



An Inquiry into: "The Red-Headed League"

"The Red-Headed League" was first published in *The Strand Magazine* in July 1891. It is part of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

As can be seen from the table below, the date for this case varies, depending on the chronologist.

If the case took place in 1890, as the majority states, at

<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-Gold</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>

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 pos-



Courtesy of ITV Granada

sible 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 enraptured 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.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

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 Watson's examination of Jabez Wilson and the deductions that he derives as a result. According to the Good Doctor, Wilson “bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow.” This tells us much about not just Watson, but his time.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

His reference to the “average commonplace tradesman,” is very indicative of Watson's class, which was firmly entrenched in the upper middle class—possibly even former, very minor, nobility. His initial season of penury, experienced when he was invalidated from the Army, did not alter his view of Wilson who was “in trade.” Even had Wilson had been successful to the level of wealth, socially he would have still been eyed askance, as someone who is socially inferior.

This is a notable peculiarity of the Victorian Age. Although Great Britain's growth and success as an Empire was based upon trade, those who were involved in the actual trade were not quite gentlemen. A good example of this way of thinking is illustrated in *The Forsyte Saga*, 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 “new money” 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 (and therefore meriting “doctor” in front of his name), he



Courtesy of ITV Granada

was a professional whose status was well above that of the 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 the response of James Mortimer, MRCS, 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*, British physicians graduated with degrees of M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) and M.C. (Master of Chiurgy or surgery). Further study, experience, and a thesis were required to earn the title doctor—a graduate degree similar to Sc.D. or Ph.D. Physicians with the title of doctor were considered gentlemen whereas the M.R.C.S. were considered tradesmen, and were expected to use the tradesman’s entrance.

The Practice

And speaking of the Good Doctor, although he was in harness, it does not appear that patients were exactly breaking down his door. Consider his reply when Holmes asks him to join him in the case:

“Could your patients spare you for a few hours?”

And Watson’s reply,

“I have nothing to do to-day. My practice is never very absorbing.”

What are we to make of this? How did our medico maintain his household? Were the Morstan pearls hocked?

The Musical Detective

According to Watson, Holmes was not only “an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit.”

A *composer*? How is it that his music is unknown? Or is it that he wrote it under a pseudonym?

Where Was the Press?

Something that always puzzles me, and that I wish Watson had mentioned one way or another was the absence of the press in the matter of the Red-Headed League’s supposed recruitment effort. If we are to believe Jabez Wilson, when he went to apply for the position that the streets near the place were overflowing: “Fleet Street was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope’s Court looked like a coaster’s orange barrow,” surely this would have attracted the attention of the press.

Considering that at the time Fleet Street was where the majority of London newspapers had their offices, it seems incredible that reporters would not have been doing every-



Courtesy of ITV Granada

thing they could to get an interview with Duncan Ross. Someone as clever as John Clay should have realized that such an advertisement would have resulted in such a flood of applicants, focusing unwanted attention on his scheme. Like the dog that didn’t bar in the night, the absence of the press is mystifying.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

The Nominal Crib

Regardless of the fact that Mr. Jabez Wilson did not shine for his acuity, it seems incredible that he wasn’t just a bit suspicious of the reality of the League. Four pounds a week for copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in longhand? And he must provide his own paper, pen, and

ink? Add to this the absolute prohibition about leaving the office—regardless of illness, business reasons, or bathroom stops!

Then again, today I got an email from a sheikh asking to use my bank account as a transference point for \$50 million dollars and it is a fact that some people do reply to such entreaties in great hope of reaping an incredible profit.

The Lost Loot

Had Spaulding and Clay successfully carried out their nefarious business, by how much would they have profited?

A Napoleon was a 20-franc, 1.5-ounce gold piece. The 30,000 Napoleons were equivalent to £24,000, 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.

Of course, Jabez Wilson was not exactly hurt by his stint at the Red-Headed League. The £32 he received for his encyclopædic efforts were the equivalent of about \$12,000 in our currency.



Courtesy of ITV Granada

Expenses?

I always think I may have missed something in this respect. Once Clay was captured, when Merryweather thanked Holmes, our sleuth declined any reward, because he was amply repaid by the experience. However, he stated that he expected the bank to repay “some small expense” he had during the case. What did he refer to? Cab fare? As much as I review this case, it does not seem to me that Holmes has had any expenses.

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.

Horniman Museum opens.

First part of Rosebery Avenue opened.

Dulwich Park, gifted by Dulwich College, opens.

City and South London Railway from Stockwell to William Street, first deep level tube railway.

Financial panic in London and in Paris.



Vauxhall Park opens.

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

London-Paris telephone line opened.

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.

Gilbert writes, *Original Comic Operas*.

Barry writes, *My Lady Nicotine*.

Sir Richard Burton died 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*.



◀ Sir James George Frazer writes, *The Golden Bough* (to 1915).

Booth writes, *In Darkest England*.

Caine writes, *Bondman*, a novel.

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.

The five republics of Central America unite under one president with a five-member cabinet and diet of 15.

◀ 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.

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.

◀ 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.

Italy annexes Eritrea.

French miners to elect delegates to supervise safety while working.

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.

First Chinese cotton mill constructed.

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.

Heinrich Schliemann German archaeologist, discoverer of Troy, dies. ▶

Olderbank Clubs in Italy suppressed.

Sioux and Cheyenne Indians go on the warpath. Federal troops summoned, and the outbreak ended.

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



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*.

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*.

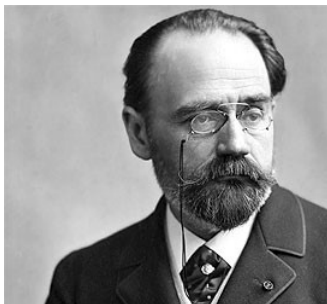
◀ Zola writes, *La Bête humaine*.

Paul Claudel presents *Tête d'Or*.

Ibsen writes, *Hedda Gabler*, a novel considered scandalous. ▶

Stefan George writes, *Hymnen*.

Arno Holtz writes, *Die Familie Selicke*.



Science and Technology



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

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

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

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



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..."

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