



The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure IV -- The Red-Headed League

“As a rule,” said Sherlock Holmes, “the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be.” Holmes was right: he seems to have solved much of this mystery the instant he heard the description of Jabez Wilson’s assistant, and nearly all the rest of it while smoking those now-famous three pipes. But mystery isn’t everything, and we, like Watson, share Holmes’s “love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and the humdrum routine of everyday life.” You’ve got to hand it to John Clay and his friend for coming up with so bizarre, so ingenious — and so hilarious — a scheme as “The Red-Headed League!”

I have picked two characters in this story to help us get the ball rolling, but if I know the Hounds, it won’t be long before we find ourselves discussing dates and tunnels, French gold and German music, earrings and rubbers. And why not? Though we may begin with generalities and suppositions, it is in the details that our theories will be verified or disproved.

Jabez Wilson: Was there anything the matter with Jabez Wilson’s eyes? He seemed to have some difficulty locating the newspaper advertisement to show to Holmes. Was this merely “old sight,” or does Watson’s description of Wilson’s eyes as “small, fat-encircled,” hint at some particular ailment? (Any eye doctors or eye experts out there?) How old was Wilson at the time of the story? And how did John Clay get so lucky as to find so perfect a “mark” as Wilson, in just the right place at the right time? Or was it luck?

Wilson said to Holmes, “I had heard that you were good enough to give advice to poor folk who were in need of it.” Did Wilson think of himself as poor/impecunious as well as poor/unfortunate? Did Clay overdo it by paying Wilson so grand a sum as four pounds a week for his services? Holmes explained that the amount was “a lure which must draw him,” but was it the loss of so rich a prize that sent Wilson running for help when



the money stopped coming? Had the amount been smaller, or Wilson better off, do you think that he might have been more inclined to let the matter drop without a fuss once the Red-Headed League disbanded?

Mr. Merryweather: It seems to me that Watson took an instant dislike to the bank director Mr. Merryweather and his “oppressively respectable” frock coat. Is one frock coat any more oppressive than another? Did Watson have some special reason to hate bankers in general? What might have made Merryweather miss his rubber twenty-seven years earlier?

What did Holmes mean when he said that Merryweather was “personally interested” in the matter? Wouldn’t Merryweather’s position as chairman of the bank directors make his interest in the robbery a professional interest, rather than a personal one? How would a person get to be on the board of directors of a bank? I note that Holmes’s comments about Merryweather were made when Holmes and Watson were alone in the second hansom, out of earshot of the other two men. Was there something else going on here? Ever wonder how Clay knew about the French gold? An inside tip, perhaps, from a very reliable source? And why did Merryweather strike his stick upon the flagstones in the vault? Was he trying to warn Clay? Do you think Holmes may have added Merryweather to his bag later on?

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