amounted to was a pittance compared to the expected gain from the robbery, why would they stop paying Wilson to stay away at the most critical time of all, when they



were about to reach their goal? His presence at that point would have been more than a simple embarrassment.

Were one to cold-bloodedly consider the entire affair, it would have been more practical to send Wilson to his Eternal Reward, not only keeping him from accidentally stumbling on the finished tunnel but, what would have been even worse, running into the two thieves as they were removing the loot from the bank. Nobody would have blinked an eye if they had closed the pawnshop with an “Going out of business” sign.

Unexplainably, Holmes said nothing about keeping quiet so the garrulous Mr. Wilson might have told Clay about his visit to 221-B. As the crucial moment approached it would have been logical and prudent for the burglars, (particularly Clay, who despised those below his elevated rank) to bury Wilson in the rubble of their tunnel.

Regarding the tunnel in question, I have gone into this in detail before. For those of you who might be interested, I have written two monographs on the subject: “A Few Tunneling Considerations” and “John Clay’s Inspiration?” If you would like to have any of these, you can email me off-list at CourageousMurray@aol.com.

The Curious Incident of the Press

As Yoda might remark, “It is perennially puzzled that am I,” regarding the unexplainable absence of the press and the lack of coverage on the matter of the Red-Headed League’s supposed recruitment effort.

If Jabez Wilson did not exaggerate how great was the overflow of red-headed folk in the streets near the League’s office, why did this not attract the attention of reporters? In his own words, “Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope’s Court looked like a coaster’s orange barrow.”

This is particularly puzzling because at the time a majority of London’s newspapers had their offices at Fleet Street. Amongst these were Reuter’s, *Daily Express*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Liverpool Post*, and the *Glasgow Herald*. It beggars the mind that not a single newspaperman noticed this unusual overcrowding and did not attempt everything possible to get an interview with Duncan Ross. Stranger still is that someone as clever as John Clay would not have realized that such an open-ended advertisement would have resulted in such an unusual flood of applicants, focusing unwanted attention on his scheme.

The Potential Loot



What would Spaulding and Clay's profit have been had they successfully carried out their nefarious business?

A Napoleon was a 20-franc, 1.5-ounce gold piece. The 30,000 Napoleons locked up in the bank vault were the equivalent to £24,000 during Victoria's time 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. Not a bad haul.

On a more minor note, Jabez Wilson had nothing to complain about. His stint at the Red-Headed League earned him £32, or about \$12,000 in today's currency.

The Phantom Fee

I suspect that Watson left something out regarding the Great Detective's fee. When Clay was finally brought down and Merryweather thanked Holmes, our sleuth declined any reward stating that he had been amply repaid by the experience: "I have had one or two little scores of my own to settle with Mr. John Clay. 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."

What was he referring to by "some small expense"? Cab fare? Regardless of how often (and it has been often!) I review this case it does not appear to me that Holmes incurred in any expenses.

Although our sleuth claimed no fee or reward, the principle of *Ars gratia artis* can be carried a little too far—regardless of one's artistic proclivities, it is still necessary to be able to put cheese on one's bread. An amount coming to 10% of the total that Holmes prevented from being stolen—£2,400—would have been justified. It does not matter whether this sounds a bit excessive—it is what a finder's fee generally amounts to. In this case even a paltry 5% would have been adequate and well-deserved. After all, Holmes kept the bank from losing £24,000 during a time when governments did not support banks or guaranteed their losses.

A Few Loose Threads

Although almost always one wishes that Watson had been more explicit regarding some aspects of the cases, the fact remains that for generations these seemingly loose ends have provided material for long and entertaining discussions. For instance:

We were told that Wilson's household included a girl who did the cooking and cleaning. Going by the fact that there was no "Red-Headed League" for her, how is it she noticed nothing amiss going on each time Wilson was absent from the premises? Did Clay bribe her or worse?

Would the cellar of a pawnshop been of such little use that Wilson did not need go down to it in months?

As already mentioned, we do not further hear from Wilson after his visit to Holmes, other than for our sleuth's assumption while waiting for the criminals to emerge in the bank's underground vault, that the by that time the pawnbroker would be asleep. Was he disposed of by Clay soon after the League's demise?

Deep waters indeed!

A Most Pleasant Companion

Invariably, when a survey is done this is one of the canonical stories chosen as a favorite. It is a pleasant, old companion; the kind one enjoys spending a quiet evening with.

We see the Great Friendship is at its best—Holmes dazzles with his deductions and the perpetually puzzled Watson is ever-ready to join him as he pockets his old service revolver. We read in awe as the incomparable Sherlock Holmes tells us everything about Jabez Wilson, his stout, red-haired new cli-



ent: “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 how for Holmes tobacco is a measure of the difficulties encountered in solving a case based on the volume of a favorite pipe (“It is quite a three-pipe problem”). We also learn that our sleuth authored a monograph (alas, long-lost) focused on tattoos.

This is one of the few cases that begins by looking into something apparently unimportant—even hilarious—that fast develops into an outrage of considerable magnitude.

We also see our detective once more helping the official police to shine, while thinking little of the its members’ abilities: “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.”

Contrasting this is what Jones thinks (with reservations) about the Great Detective: “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.”

Wonderful!



What else happened in 1890:

Empire



Helgoland ceded to Germans.

Work of Rhodes Pioneers begun in Southern Rhodesia.

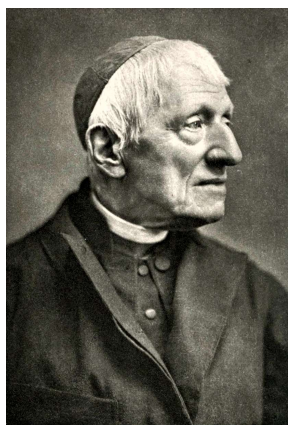
◀ Britain annexes Uganda.

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.

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

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

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.



Wounded Knee Massacre in South Dakota. Last battle in the American Indian Wars. This event represents the end of the American Old West.

◀ 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.

Revolution in Argentina, President Celman ousted.

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.

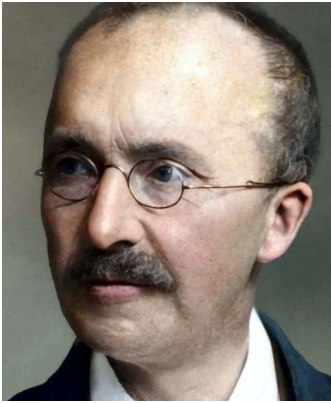
French miners to elect delegates to supervise safety while working.

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.

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

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.

Olderbank Clubs in Italy suppressed.

Political revolts in Switzerland over the government's refusal to submit to the people the question of a revision of the constitution.

First Chinese cotton mill constructed.

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

Art

Franck, Belgian organ composer dies.

Cézanne paints *Mme. Cézanne in the Conservatory*.

Degas paints *Dancers in Blue*.

Gilbert writes, *Original Comic Operas*.

Barry writes, *My Lady Nicotine*.

Pietro Mascagni writes *Cavalleria Rusticana*.

Van Gogh paints *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, *Street in Anvers*, dies.

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

Tschaikovsky composes *Queen of Spades*.

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

Paul Claudel presents *Tête d'Or*.

Stefan George writes, *Hymnen*.

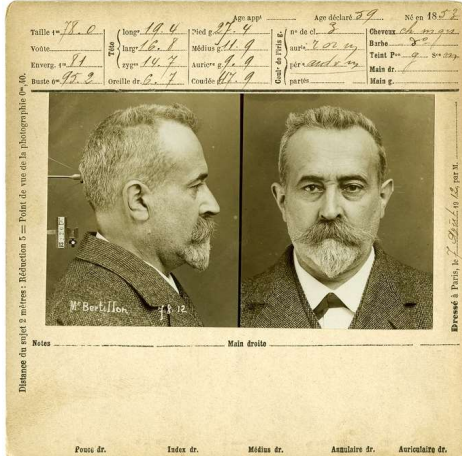
Arno Holtz writes, *Die Familie Selicke*.

Ibsen writes, *Hedda Gabler*.

Zola writes, *La Bête humaine*.

Science and Technology

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



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

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

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

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

Lockyer’s theory of stellar evolution.

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)

“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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