

Sherlock Holmes
Short Stories

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

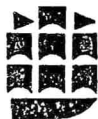
chosen and simplified by
Anthony Laude, MA

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LONGMAN

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¹ The 2,000 root words of the *General Service List of English Words* of the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection*. In 1975 the General Editor of the series compiled an appendix deleting some low frequency words and adding words whose frequency has increased since the General Service List was first published.

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The Red-Headed League

One Saturday morning in autumn, I went to see my friend Sherlock Holmes at his rooms in Baker Street. But he already had a visitor – a very fat old man with unusually bright red hair and a red face – and I therefore said:

‘I will go away, Holmes – you are busy.’ I was apologizing for the interruption when he pulled me into the room and closed the door behind me.

‘You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson,’ he said welcomingly.

‘I was afraid you were busy,’ I said.

‘I *am* busy, Watson – very busy.’

‘Then I will wait in the next room.’

‘Certainly not!’ Holmes turned to his other visitor. ‘Doctor Watson has helped me in many of my most successful cases, Mr Wilson, and I have no doubt that he will be very useful to us in this one too. Watson, this is Mr Jabez Wilson.’

The fat gentleman half got up from his chair and bowed to me, giving me a quick, questioning look from his deep-set little eyes. Then we all sat down.

‘Please begin your account again for Doctor Watson, Mr Wilson,’ said Holmes. ‘Do not leave out any of the details, which are all very interesting. Yours is an extremely unusual case, I think.’

Mr Wilson took a dirty old newspaper out of his pocket, and began to look among the advertisements in it.

Holmes saw me watching the old man and guessed my thoughts.

‘You are trying to be a detective, Watson!’ he said. ‘Well, Mr Wilson’s appearance proves what his past life has been.’

It is clear that he has been a workman, that he has been writing a great deal recently, and that he has been in China.'

Mr Wilson was quite astonished. 'But I had not told you any of those things, Mr Holmes!' he said. 'How did you know, for example, that I had been a workman? You are right about that – when I was a young man I was a carpenter*.'

'Your hands prove it, Mr Wilson,' Holmes answered. 'Your right hand is much larger than your left. You have worked with it, and so it is more developed.'

'But how did you know that I had been writing a lot recently?'

'I looked at your sleeves*. The right sleeve is nearly worn out at the wrist, and the left one is nearly worn out at the bend of the arm. Your right wrist and your left arm have been rubbing on a desk. So you must have been writing.'

'And how did you guess that I had been to China?'

'On your right wrist you have a tattoo* of a pink fish. That particular kind of tattoo is done only in China. I have studied tattoos, Mr Wilson: in fact I have written a book about them. I can also see a Chinese coin on your watch chain. So it was very easy to guess that you had been in China.'

Mr Wilson laughed loudly. 'And I thought you had done something clever!' he said.

'I ought not to have explained!' said Holmes to me. 'Well, Mr Wilson,' he went on, 'have you found that advertisement yet?'

'Yes, I have found it now.' He pointed with a thick red finger to a place in the newspaper. 'There it is, sir,' he said to me.

I took the paper, which was two months old, and read the following advertisement:

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE. A man is needed for a new post in this League which was started by the late Ezekiah Hopkins, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, who left money to the society in his will*. The wages are four

pounds a week and the work is very easy. Any man who has red hair and good health, and is at least twenty-one years old, may apply for this post. Come to the Red-Headed League's offices, 7 Pope's Court, Fleet Street, London, at eleven o'clock on Monday morning. -
DUNCAN ROSS.

'What does it mean?' I said, after I had read this strange advertisement twice.

Holmes laughed happily. 'It is rather unusual, Watson, isn't it! And now, Mr Wilson, please tell us everything about yourself, your house and servants, and this "Red-Headed League".'

'Well, gentlemen, I am a pawnbroker* in Saxe-Coburg Square, here in London. It isn't a very large business, and makes hardly any profit now. I used to have two men to help me in my shop, but now I have only one. Luckily he is willing to accept half wages, as he wants to learn the business.'

'What is the name of this useful boy?' asked Sherlock Holmes.

'His name is Vincent Spaulding. But he isn't a boy. I don't know how old he is. He is an excellent worker, Mr Holmes. He could easily earn much more money in another shop. But I am not going to tell him so!'

'Of course not!' said Holmes. 'But has this wonderful person no faults?'

'His only fault is a love of photography. He spends too much time in the cellar*, busy with his developing and printing. He is like a rabbit in its hole! But apart from that, he is a good worker.'

'And have you any servants?' asked Holmes.

'There is only a fourteen-year-old girl, who cooks and cleans the house. She and I and Spaulding are the only people who live in the house. My wife is dead and I have no children.

'One Monday morning about two months ago, Spaulding came into my office. He had that newspaper in his hand and he said:

“What a pity my hair isn’t red!”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “here is a new advertisement from the Red-Headed League. If I had red hair I could get a nice easy job and a lot of money.”

“What is this society?” I asked.

“Haven’t you heard of it?” He sounded surprised. “It is a society for men with red hair. You could apply for the post yourself!”

“What are the wages?” I asked him.

“Four pounds a week; and the amount of work would be very little. You could easily continue your work here too.”

Well, two hundred pounds a year would be very useful to me. So I asked Spaulding to tell me more. He showed me the advertisement, saying:

“I think the society’s money came from a very rich American, Ezekiah Hopkins. He was a strange man. He had red hair himself, and when he died all his money went to this Red-Headed League. In his will he gave orders that the money was to be used to give easy jobs to men with red hair.”

“But thousands of men have red hair!” I said. “If I applied for the post, I wouldn’t have a chance of getting it.”

“I think you are mistaken, Mr Wilson,” said Spaulding. “The Red-Headed League gives its posts only to men who were born in London. Ezekiah Hopkins was born here himself, and he loved the old place. And also, only men with really *bright* red hair can get these posts. The society does not accept men with light red hair or dark red hair. You would get the post easily if you applied for it!”

At last I decided to take Spaulding’s advice. As he knew so much about the Red-Headed League, I thought that he would be useful to me at the society’s offices. So I told him to shut up the shop and come away with me immediately. He was very willing to have a holiday, and we were soon on our way to Pope’s Court.

Mr Holmes, that little street looked like a basket of

oranges! It was completely full of men with red hair of every possible shade. But there were not many who had really bright red hair like mine. Spaulding bent down and pushed his way through the crowd with his head, and pulled me through all those people to the office steps. I could see hopeful men there going in, and disappointed men coming out. Soon we were in the office ourselves.

'There was very little furniture in the room: only two hard chairs, a kitchen table, and a bookcase. A small man was sitting at the table. His hair was even redder than mine. He said a few words to each man who came in, and always managed to find a reason for saying "No". However, when it was my turn, the little man was much more friendly. He closed the door, so that he could speak to Spaulding and me privately.

"This is Mr Jabez Wilson," said Vincent Spaulding, "and he is willing to accept a post in the Red-Headed League."

"His hair is certainly very fine!" the other man said. "But is it real? We have been fooled several times before, and have to be very careful."

'Suddenly he seized my hair in both his hands, and pulled it until I cried out with pain. "Those are real tears in your eyes," he said. "So I will give you the post. Congratulations on your success!"

'He shook me warmly by the hand, and then went over to the window and shouted to the men outside:

"The right man has now been found! You can all go away!"

'Soon the disappointed men had all gone, and the small man and I were the only people with red hair left in Pope's Court.

"My name is Duncan Ross," he said. "I am the Secretary of the League. We must talk about your new duties now. When will you be able to begin?"

"Well," I said, "that is a little awkward, as I have a business already."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Mr Wilson!" said Vincent

Spaulding. "I shall be able to look after that for you."

"What are the hours of work?" I asked Mr Ross.

"From ten o'clock in the morning until two o'clock in the afternoon."

"Well, Mr Holmes, most of a pawnbroker's business is done in the evenings. So I could easily work for Mr Ross in the mornings. Besides, I knew that Spaulding was an excellent shopman, and that he would be able to deal with all business matters during the day.

"Those hours will suit me very well indeed," I said. "What is the nature of the work?"

"First of all," said Mr Ross, "you must stay here from ten until two. If you leave the building, you will lose your post for ever. Even if you are ill, you must stay in the office. And the Red-Headed League will not accept any other excuse. Ezekiah Hopkins, who started the society, made all these rules in his will. Your work is to copy out the *Encyclopaedia Britannica**. There it is, over in that bookcase. You must bring your own pen, ink and paper. Will you be ready tomorrow?"

"Certainly!" I answered.

"Well, goodbye, Mr Wilson. I am very glad that you have obtained this important post." Mr Ross stood up and bowed. Then Spaulding and I went back home. I felt thoroughly delighted at my own good fortune.

Next morning I bought some paper and returned to Pope's Court, though I had begun to suspect this "Red-Headed League" was only a joke. However, everything was all right. Mr Ross showed me the beginning of the letter A in the encyclopaedia, and then he left. At two o'clock he came back, congratulated me on the amount I had written, and then locked the door of the office after me.

This continued for more than eight weeks, Mr Holmes. Every morning I arrived at ten o'clock, and every afternoon I left at two. Each week Mr Ross gave me my four pounds in gold. At first he used to come into the office a few times each day, but after a time he did not come in at all. But of course I never left the room, because I did not want to lose

my post.

'I copied out the articles on Actors, and Advertising, and Agriculture, and Apples; and many others. I spent a small fortune on paper, and had nearly filled a shelf with my writings. I was even hoping to begin the letter B soon. But suddenly everything came to an end.'

'To an end?' said Holmes.

'Yes, sir. It happened this morning. I went to my work as usual at ten o'clock, but the door was still locked. There was a card nailed to it – a little notice, which I pulled down: here it is.'

Mr Wilson showed us a small square card. On it somebody had written:

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE DOES NOT
EXIST ANY LONGER.
4TH OCTOBER.

Sherlock Holmes and I could not help smiling. 'And what did you do then?' asked Holmes.

'I knocked on the doors of all the other offices. But nobody had heard of Mr Duncan Ross. So I went to see the owner of the building, but he too told me that he had not heard of either the Red-Headed League or its Secretary, Mr Ross.

'“Well,” I said, “who is the gentleman with red hair?”'

'“Oh, his name is William Morris. He is a lawyer. But he moved out yesterday.”'

'“Where can I find him?” I asked.

'“Oh, at his new offices. He told me the address. Here it is: 17 King Edward Street.”'

'I went to King Edward Street, Mr Holmes, but Number 17 is a small factory. Nobody called Morris or Ross worked there, and the manager had never heard of either of them.'

'And what did you do then?' asked Holmes.

'I went home to Saxe-Coburg Square and asked Vincent Spaulding to advise me. But he could not give me any useful advice. He only said that Mr Ross would certainly write to me.

'But I was not satisfied, Mr Holmes – I did not want to lose my four pounds a week, and so I came to you.'

'You acted wisely, Mr Wilson,' said Holmes. 'This matter may be a very serious one.'

'Very serious indeed!' said Mr Wilson. 'I seem to have lost four pounds a week.'

'You must not complain, Mr Wilson,' said Holmes. 'You have really *gained* thirty-two pounds. And do not forget that you have also gained a lot of knowledge about subjects beginning with the letter A! Now let me ask you a few questions. First of all, how long has Vincent Spaulding been your shopman?'

'For about three months.'

'How did he get the post?'

'He answered an advertisement.'

'Did any other men apply for the post?'

'Yes: ten or eleven.'

'And why did you choose him?'

'Because he seemed to be a sensible young fellow, and he was willing to accept half wages.'

'Can you describe him to me?'

'He is small; not thin; he moves quickly. There is no hair on his face, though he is at least thirty years old. He has a white mark just above his eyes.'

Suddenly Holmes seemed very excited.

'A white mark!' he cried. 'And has he also got little holes in his ears, for ear rings?'

'Yes, he has.'

'I knew it!' said Holmes. He stood up. 'Well, Mr Wilson,' he said, 'I will think about this matter. Today is Saturday. I hope that everything will be explained by Monday.'

When Mr Wilson had gone, Holmes asked me:

'What is your opinion of this Red-Headed League, Watson?'

'I have no opinion, Holmes. It is a complete mystery to me.'

'Yes,' he said. 'I must work hard, Watson.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked him.

'First of all I am going to smoke my pipe for fifty minutes. Please do not speak to me during that time.' He sat down and began to smoke his dirty old black pipe.

We sat in silence for a long time. I thought Holmes had gone to sleep, but suddenly he jumped up and put his pipe down on the table.

'There is music at the Steinway Hall this afternoon,' he said. 'Shall we go and hear it?'

'All right,' I replied. 'I am completely free today.'

'Good! Put on your hat, and come. I want to look at Saxe-Coburg Square before we go to the Steinway Hall. And we must also have some lunch. Come along!'

We went partly by the Underground Railway, and partly on foot. Saxe-Coburg Square was a dull, poor sort of place, with some dirty grass in the middle, and a few bushes. I noticed a smell of smoke. The four rows of small brick houses had two floors each, and a cellar. One of them had a shop window and shop door as well as a house-door. Above the window we saw a brown board with the name 'JABEZ WILSON' painted on it in white letters. There were also the three golden balls which are the sign of a pawnbroker's shop.

Holmes stopped in front of Mr Wilson's house and looked at it for a moment. Then he knocked loudly several times on the large stones of the street with his stick. Finally he went up to the door and knocked.

The door was opened immediately by a young man.

'Can you tell me the way to the General Post Office, please?' Holmes asked.

The pawnbroker's man did not hesitate for a second. 'Go along that street,' he said, pointing. 'Then go down the third street on the right. After that, the General Post Office is in the fourth street on the left.'

'A clever man!' said Holmes, as we walked away. 'In my opinion there are only three men in London who are cleverer – and only two who are braver or bolder.'

'Did you recognize his face?' I asked.

'My dear Watson, I did not look at his face!'

'Oh! Why then did you knock at the door?'

'Because I wanted to look at the knees of his trousers,' Holmes answered. He refused to say anything else about the matter, however, or to explain why he had struck the ground with his stick. He only said: 'We have seen Saxe-Coburg Square. Now let us look at the streets behind it.'

We left the little square and were soon in one of the noisiest main roads in London. Some of the houses and shops in this main road, however, were separated only by gardens and yards from the quiet little square behind. There was a sweet shop, a newspaper shop, a branch of the City and District Bank, an Italian restaurant, and a small factory where carriages were made.

'We have done our work now, Watson,' said Holmes. 'Let us have some lunch – and then some music.'

As we were coming out of the Steinway Hall Holmes said to me: 'I suppose you must go home to your wife now, Watson?'

'Yes, I ought to go home,' I replied.

'And I have several things to do myself,' he said. 'This affair in Saxe-Coburg Square is serious. A great crime has been planned, but I think that we can prevent it. I shall want your help tonight.'

'At what time?'

'At ten o'clock.'

'I will come to Baker Street at ten,' I promised.

'Good! And, Watson, there may be some danger – so please bring your gun.' He waved his hand and disappeared into the crowd.

There were two cabs* outside the house in Baker Street when I arrived at ten o'clock. Two visitors were there already: a police officer called Peter Jones, and a tall, thin, sad man who was very correctly dressed in dark clothes.

'Watson, I think you know Mr Jones? Let me introduce you to Mr Merryweather, a director of the City and District Bank, who is going to join us in our adventure.'

'I hope you are not mistaken in your suspicions, Mr Holmes,' Mr Merryweather said. 'I have played cards with my friends every Saturday evening for twenty-seven years – this is the first time I have been absent. I do hope you are not wasting my time!'

'I think I can promise you an exciting night, Mr Merryweather,' replied Holmes. 'You are going to save thirty thousand pounds. And you, Jones, are going to catch a criminal whom you have been trying to find for years!'

'Yes,' said Jones: 'John Clay, the murderer, forger*, and robber. He is only a young man, but he is the cleverest and most dangerous thief in all England. He was not always a robber: he is an Oxford University man, and his grandfather was a king's brother.'

Holmes looked at his watch. 'It is time to leave now, gentlemen,' he said. 'Mr Merryweather, will you go with Mr Jones in the first cab, please? Watson and I will follow you in the other one.'

It was a long drive, but in the cab Holmes spoke very little. Instead, he sang some of the music that we had heard at the Steinway Hall that afternoon.

At last both cabs arrived at the City and District Bank, in the main road near Saxe-Coburg Square. Using his own keys, Mr Merryweather led us through various doors and along various dark passages. He stopped to light an oil lamp, and then took us into a large cellar, where I noticed a smell of earth. There were many strong boxes in piles.

Holmes took the oil lamp and held it up. 'The ceiling, at least, is strong,' he said.

'So is the floor,' said Mr Merryweather, striking it with his stick. 'Oh! It sounds quite hollow!' he cried in surprise.

'Please speak more quietly!' said Holmes. 'If the thieves hear us, all our chances will be ruined. Will you please sit down on one of those boxes, and not interfere?'

Mr Merryweather sat down obediently. He looked a little ashamed. Holmes put the oil lamp on the floor and took a magnifying glass* from his pocket. Then, kneeling, he began to examine the cracks between the large stones of

the floor.

After a few moments he jumped up and said: 'Nothing will happen until midnight. The thieves can do nothing until the old pawnbroker has gone to bed. As soon as he is in bed, however, they will act quickly, in order to gain extra time for their escape.'

'What is in these boxes?' I asked.

'Mr Merryweather will tell you that,' said Holmes.

'It is our French gold,' whispered the director. 'These boxes contain thirty thousand pounds, which we borrowed a few months ago from the Bank of France.'

'Now, gentlemen, we must wait in the dark,' said Holmes, putting out the lamp. 'The robbers will soon be here, so we must hide behind the boxes. When they come, we must simply jump on them. They are very dangerous men and we must act quickly. If they shoot at us, Watson, you must shoot at them.'

I put my gun on top of a box within reach of my hand.

'There is only one way of escape for them,' Holmes continued: 'back through the house into Saxe-Coburg Square. Did you do what I asked you to do, Jones?'

'Yes, Mr Holmes. Three policemen are waiting outside Mr Wilson's house.'

'Good! And now we must be silent and wait.'

We waited for an hour and a quarter, but in the darkness it seemed much longer. My legs became very stiff and tired. I could hear the different breathing of my three companions. Suddenly I saw a little line of light through the floor. Then a large stone was pushed up and the line of light became larger and brighter. I saw a hand appear. But then the stone was quietly let down again and there only the little line of light, along the crack, could be seen.

Then, with much more force, the large stone was pushed up again. It made a loud noise as it turned over on its side. Then a face appeared, and I recognized the pawnbroker's shopman. The young man looked round and then pulled himself up into the cellar. He helped another man to climb out of the hole. Both men were small. The second of them