



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure IV -- The Red-Headed League

First published in:

The Strand Magazine, August 1891

Time frame of story (known/surmised):

October, 1890. Note: there are inconsistencies among dates stated by characters in this story that make it impossible to pin down an exact date, or even year.

Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

Watson not living with Holmes at 221B, instead residing at his house in Kensington.

Opening scene:

Watson calls upon Holmes and finds Holmes with a client, Jabez Wilson. Holmes invites Watson's involvement. Client interview in Baker St. takes up the first half of the story.



Client:

Jabez Wilson, a red-haired pawn broker.

Crime or concern:

Loss of well-paying job doing clerical make-work leads Wilson to contact Holmes. Real crime was attempt by Wilson's employee to break into a bank vault.

Villains:

Wilson's recently-hired and low-paid helper, Vincent Spaulding, and his confederate, Duncan Ross. Spaulding's true identity was John Clay, a brilliant criminal, who had attended Eaton and Oxford and whose grandfather was a Royal Duke. The red-headed Ross posed as director of the Red-Headed League, and was a murderer, thief, smasher, and forger.

Motive:

Burgle a bank vault. Trick pawn-broker into vacating his shop so tunnel can be dug from basement into neighbouring bank vault.

Logic used to solve:

Holmes saw through the ploy, and determined Wilson's pawn-shop backed up against bank on a main thoroughfare. Description of pierced ears and acid-scar on employee's forehead suggested Clay's involvement to Holmes. Dirty trouser-knees verified tunneling operation.

Policemen: Peter Jones, the official police agent, who was brave as a bulldog and as tenacious as a lobster, but an absolute imbecile in his profession.

Holmes' fees:

Remarkably, Holmes prevented the loss of £30,000, but when the bank-director offered to pay Holmes, the reply was, "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."

Transport:

Holmes & Watson travelled by the Underground as far as Aldersgate; then took a short walk to Saxe-Coburg Square.

Holmes & Watson, the policeman, and the bank-director took two hansoms and rattled through an endless labyrinth of gas-lit streets, finally emerging into Farrington Street near the scene of the anticipated crime.

Food:

Mention of an orange coster's barrow. A coster is a street vendor of fruits and vegetables, often selling goods from a cart or barrow.

Holmes & Watson went through the city on a Saturday afternoon to hear Sarasate, a violinist, play at the St. James's Hall, and stopped for lunch of a sandwich and a cup of coffee, on the way.

Near the bank for which the burglary was planned, was the Vegetarian Restaurant.

Drink:

Following the midnight capture of the criminals, Holmes & Watson sat over a glass of whisky and soda in Baker Street.

Vices:

Holmes smoked three (black clay) pipes of tobacco in 50 minutes, pondering the case.

Other cases mentioned:

IDEN and SIGN

Notable Quotables:

"Omne ignotum pro magnifico" (everything unknown is grand) – Holmes

"There may be some little danger, so kindly put your army revolver in your pocket. If they fire, Watson, have no compunction about shooting them down." – Holmes

"I miss my rubber. It is the first Saturday night for seven-and-twenty years that I have not had my rubber." – Bank Director Merryweather

Other interestings:

This story shares a plot element with 3GAR and STOC, which is tricking someone to go elsewhere whilst the criminal takes advantage of the absence to commit the crime.

When all is said and done:

“The man is nothing, the work is everything. (L’homme c’est rien — l’oeuvre c’est tout) It saved me from ennui.” This was Holmes’ modest reply to Watson’s praise for solving the mystery. That explains the low fees charged in this case.

McMurdo’s Camp