

The Red-Headed League

A Short Story by Arthur Conan Doyle

Adapted for Reader's Theatre
By Al Rodin

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Jabez Wilson is a pawnbroker whose store is located on Coburg Square next to a bank. He consults Holmes about the "League of Red-Headed Men." He had been told by his employee, Vincent Spaulding, that it is a group established by a red-headed American millionaire, now dead, who had left a large amount of money for men with such hair color.

Spaulding introduced Wilson to Duncan Ross who is also red-headed and the manager of the operation. Ross tells Wilson all he needs to do to earn the money is to spend four hours a day at an office, copying out the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Wilson does so for eight weeks, after which he finds the office locked.

Holmes becomes excited at Wilson's description of Spaulding. That evening Holmes gathers Watson, Inspector Lestrade, and Mr. Merryweather, the director of the bank, to descend into the bank's vault. They lay in wait in the dark. Soon Spaulding is seen descending into the vault. At his capture it is revealed that his actual name is John Clay, a criminal of whom Holmes is well aware. He and his compatriot, Archie, alias Duncan Ross, are arrested.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 Men)

SHERLOCK HOLMES: Austere, at times haughty, with occasional humor shown as a wry smile. Intolerant of sham and dull wittedness. Not overly enamored of the opposite sex, but exhibits gentlemanly behavior. Has so deeply repressed his romantic nature that he no longer is aware of its existence. Prides himself on his remarkable ability to make conclusions which are based on observations and are always correct, yet completely mystifying to others, including Dr. Watson.

DOCTOR WATSON: Prosaic, somewhat stodgy, and at times thick-headed. Faithful and obedient to Holmes, being often used as his foil. Unable to unravel a mystery until Holmes' concise denouement. A ladies' man, but always proper in his relationship with them, and shocked at any impropriety on their part. At Holmes' beck and call, being quite willing to leave his practice (And his wife) immediately whenever asked.

JABEZ WILSON: An unassuming pawn broker who was deduced by Holmes to have done manual labor, been a ship's carpenter, traveled to China, and recently done a considerable amount of writing. He was recruited by Spaulding to fill a vacancy in the League of Red-Headed Men because of his intensely red hair. He was required to be away from his business four hours daily, copying out the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

JOHN CLAY: A red-headed criminal who used the aliases of Duncan Ross and William Morris. According to Holmes, he was the fourth smartest man in London.

VINCENT SPAULDING: An alias of John Clay's assistant, Archie, who posed as an employee for Wilson.

MERRYWEATHER: Chairman of the bank invaded by two thieves.

PETER JONES: Scotland Yard agent.

SCENE 1

(The main room of the Sherlock Holmes suite at 221 Baker Street in the autumn of 1890. HOLMES and WILSON are in deep conversation.)

WATSON: *(Appears at door, looks at Holmes and Jabez Wilson in mimed conversation, and goes to DSR.)* I had called upon my friend, Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year and found him in deep conversation with a very stout, florid-faced, elderly gentleman with fiery red hair. He bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman: obese, pompous, and slow. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red hair, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features. With an apology for my intrusion, I was about to withdraw. *(Starts to go to USL to exit .)*

HOLMES: *(Rising.)* Wait. Sit down. You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson.

WATSON: I was afraid that you were engaged.

HOLMES: I am. Very much so.

WATSON: Then I can wait downstairs.

HOLMES: Not at all. Mr. Wilson, this gentleman has been my partner and helper in many of my most successful case, and I have no doubt that he will be of the utmost use to me in yours also. *(WILSON half rises, nods as a greeting, and sits.)* Try the settee. *(THEY sit.)* I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum of everyday life. You have shown your relish for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle, and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to embellish so many of my little adventures.

WATSON: Your cases have indeed been of the greatest interest to me.

HOLMES: You will remember that I remarked the other day, just before we went into the very simple problem presented by Miss Mary Sutherland, that for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination.

WATSON: A proposition which I took the liberty of doubting.

HOLMES: You did, Doctor, but none the less you must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep on piling facts on you until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right. Now 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 singular which I have listened to for a long time.

WATSON: That would certainly make it noteworthy.

HOLMES: You have heard me remark that the strangest and most unique things are very often connected not with the larger but with the smaller crime, and occasionally, indeed, where there is room for doubt whether any positive crime has been committed.

WATSON: It may indeed be so in some instances.

HOLMES: As far as I have heard it is impossible for me to say whether the present one is an instance of crime or not, but it is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to. Perhaps, Mr. Wilson, you would have the great kindness to recommence your narrative.

WATSON: You are most considerate to include me.

HOLMES: I ask you merely because my friend Dr. Watson has not heard the opening part, but also because the peculiar nature of the story makes me anxious to have every possible detail from your lips. As a rule, when I have heard some slight indication of the course of events, I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory. In the present instance I am forced to admit that the facts are, to the best of my belief, unique.

WILSON: And I have suspected as much.

HOLMES: First, there are several points of interest as to Mr. Jabez Wilson himself.

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HOLMES: (*Cont'd.*) Beyond 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.

WILSON: (*Stands.*) How in the name of good fortune did you know all that, Mr. Holmes? How did you know, for example, that I did manual labor? It's as true as gospel, for I began as a ship's carpenter.

HOLMES: Your hands, my dear sir. (*WILSON looks at hands.*) Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed.

WILSON: Well, the snuff, then, and the Freemasonry?

HOLMES: I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how I read that, especially as, rather against the strict rules of your order, you use an arc-and-compass breast pin.

WILSON: Ah, of course, I forgot that. But the writing?

HOLMES: What else can be indicated by that right cuff (*WILSON looks at it.*) so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk.

WILSON: Well, but China?

HOLMES: The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist. (*WILSON and WATSON look at it.*) It could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks and have even contributed to the literature on the subject. 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.

WILSON: (*Laughing and sits.*) Well, I never! I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing to it, after all.

HOLMES: I begin to think, Watson, that I make a mistake in explaining. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*—everything unknown magnificent—you know, and my poor little reputation, such as it is, will suffer shipwreck if I am so candid. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?

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