

The Red-Headed League



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Arthur Conan Doyle was born in Edinburgh, Scotland. His early life was not glamorous, but thanks to the support of wealthier relatives, he was sent to England for his education. He ended up studying medicine in Edinburgh, and would remain in the medical field throughout his life. Alongside his medical career, however, Arthur was a prolific writer. Not only did he write four Sherlock Holmes novels, and over fifty Holmes short stories, he also wrote seven historical novels, nine general novels, five narratives, multiple collections of short stories, and several stage works. His interests were extremely varied. He was a keen sportsman, trying his hand at boxing, football, cricket and golf. He was also a very active political campaigner and justice advocate, and a famous proponent of Spiritualism. He was also interested in history, particularly the Napoleonic era, which many of his literary works reflect. He was the father of five children, and was married firstly to Louisa Hawkins, and then to Jean Leckie, following Louisa's death in 1906. Conan Doyle passed away of a heart attack in 1930, at his home in East Sussex. His last words were to his wife: "You are wonderful."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The modern police force was formed in England in 1829. Of course, by the time of Conan Doyle's writing in 1891, people were more used to the police, but the detectives of the age still weren't all that respected. They were considered fairly incompetent, especially in the face of major unsolved crimes such as the Jack the Ripper murders in the 1880s. This is why the Sherlock Holmes stories present the police as being quite inept at their jobs, and offer up Holmes' rationality as a superior alternative. Another potentially relevant historical circumstance is that of the Royal family at the time, or more specifically, Prince Edward VII (later King Edward VII, and known affectionately as Bertie). Bertie was Queen Victoria's eldest son, and although he was popular with the public, he was involved in numerous scandals in the late nineteenth century. The Royal Baccarat Scandal, for example, was a British gambling scandal involving the prince in 1891, the same year that "The Red-Headed League" was written. Bertie was also allegedly involved in a scandal involving a homosexual brothel that employed young boys. He undoubtedly led a wild and scandalous existence, and it seems as though this might be referred to in the story. The crime takes place in Saxe-Coburg Square, which is a reference to the royal surname, Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. John Clay claims that he is royalty when he is

caught, and demands not to be man-handled. Thus, the young criminal Clay may be a tongue-in-cheek reference to the illegal tendencies of the real Prince Edward at the time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Sherlock Holmes stories are an early example of the detective genre, but an even earlier example can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's detective, C. Auguste Dupin, who first appeared in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Dupin is fairly similar to Holmes, in that he is fairly astute in his deductions as an outsider, but he is by no means the professional and rational detective that Holmes is. The same is true of Holmes' English predecessors in the detective genre, such as Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*. Cuff is again not nearly as rational or as professional as Holmes. In fact, Holmes' rationality could be a direct influence of the scientific texts of the age, which employed a more methodical approach to writing than traditional fiction. Science and literature were much more closely connected at the time, and seminal scientific texts, such as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, were accessible to both a literary and a scientific audience. The same could perhaps be said of Sherlock Holmes: the stories are a way of making the scientific method of problem-solving available to the wider literary public.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Red-Headed League"
- **When Written:** 1891
- **Where Written:** Europe
- **When Published:** 1891
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Detective fiction, crime fiction
- **Setting:** London, England
- **Climax:** Sherlock Holmes captures John Clay in the cellar of the bank.
- **Antagonist:** John Clay
- **Point of View:** First person and third person

EXTRA CREDIT

A Familiar Figure. The character of Sherlock Holmes was based on one of Conan Doyle's college professors, Joseph Bell. The resemblance was significant enough that Conan Doyle's famous friend, Robert Louis Stevenson, wrote to him to ask: "can this be my old friend Joe Bell?"

Attempted Murder. Arthur Conan Doyle grew so

disenchanted with Sherlock Holmes that he tried to kill him off in the 1893 story “The Final Problem.” The public outcry was so extreme that Conan Doyle had no choice but to bring him back to life again.



PLOT SUMMARY

Jabez Wilson comes to Sherlock Holmes and John Watson for help, claiming he has been wronged by a mysterious **league of red-headed men**. The titular Red-Headed League claims to be an organization of red-headed men, founded by an eccentric red-headed millionaire who wished to provide for other red-headed men by offering them easy jobs for high pay. Wilson acquired one such job, copying out the encyclopedia for four pounds a week, for his employer, Duncan Ross. However, when Wilson turned up to the office today, there was a sign on the door announcing that the league had been disbanded. After having trouble tracking down Ross, Wilson learns that the landlord of the building knew Ross under a different name, William Morris.

Wilson was encouraged to apply by his assistant, a man named Vincent Spaulding. Sherlock enquires further about the assistant, and Wilson says that even though he is the best assistant he’s had, Spaulding is happy to work for half wages. This alerts Sherlock to something odd about the assistant, so he asks several follow-up questions. Wilson reveals that Spaulding is an intelligent young man with a passion for photography: he spends hours in Wilson’s **cellar** each day, developing his photographs. Wilson also reveals that Spaulding is of uncertain age, and has an acid splash on his forehead. All of these details are suspicious, but it is the acid marking that reveals to Holmes that Vincent Spaulding is in fact John Clay, one of the top criminals in London.

Holmes visits Wilson’s property to investigate further. The job with the Red-Headed League had required Wilson to leave the house for four hours every day, so Holmes suspects that the job was invented to simply get Wilson out of the way, leaving Clay to work on something illicit at the house. When Sherlock realizes that there is a bank on the same road as the property, he deduces that Clay is digging a tunnel from the cellar to the bank, in order to rob it. The disbanding of the league probably indicates that the tunnel is now finished, because Wilson no longer needs to leave the house. Holmes rings the doorbell, and a “bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow” answers. Holmes asks for directions and then promptly leaves. As he walks away, Holmes reveals that the man was in fact John Clay. Holmes explains to Watson that he asked for directions because he wanted the chance to look at Clay’s knees—he wanted to see if the trousers were worn down at the knee, as this would indicate that Clay had been doing a lot of digging.

Holmes concludes that the robbery will likely be tonight,

because the tunnel is finished. As such, he gathers Watson, Detective Jones (the policeman assigned to the case), and Mr. Merryweather (the bank manager). The men wait in total darkness in the bank cellar for the criminals to emerge from the tunnel. Eventually, two men surface from the trapdoor. The first is the same man who answered the door to Holmes earlier that day, John Clay. Holmes manages to grab hold of Clay and detains him. Detective Jones fails to capture the second criminal, Archie, who is the same man who posed as Duncan Ross and William Morris. Holmes dryly assures Clay that his accomplice will soon be caught, as he has three further policemen stationed at the only other exit from the tunnel. Clay compliments Holmes on his thoroughness, and Holmes, in turn, compliments Clay on his ingenious plan. Merryweather claims that he doesn’t know how the bank can begin to repay Holmes, but Holmes asks for nothing more than his fair recompense. To conclude the story, Holmes explains step-by-step to Watson how he managed to solve the crime.



CHARACTERS

Sherlock Holmes – The protagonist of the story, Sherlock Holmes is a private detective who works alongside his assistant and friend, Dr. John Watson. Jabez Wilson, a pawnbroker who lives next door to a bank, employs Holmes and Watson to solve the mystery of the titular **Red-Headed League**. As always, Holmes uses the power of logic and rationalism in order to solve the crime. Throughout the story, Holmes picks up on minute details that other people miss, and is able to use these details to deduce the facts of the crime. For example, when he pays a visit to Wilson’s assistant, Vincent Spaulding, Holmes notices that the man’s knees are incredibly dirty. This detail, which Watson overlooks, confirms Holmes’ suspicions that Spaulding is actually criminal mastermind John Clay, and that he is digging a tunnel from Wilson’s cellar to the bank’s **cellar** so that he can rob the bank and escape undetected. Holmes is presented as a superior character in the story, both in terms of his intellect and dedication to helping others. Nevertheless, he is not the most easygoing of characters. He certainly has a high opinion of himself, and is quick to talk down to others if he assumes them to be wrong. He sharply rebukes Mr. Merryweather, for instance, for making too much noise as they wait for the criminals. He is also sharp with Watson, but this does not stop the men from maintaining a very close friendship.

Dr. John Watson – Dr. John Watson is the narrator of the story, and Sherlock Holmes’ assistant. Although Holmes’ intellect and deductive prowess easily outpace Watson’s, Watson accompanies Holmes on his cases both out of fascination and a desire to improve his own detective skills. Watson is often too distracted by the extraordinary aspects of the case to be able to solve the crime. He never falters in his admiration for Holmes, though, even when Holmes does not always hold him in such

high esteem. Nevertheless, they remain firm friends. Watson serves as Sherlock's chronicler, as he records everything in his journals. Watson is pleasant and easier to get along with than Holmes (who can be intense and aloof), which proves useful in dealing with clients. His occasional blunders and cheerful attitude also makes him a more relatable character for readers than Holmes, who seems to have a superhuman capacity for rationality and deduction.

Jabez Wilson – Jabez Wilson is an average pawnbroker, and the innocent victim of the story. He hires Sherlock Holmes and his assistant, Dr. John Watson, to solve a peculiar mystery tied to a strange organization called the **Red-Headed League**. Because Wilson's house is next to the bank, criminal mastermind John Clay targets him as an access point. This proves fairly easy as Wilson is quite slow-witted and trusting, and doesn't suspect anything odd going on in his house. John Clay poses as an assistant to Wilson, under the guise of Vincent Spaulding. Wilson describes Spaulding as an intelligent young man with a passion for photography, not realizing that the time Clay spends in the **cellar** is spent not developing photographs, but digging a secret tunnel to the bank. Wilson is also a target because of his need for money, which means that he is easy to lure out of the house with the promise of a well-paid job. His greed is not malicious however, it is just a result of his struggling business.

John Clay / Vincent Spaulding – John Clay, the antagonist of the story, is a criminal mastermind in London. Sherlock Holmes even describes Clay as the fourth-smartest man in the city, and were it not for his criminality, Clay might even be a respectable figure. Clay has royal blood (his grandfather was a duke) and is extremely well educated, having studied at Eton and Oxford. This heritage makes him pompous and refined—even when he's arrested, he requests that the police officer address him as "sir" and remember to say "please." At the story's opening, Clay works as Jabez Wilson's assistant under the alias of Vincent Spaulding. This job, coupled with his brilliant creation of the **Red-Headed League** job opening, allow him to lure Wilson out of the house. With Wilson out of the way, Clay is able to dig a tunnel from Wilson's property to the bank's **cellar**. Although Clay plans on robbing the bank with his accomplice, Archie, and escaping undetected through the tunnel, Holmes intervenes in the nick of time, and both criminals are captured.

Archie / Duncan Ross / William Morris – Archie is the criminal accomplice of John Clay. He poses under the name of Duncan Ross as the employer of Jabez Wilson, as part of the scheme to get Wilson out of his house. He hires Wilson to copy out the encyclopedia for four hours every day, strictly instructing him not to leave the building during these times. Wilson therefore knows Archie, but only in the context of the **Red-Headed League**, not realizing that he is in fact a criminal. Archie later disappears, and it turns out that he had also been posing under the name of William Morris, claiming to be the landlord of the

building that he was a solicitor seeking a temporary office. The landlord had never heard of either Duncan Ross or the Red-Headed League, and the forwarding address Archie provided leads Jabez Wilson only to an artificial knee-cap factory. Although Archie initially escapes back through the tunnel during the robbery, he is presumably apprehended at the other end of the tunnel, where Sherlock Holmes has arranged for three policemen to be stationed.

Detective Jones – Detective Jones is the incompetent policeman assigned to the case. Sherlock Holmes describes him as an "imbecile" in his profession. Jones does not even manage to catch a criminal: only Holmes successfully grabs John Clay, whereas Jones loses his grip on Archie and allows him to escape. Fortunately, Holmes had arranged for three other policemen to guard the other end of the tunnel, ensuring Archie's eventual capture. Although it seems that Holmes was right not to trust Jones, Jones is also rather defensive, as he doesn't like to admit that Holmes is better at his job than he is.

Mr. Merryweather – Mr. Merryweather is the manager of the bank that John Clay and Archie have targeted, which is only a few meters away from Jabez Wilson's house. He accompanies Sherlock Holmes, Dr. John Watson and Detective Jones in capturing the criminals, though Mr. Merryweather is largely useless and makes too much noise.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



THE BIZARRE VS. THE MUNDANE

Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Red-Headed League" is characterized by bizarre imagery. The concept of the titular **Red-Headed League** itself is utterly bizarre: it is not often that secret societies full of red-headed men are formed in London, or that someone is hired for a job purely because his hair is redder than that of hundreds of other applicants. The point of this story, however, is that the bizarre is often not as bizarre as it may seem. The everyday holds plenty of surprises, and shouldn't be overlooked just because it appears to be initially less interesting. The reader eventually learns that the bizarre Red-Headed League in this story is merely a front for an ingenious, but significantly less unusual, bank robbery. The bizarreness of the league was merely a distraction. Sherlock Holmes is able to see through this distraction, realizing that it must be a front to get Jabez Wilson out of the house for several hours a day, so that his assistant, Vincent Spaulding (who is actually criminal mastermind John

Clay), can dig a secret tunnel to then rob the bank. Holmes is able to solve the mystery because he does not become too invested in its extraordinary circumstances, even though he does admit to being entertained by them. In other words, Conan Doyle's message is that it is important not to get caught up in the allure of the bizarre, as the bizarre is often of little significance. Instead, it is the more mundane, everyday occurrences that prove to be more important, if somewhat less exciting.

Conan Doyle makes a point of emphasizing the bizarre in this story, positioning it at the forefront of the narrative in order to demonstrate just how easy it is to get distracted by its appeal. In fact, the whole story is set up in order to trick the reader into thinking that the Red-Headed League is far more important than it actually is. Even the title of the story suggests that it is about a Red-Headed League, rather than a bank robbery. Much of the early narrative of the story concerns the events relayed by Jabez Wilson about his experiences with the league: the bizarre image of his lining up on Fleet Street with hundreds of other red-headed men, of having his own "blazing red" hair pulled to make sure that it wasn't a wig, of writing out the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for four pounds a week. The whole story seems too fantastical to have any logical explanation, because this is exactly the case. The story has been completely fabricated as an elaborate façade for a commonplace bank robbery. By fooling the reader into thinking that the explanation must have something to do with the Red-Headed League itself, and then proving them completely wrong, Conan Doyle stresses the importance of not placing too much emphasis on the bizarre, as it can often point in the wrong direction entirely.

Sherlock Holmes is, fortunately, able to see past the allure of the bizarre, and focuses instead on the more banal details of the case in order to reach its conclusion. Conan Doyle demonstrates Holmes' superior rationality by contrasting him against those around him who are too drawn in by the pull of the extraordinary. When Jabez Wilson is first introduced, for example, all Watson notices about him is his hair, claiming that "there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head." In only searching for what is "remarkable" about the man, Watson has failed to notice some important details that Holmes, who is paying closer attention, manages to spot. Because he is not distracted by the bizarre, Holmes notices, for example, that Wilson has recently been doing a lot of writing, because one of his cuffs is more worn than the other. By concentrating on the everyday aspects of Wilson's character, Holmes manages to deduce far more than Watson, who is only interested in the more striking aspects of Wilson's appearance, and gets nowhere as a result.

Because he is not drawn in by Wilson's flaming red hair, or by the story of the Red-Headed League, Holmes is able to look past the bizarre aspects of the story and discover the true

nature of the crime. He explains to Watson that "it was perfectly obvious from the first that the only possible object of this rather fantastic business of the advertisement of the League, and the copying of the Encyclopaedia, must be to get this not over-bright pawnbroker out of the way for a number of hours every day." With this observation, coupled with the knowledge that Wilson's assistant spent hours each day in the **cellar**, Holmes was able to logically assume that a tunnel was being dug to the neighboring bank, in preparation for a robbery. The tale of the Red-Headed League was simply a ruse to put Wilson off the scent of the crime. Sometimes the most bizarre of occurrences have the simplest of explanations, or as Sherlock himself claims: "As a rule, [...] the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be." Because of his ability to see past the bizarre and focus instead on the everyday details, Sherlock is able to get to the heart of the matter and solve the crime.



LOGIC AND RATIONALISM

Arthur Conan Doyle was a firm believer in a rationalism. He was a doctor by trade and was therefore well-versed in the scientific method (a highly-rational approach to assessing facts), which he loosely applies to the practice of solving crimes. Furthermore, late-nineteenth-century London was gripped by high-profile crimes, such as the Jack the Ripper murders, and the police force was often dismissed for being ineffective at stopping or catching criminals. Conan Doyle therefore takes fire at the police force and offers up Sherlock Holmes' rationality as a superior alternative. Once Holmes applies his meticulous logic to mysterious circumstances, it's much easier to discern what has happened. He is the only character who is able to solve the bank robbery plot, and as such, Conan Doyle presents logic as the most superior method of crime-solving.

Holmes' logical method is introduced early in the story, when he deduces several aspects of his client Jabez Wilson's character by carefully observing his appearance. After just a few moments, Holmes is able to conclude that Wilson had done manual labor (his muscles are larger in one hand), that he is a Freemason (his breastpin bears the "arc-and-compass" symbol of the Freemasons), that he has been in China (he has a fish tattoo that "could only have been done in China" due to its unique pink staining), and that he has been writing prolifically (one of his cuffs is more worn than the other). When Wilson learns how Holmes managed to gather all of this information, he says, "I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it, after all." This is exactly the point that Conan Doyle is trying to make: applying logic to the world makes everything seem simple and obvious.

Holmes is then able to apply this technique to the business of solving the crime, demonstrating just how effective the powers of logic can be. He explains his strategy to his assistant, Watson,

at the close of the story. Firstly, Holmes realized that the **Red-Headed League** must simply be a ruse intended to keep Wilson out of the shop for several hours a day. He was suspicious of Wilson's assistant, Spaulding, because he was happy to be paid half wages, and so correctly assumed that he must be the culprit. Wilson also mentioned that his assistant spent many hours in the **cellar**, and so Holmes realized that this must be the scene of the crime, and that Spaulding was likely digging a tunnel. When he went to visit the premises, Holmes carefully observed the nearby buildings and realized that there was a bank only meters away from the property, which was all the further explanation he needed to solve the crime. The assistant, who was really criminal mastermind John Clay, was digging a tunnel to the bank in order to steal thousands of pounds worth of gold, and Holmes was able to conclude as much by carefully observing the facts already available to him. By correctly applying the powers of logic, Holmes becomes the only person able to solve the crime.

By contrast, the other characters in the story are unable to solve the crime, because they do not apply the same meticulous methods as Holmes. Watson attempts to study Jabez Wilson as Sherlock does, for example, but gets too engrossed by Wilson's bright red hair and fails to notice anything else as a result. He does not maintain a steady and rational outlook like Holmes. Later in the story, as Holmes taps the pavement with his stick (he is searching for the tunnel below ground), Watson is completely clueless as to Holmes' intentions. By contrasting the ineptitude of Watson against the quick and rational mind of Sherlock, Conan Doyle highlights that a scientific method is far more effective for solving crimes.

Conan Doyle also employs imagery of darkness in order to demonstrate the ignorance of every character other than Holmes, including Watson, and Detective Jones, the policeman. As the men hide in the cellar at the close of the story, anticipating the criminals' exit from the tunnel, the complete darkness of their surroundings represents the metaphorical ignorance of all characters other than Holmes. Even Jones, the policeman assigned to the case, has no clue what is going on. Jones is in fact only passingly mentioned in the story, as a "complete imbecile." The police force is thus essentially made defunct in comparison to Holmes. Only Holmes, the superior crime-solver, knows that the criminals will emerge from the tunnel; everyone else is yet to reach this conclusion. When Holmes extinguishes his light, the others are left in "absolute darkness," demonstrating that Holmes alone possesses the ability to solve the crime due to his quick but careful logic. His lamp is representative of the literal enlightenment that his rational methods can offer. As such, in contrast to the ignorance of every other character in the story, Holmes' rationality is upheld on a pedestal of superiority. In this way, Conan Doyle underscores that logic and rationalism are the unequalled solutions to difficult problems, and that if the police would

employ these methods, they might not be so ineffective as they currently are.



APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

Things are very rarely as they first appear in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Red-Headed League." **The Red-Headed League** itself is an elaborate front for a bank robbery. In addition, the appearances of characters can also be very misleading, for example John Clay, who appears to be a respectable young man, turns out to be a famous criminal. Throughout the story, Conan Doyle reminds the reader not to take appearances at face value. If Sherlock Holmes was unable to look past the misleading appearance of the Red-Headed League, he would not have been able to uncover the true reality of the criminal plot lurking under the surface. Likewise, if one were to assume that John Clay was the respectable man that he appears to be, he would never get caught. Throughout the course of the story, Conan Doyle illustrates the many dangers in mistaking appearances for reality.

The primary instance of misleading appearances comes in the form of the Red-Headed League itself. The league is really only an elaborate façade for the bank robbery that Clay and his accomplice, Archie, are plotting, designed to distract everyone else from the tunnel being dug from Jabez Wilson's cellar to the bank. Conan Doyle uses the idea of the league to demonstrate just how easy it can be to be drawn in by appearances. Indeed, much of the early narrative is dedicated entirely to the events of the league: first of Wilson's applying for his role as the most red-headed man in London, and then of his job copying out the *Encyclopedia* for the benefit of the league, and so forth. The story is designed to lure the reader into paying attention only to the league, and thus only to the outward appearances of the case. Even the title, "The Red-Headed League," suggests that the reader should only concentrate on the league itself. As a result, the reader is unlikely to notice what is really going on in the background of the story. It is only Sherlock's characteristic ability to look past appearances and dig deeper into the true reality of the crime that allows him to solve the mystery. The league, as strange as it is, never distracts him, and he is consequently able to dismiss it as nothing more than a front for the robbery. This ability to look past appearances, Conan Doyle implies, is crucial.

Many characters in the story also have misleading appearances. Conan Doyle highlights this early on when Watson points out that Sherlock has two very different sides to him: one contemplative and calm, the other "formidable." If one were to catch Holmes in either of these moods, it would be very difficult to imagine him in the other. Through Watson's observation, Doyle insists that one should not judge a person simply by their outward appearance, as there may be multiple sides to them. This notion becomes dangerously true in the case of John Clay. From first glance, he appears to be a very respectable young

man: he is first introduced as a “bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow,” and it is only later revealed that he is in fact one of the greatest criminals in London. In this way, Conan Doyle reminds the reader that overlooking the true reality of a situation can have very dangerous consequences. If Sherlock did not recognize Clay as the criminal that he was, then he would never have been caught.

Conan Doyle does leave clues throughout the story, however, designed to remind the attentive reader to look beyond first appearances. Upon Jabez Wilson’s first encounter with the Red-Headed League, for example, he recalls the employer pulling his hair to make sure it was real, claiming that they have to be careful, “for we have twice been deceived by wigs and once by paint.” This is an early indication that the reader should not be too hasty to judge based on appearances, as it is easy to be deceived by simple disguises. Later in the story, Watson turns a corner in a road and notices that the front of the road is remarkably different to the back, presenting “as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back.” In other words, there is always more than one way of looking at things, and appearances may not tell the whole story. From mysterious leagues to criminal plots, from respectable young men to criminals, Conan Doyle makes a point of emphasizing that one should not put too much faith in appearances, as they can often be deeply misleading and even dangerous.



GREED

In “The Red-Headed League,” characters who are greedy are eventually punished for their actions, whereas selfless characters (such as Sherlock

Holmes) are rewarded. The criminals John Clay (also known as Vincent Spaulding) and Archie (also known as Duncan Ross) try to rob a bank and are punished for this greed through their arrest. Even Jabez Wilson, the innocent victim of their crime, is punished for his greed—after all, his decision to take on an assistant for half the normal wage, and to leave his shop unattended in order to earn four pounds extra a week, are two greedy acts that ultimately lead him to become the victim of a criminal scheme. Holmes, on the other hand, expects no reimbursement other than what he is fairly owed, and this fairness eventually earns him the ultimate reward: solving the case. Conan Doyle thus implies that greed in any measure is morally punishable, while moral integrity reaps rewards.

The criminals John Clay and Archie are the characters most corrupted by greed in the story. This corruption is particularly noticeable in Clay, who—if not for his greed and criminal behavior—would be a respectable figure. Holmes describes him as the “fourth smartest man in London” and “a remarkable man.” He is from royal blood, was educated at Eton and Oxford, and appears to be a “bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow.” Holmes even praises him for his “new and effective” scheme and clever mind. In other words, were it not for his greed, Clay

might even be as respected as Holmes. Greed, however, corrupts Clay, leads him into a life of crime, and eventually brings about his arrest. Were it not for his desire to steal “30,000 napoleons” of French gold, Clay might not have ended up so badly.

Jabez Wilson, on the other hand, is a far more sympathetic character. Whilst Clay has no excuse for his greed (given that he is clearly from a well-off family), Wilson’s greed is more excusable because he is poor and struggling in his business. He does not try to steal, but he does push the limits of morality in order to acquire a little extra money. Wilson admits that when he hired Clay (in disguise as Vincent Spaulding) for half a normal wage, he knew “very well that he could better himself and earn twice what I am able to give him,” but he was still willing to go along with it if it meant that he could save the money. Wilson is also happy to take an easy job for good pay when he fills the vacancy at the **Red-Headed League**, copying out the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for four pounds a week. He is punished for this greed when he becomes the unwitting target of Clay’s scheme, but as Holmes points out, Wilson is still “richer by some 30 [pounds], to say nothing of the minute knowledge which you have gained on every subject which comes under the letter A. You have lost nothing.” Because Wilson was never truly malicious or completely unjustified in his greed, his punishment is not as extreme as that of John Clay and Archie—but Conan Doyle still makes the point that no greed is completely excusable or goes unpunished.

Sherlock Holmes is, by contrast, presented as a just and selfless character, and for this he is rewarded. When Mr. Merryweather, the bank manager, says that he doesn’t know how he can begin to repay Holmes, Holmes is quite clear that he should be repaid only what he is duly owed. Unlike Wilson, who is happy to take an easy job for high pay, or Clay, who desires far more money than he could ever deserve, Holmes is a model of selflessness. He replies: “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.” Holmes’ reward for his integrity is solving the mystery, capturing the criminals, and earning the respect of all those around him—even from the criminals themselves. The moral of the story, then, is that all greed is morally punishable, and that those who are just and selfless will be rewarded for their actions.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BANK CELLAR

The darkness of the bank cellar represents how all of Sherlock Holmes' accomplices—John Watson, Detective Jones, and Mr. Merryweather—are figuratively “in the dark,” ignorant of the true nature of the crime because they don't have Holmes' capacity for deduction. Near the end of the story, Sherlock and his companions wait for the criminals, John Clay and Archie, to appear from the tunnel in the cellar. As soon as Sherlock extinguishes his lamp, the cellar is completely dark. Watson claims that he has never known such “absolute darkness” in his life, which echoes his complete confusion over the case at hand. Sherlock's lamp represents his enlightened position, having already solved the crime with his advanced rationality. In addition, the cellar, which lies beneath the bank, also symbolizes Sherlock's ability to see beneath the façade of the **Red-Headed League**. It is only when Sherlock realizes that John Clay is spending hours in the cellar of Jabez Wilson's house that he realizes Clay must be digging a tunnel to the cellar of the bank.



RED-HEADED LEAGUE

The titular Red-Headed League is the literal red-herring of the story, and it symbolizes the consequences of getting too caught up in appearances. Criminals John Clay and Archie invented the league as a ruse to get Jabez Wilson out of the house for four hours every day. Clay (in disguise as Wilson's assistance, Vincent Spaulding), shows Wilson a job advertised in the newspaper by the league, and encourages him to apply for the role. He claims that Wilson would be a perfect fit, thanks to his “fiery” red hair—the newspaper ad states that one must be red-headed to apply. The story is that the Red-Headed League was founded by an eccentric millionaire with red hair, and was intended to provide for men who are also red-headed. Thus, even the fictitious league is itself founded on appearances, which is an early indication that it is not to be trusted.

Sherlock Holmes is only able to solve the mystery because of his ability to see beyond the façade of the league. Sherlock alone realizes that John Clay and his accomplice, Archie, created the league as a distraction from the true nature of the crime. Through Holmes' skillful deduction, Conan Doyle reminds the reader not to assume significance in something just because it might seem more interesting or ostentatious at first glance.

The Red-Headed League Quotes

“I took a good look at the man and endeavoured, after the fashion of my companion, to read the indications which might be presented by his dress or appearance. I did not gain very much, however, by my inspection. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy gray shepherd's check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. [...] there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head.”

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Jabez Wilson, Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 264-65

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Watson attempts to adopt Holmes' methods of deduction. When faced with Jabez Wilson for the first time, Watson tries to ascertain various facts about his character simply by observing his appearance. When Holmes does this, he never fails to pick up on a few remarkable facts about a person. When Holmes observes Wilson, for instance, he concludes that he has practiced manual labor, because the muscles in one of his hands are more developed than the other. He also correctly identifies the “square pierced bit of metal” that Watson hastily overlooks as a Chinese coin, correctly assuming that Wilson has spent time in China. Unfortunately, Watson's efforts reap significantly less rewards. His main fault is that he overlooks the ordinary details of the man and becomes too focused on his “blazing red head.” As the story will soon reveal, Wilson's red hair is of no real significance. Because Watson was too invested in noting the “remarkable” details of Wilson's character, he completely missed the seemingly unremarkable details that might have given him some better clues.

“Well, I never!” said he. “I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it, after all.”

Related Characters: Jabez Wilson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bantam Classics edition of *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories, Volume 1* published in 1986.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

Holmes deduces several facts about Jabez Wilson simply by observing his physical appearance. He can tell that Wilson has practiced manual labor, for example, because the muscles in one of his hands are larger than the other. Jabez is amazed when Holmes reveals his conclusions, as he cannot figure out how Holmes would know such specific facts about him without having been told. After Holmes has explained his logical method to Wilson, Wilson decides that what Holmes has done is actually very simple.

This passage reveals the story's attitude toward logic. A situation may seem confusing at first, but once logic has been applied to it, it becomes very simple. Wilson's initial reaction perfectly encapsulates this: at first he is so amazed by Holmes that he cannot begin to fathom Holmes' methods. As soon as Holmes has explained his rational technique, however, Wilson decides that it was exceedingly simple—that there was “nothing in it, after all.” Conan Doyle suggests that as long as logic is applied to a situation, even the most complex of problems can become straightforward.

“I should not wish a smarter assistant, Mr. Holmes; and I know very well that he could better himself and earn twice what I am able to give him.”

Related Characters: Jabez Wilson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes, John Clay / Vincent Spaulding

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

Jabez Wilson declares that he was well aware of the fact that his assistant Vincent Spaulding (who is actually criminal mastermind John Clay) is too skilled to be paid half wages. Nevertheless, Wilson is desperate enough to save money that he happily goes along with it anyway. This decision is ultimately Wilson's downfall. Had he not hired Clay for half normal wage, even though he knew it was morally wrong, he would not have become the victim of Clay's criminal scheme. Clay was able to take advantage of Wilson because of his desire to save money, as Clay knew that Wilson would hire him as long as Wilson thought he was getting a good

deal. This arrangement meant that Clay was able to infiltrate Wilson's property and dig the tunnel from Wilson's cellar to the bank.

In fact, throughout the whole story Conan Doyle suggests that any form of greed is morally punishable, just as Wilson is ultimately punished for his. The criminals John Clay and Archie, for instance, are also punished for their greed when they are arrested.

“But we have to be careful, for we have twice been deceived by wigs and once by paint.”

Related Characters: Archie / Duncan Ross / William Morris (speaker), Jabez Wilson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

When Jabez Wilson goes to apply for his job with the Red-Headed League, Duncan Ross (who is Archie in disguise) pulls on his hair to make sure that it is real. He claims that they have been deceived by wigs and paint, which seem like fairly rudimentary disguises. This is Conan Doyle sending a subtle hint that nothing is to be trusted in the case of the Red-Headed League. He is pointing out just how easy it is to be fooled by silly disguises. It is later revealed that the league itself was nothing more than a trivial disguise for a bank robbery, but many of the characters in the story are easily deceived by the façade, just as Archie claims to have been deceived by the wigs and paint. This passage, then, is an early warning from Conan Doyle not to be fooled by the pretense of the criminals.

“As a rule,” said Holmes, “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.”

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. John Watson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: **Page Number:** 276**Explanation and Analysis**

Watson is completely dumbfounded by the bizarre case of the Red-Headed League, but Holmes assures him that it is likely to have a very simple explanation. This passage expresses one of the key ideas in this story: that the bizarre often proves to have a straightforward explanation, and turns out not to be so bizarre after all. Furthermore, it is important not to get too caught up in the bizarre, as this will likely only prove to be a distraction from the true reality of the situation.

Watson cannot will himself to see past the bizarre circumstances of this case. He gets too focused on the extraordinary tale of Jabez Wilson and the Red-Headed League, and thus fails to notice the clues that would otherwise have helped him to solve the crime. Holmes, on the other hand, does not let the league distract him. Instead, he realizes that it must simply be a ruse for a bank robbery. Sherlock ultimately proves successful in solving the crime, and his ability to look past the bizarre is essential to this success.

●● It was instantly opened by a bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow, who asked him to step in.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes, John Clay / Vincent Spaulding**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 277**Explanation and Analysis**

This “bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow” is in fact a master criminal, John Clay, who is disguised here as Jabez Wilson’s assistant, Vincent Spaulding. Answering the door, he appears to be a respectable-looking young man. It is not until Holmes walks away and refers to the same young man as John Clay that a reader is made aware of Spaulding’s true identity. If going by first impressions, no one would expect this “young fellow” to be a notorious criminal, but that is exactly the point that Conan Doyle is trying to make. It is important not to place too much credence in appearances or first impressions, as they can often be deeply misleading, or in this case, even dangerous. No one but Holmes

suspects John Clay to be a criminal, because they are all fooled by his guise of squeaky-clean respectability. Were it not for Holmes’ ability to see beyond appearances, John Clay would likely never have been caught.

●● “I am sure that you inquired your way merely in order that you might see him.”

“Not him.”

“What then?”

“The knees of his trousers.”

“And what did you see?”

“What I expected to see.”

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes (speaker), John Clay / Vincent Spaulding**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 277**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage encapsulates Holmes’ single-minded rationalism when it comes to the business of solving crimes. Holmes has just knocked on the door of Jabez Wilson’s property, which was opened by a “bright-looking, clean-shaven” young man, identified later by Holmes as John Clay (in disguise as Vincent Spaulding). Watson assumes, understandably, that Holmes had simply wanted to get a look at the man, but Holmes corrects him. Holmes had in fact only wished to observe the knees of Clay’s trousers. Watson is completely baffled, but Holmes later explains that he had wanted to see if the knees of the trousers were worn down, as this would confirm his suspicion that Clay had been digging a tunnel to the bank. Holmes is proved right in his theory, and does not feel the need to observe Clay any further, so he walks away. Watson, and the reader, might have been distracted by the unexpectedly respectable-looking Clay, but Holmes was so assured and single-minded in his methods that he barely even glanced at Clay’s face. Very few people would think to observe a man’s knees, but this ingenious notion is exactly what makes Holmes so successful in solving the crime.

“I should like just to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer's, the tobacconist, the little newspaper shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane's carriage-building depot. That carries us right on to the other block.”

Related Characters: Sherlock Holmes (speaker), Dr. John Watson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sherlock Holmes investigates the scene of the crime. He claims that he wishes to examine the surrounding buildings and to memorize their order because it's his “hobby” to know his way around London so precisely. This meticulous approach is part of his technique in solving the crime. Although the reader is at this point unaware of Holmes' purpose, the mention of the “Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank” proves essential to solving the mystery. Holmes is assessing the surrounding buildings to see whether or not it is likely that any of them could be a target for a robbery. The bank is his obvious solution. By carefully observing his surroundings, Holmes is able to solve the mystery.

This passage is also a good example of the way that Conan Doyle presents his clues. The bank is revealed in plain sight in the narrative, and if a reader is attentive enough, they might notice its significance. Thus, a reader is able to solve the mystery alongside the story's detective.

[...] 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.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Watson describes Holmes' incredible powers of deduction. He even goes so far as to say that those who are not accustomed to Holmes and familiar with his methods

would think that his knowledge was “not that of other mortals.” This startling suggestion certainly captures just how extraordinary Holmes' abilities appear to be. Watson implies that Holmes himself is simply incredibly gifted, as no one else can apply these logical methods as Holmes does. Consequently, no one else in the story can solve the crime other than Holmes and his powers of deduction.

In some ways, Watson also seems to suggest that it is only because of his “methods” that Holmes possesses such “brilliant reasoning power.” In this way, it appears that Conan Doyle is implying that with the right methods, anyone could achieve Holmes' levels of deduction.

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.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Watson cannot keep up with Holmes on this case, and he elaborates upon this here. Holmes' superior powers of deduction give him absolute mental clarity, and enable him to solve the crime quickly, whereas Watson is always stuck trying to make sense of everything. Watson has had access to the same clues as Holmes, so he feels inadequate in his inability to piece them together when it is obvious that Holmes has already solved the crime.

Conan Doyle contrasts the characters of Watson and Holmes in order to emphasize Holmes' remarkable abilities. Most people, like Watson, would struggle to solve this crime, but Holmes is gifted with such insight and rationality that it proves to be nothing more than a small challenge for him. In this sense, most readers can better relate to Watson than Holmes, making Watson an ideal candidate for narrator of the story.

“You may place considerable confidence in Mr. Holmes, sir,” said the police agent loftily. “He has his own little methods, which are, if he won’t mind my saying so, just a little too theoretical and fantastic, but he has the makings of a detective in him. It is not too much to say that once or twice, as in that business of the Sholto murder and the Agra treasure, he has been more nearly correct than the official force.”

Related Characters: Detective Jones (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Detective Jones is the policeman assigned to the case of the Red-Headed League robbery. Although he is unable to solve the crime himself, he does not like the thought of Sherlock Holmes solving every case, and proving to be better at his job than he is. Jones therefore makes little defensive comments such as this one, in order to downplay Holmes’ abilities. He does not want Holmes to take away all of his limelight, or worse, his job.

As this statement makes clear, Jones is well aware that Holmes is more than capable of solving every crime sent his way, but Jones won’t admit it. Wanting to keep some of his dignity intact, he dismisses Holmes’ methods as “just a little too theatrical,” and claims patronizingly that he “has the makings of a detective in him,” when it is clear that Holmes is already a far superior detective to Jones. This passage is part of Conan Doyle’s wider swipe at the London Police. He clearly did not think they were very capable in their jobs, and the character of Jones represents their misplaced sense

of entitlement.

Holmes shot the slide across the front of his lantern and left us in pitch darkness—such an absolute darkness as I have never before experienced.

Related Characters: Dr. John Watson (speaker), Sherlock Holmes

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is set in the cellar of the bank, where Sherlock Holmes, Watson, Jones, and Merryweather are waiting for the criminals to emerge from the tunnel, so that they can catch them before they manage to rob the bank. Only Holmes, however, is aware of this plan. The others are completely oblivious as to what is going on, and this is represented by the “absolute darkness” that Watson refers to in the cellar. The darkness represents their unenlightened state. Holmes is the only character with a light, because he is the only one enlightened enough to have been able to solve the crime. Without Holmes, the other men are left both literally and metaphorically “in the dark.” When Holmes extinguishes his light, it is thus made exceedingly obvious just how dependent the other men are on Holmes to guide them, both in the cellar and throughout the case.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE

John Watson arrives at Sherlock Holmes' apartment to find him talking to an elderly man with "fiery red hair." Holmes seems very excited, and invites Watson inside to meet the man, Jabez Wilson, and to hear his story. Holmes encourages Watson to listen by reminding him that he shares his love of "all that is bizarre." Holmes explains to Watson that the red-headed man has come to him with one of the most unusual cases he has heard in a long time.

Watson attempts to figure out some aspects of Wilson's character by observing his appearance, as Holmes usually does. However, Watson does not manage to deduce very much. The only "remarkable" aspect of Wilson's appearance, Watson claims, is the man's "blazing red head." He overlooks the smaller details of Wilson's appearance, such as a small "bit of metal dangling down as an ornament" on his waistcoat.

Holmes notices what Watson is doing and smiles at him, before revealing his own conclusions about Wilson. Wilson, Holmes claims, has practiced manual labor (one hand is more muscular than the other), is a Freemason (he wears a Freemason logo pin), and has spent time in China (he has a particular Chinese fish tattoo on his wrist, and a Chinese coin on his waistcoat). Wilson is amazed when Holmes reveals his deductions, and questions how he knew all of this. Holmes explains his powers of simple observation.

Wilson thinks Holmes is impressive, but also notes how simple Holmes' technique seems once it has been explained. He thought Holmes was being clever, but now sees that "there was nothing in it, after all."

Wilson begins telling his story by producing a newspaper advertisement. The advert is a job listing for the **Red-Headed League**, and it calls for a red-headed man to apply for an unspecified role paying four pounds a week. Watson is amazed. With a laugh, Holmes remarks that it is a "little off the beaten track."

The idea of "the bizarre" features prominently in this story, and the figure of Jabez Wilson, with his shock of "fiery red hair," is the first hint of this. The story implies that this man, who has such extraordinary hair, will have an equally extraordinary tale to tell, and Holmes and Watson both admit to taking great pleasure in such bizarre instances.



Watson fails in his attempt to deduce the character of Wilson because he is unable to see anything beyond Wilson's fantastic red hair. Watson only pays attention to the "remarkable," when he should actually be paying attention to the small, ordinary details of Wilson's appearance. If Watson had looked more closely at the piece of metal, for instance, he might have realized its significance as a Chinese coin—a detail Holmes' careful eye picks up on.



Unlike Watson, Holmes is not distracted by Wilson's "remarkable" red hair, and thus is able to pick up on the tiny details of the man's appearance. In doing so, Holmes is able to extract these varied facts about Wilson's character, demonstrating his remarkable powers of logical deduction. Holmes notices the same piece of "metal" as Watson, for instance, but correctly identifies it as a Chinese coin rather than dismissing it as a random, ornamental "bit of metal."



Holmes' ability to discern so much about Wilson just by looking at him seems extraordinary at first but is actually very simple. The application of logic makes everything more straightforward.



This strange newspaper advertisement is another example of the bizarre in the story. Holmes finds great amusement in the ad, but Watson is completely dumbfounded. This demonstrates the differing attitudes of the two men: Holmes is entertained by the bizarre, but maintains his rationality, whereas Watson is completely taken aback by it and allows it to distract him.



Wilson then explains a bit about himself: he is a pawnbroker, owns a business in Coburg Square, and has an assistant who is luckily willing to work for half wages. Holmes asks him further questions about the assistant, and Wilson explains that his name is Vincent Spaulding. Wilson can't tell how old Spaulding is, but he knows that Spaulding is extremely bright, and spends a lot of time on his photography, developing his photos for hours down in Wilson's **cellar**.

Wilson then explains that it was in fact Spaulding who showed him the advertisement for the **Red-Headed League** in the newspaper, and who encouraged him to apply for the job. Spaulding explained that a red-headed American millionaire founded the league as a way to help other red-headed men by providing them with easy jobs that pay well. Spaulding claimed that Wilson was bound to get the job due to his "real bright, blazing, fiery red" hair, which would certainly set him apart from the other red-headed applicants.

When Wilson and Spaulding arrived for the job interview on Fleet Street, the whole neighborhood was packed with red-headed men: "Every shade of colour they were—straw, lemon, orange, brick, Irish-setter, liver, clay; but, as Spaulding said, there were not many who had the real vivid flame-coloured tint." Although there were hundreds of men applying for the job, Spaulding took Wilson straight to the front and into the office, because he claimed that Wilson had a unique shade of red hair.

Once inside the office, the employer, a man named Duncan Ross, hired Wilson for the job almost immediately. First, though, he pulled Wilson's hair to make sure that it was real, explaining that "we have twice been deceived by wigs and once by paint."

Duncan Ross explains that the job is simply to copy out the encyclopedia for four hours every day, at four pounds a week. Wilson is never to leave the office during these hours, or he will be immediately fired. Wilson is happy to take the job.

Holmes seems very interested in the assistant from the moment that Wilson mentions that Spaulding works for half wages—why would an intelligent and capable man willingly work for less than he deserves? The next clue is that Spaulding is of unspecified age, as this shows that Wilson actually knows very little about his assistant. The detail of Spaulding spending a lot of time in the cellar will also be important later in the story.



It seems even more suspicious that Spaulding should be so eager to have Wilson employed in another job, which will keep him out of the house for several hours a day. This implies that Spaulding wants the time to work on something else while unsupervised—possibly in the cellar.



The image of a well-known London street completely filled with red-headed men is the next instance of the bizarre. It seems even more strange that Spaulding should be so assured in taking Wilson right to the front of the line—he clearly wants to ensure that Wilson secures this job.



Wilson thinks that he is hired simply because of his fiery red hair, but again, it seems very suspicious that he should instantly be offered the job when there are hundreds of other applicants. Ross pulling Wilson's hair also seems odd, and is perhaps a sign that these men are not to be trusted, if they can't trust anyone themselves.



This seems a remarkably easy—and trivial—job for such high pay, but Wilson is desperate for money and is happy to take the position without questioning its validity. The requirements also seem suspicious, but Wilson does not seem to notice that someone wants him out of his house for four hours every day.



Wilson began his job, and at first, Duncan Ross came into the office several times each morning. This gradually decreased, until soon, Ross wasn't coming by at all. Then, this morning, after eight weeks of work, Wilson arrived only to find a note on the door claiming that the **Red-Headed League** had been disbanded.

Wilson went around the neighboring offices, hoping to find some explanation, but found that no one had heard of Duncan Ross or the **Red-Headed League**. The landlord didn't know a Duncan Ross but said a solicitor named William Morris was using the office space temporarily until his own office was ready. Wilson attempted to track him down using the forwarding address that Morris provided to the landlord, but the address was for an artificial knee-cap factory, where no one had heard of Duncan Ross or William Morris.

Holmes promises Wilson that he will solve his case, but first asks a few further questions about the assistant, Vincent Spaulding. When he hears that Spaulding has a "splash of acid upon his forehead," Holmes sits up in excitement and claims that he had assumed as much. Holmes then sends Wilson away.

Holmes asks Watson what he thinks of the case, but Watson is completely dumbfounded by the whole story. Holmes says that there is probably a simply explanation, as "the more bizarre a thing is the less mysterious it proves to be."

Holmes wants to go out for the afternoon to think, and asks Watson to come with him. They are going to a concert, but first, they visit Saxe-Coburg Square, the address of Jabez Wilson. Holmes inspects the property carefully, even hitting the surrounding pavement with his walking stick several times.

Finally, Holmes knocks on the door, and a "bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow" answers. Holmes asks for directions to the Strand and then leaves. As they walk away, Holmes tells Watson that the man who answered the door was Wilson's assistant, Spaulding. Holmes remarks that Spaulding is the "fourth smartest man in London." Holmes explains to Watson that he had wished to observe the "knees of [Spaulding's] trousers," which Watson finds confusing. He is also confused as to why Holmes "beat the pavement" with his stick.

This part of the story makes Duncan Ross also seem fairly suspicious as a character. A reader might begin to sense a connection between Duncan Ross and Vincent Spaulding.



This turn of events seems to confirm Ross's criminality, but the circumstances are still very mysterious. It is perhaps not coincidental that his fake address leads to an artificial knee-cap factory. Not only is this detail completely bizarre, it is also a hint, given the fact that the knee-caps are artificial, that everything is not as it seems.



Holmes clearly thinks that the assistant is the key to solving the crime. He reacts with such excitement because he clearly recognizes Spaulding from the description. As the reader will later find out, the detail of the acid splash makes Holmes realize that Spaulding is in fact the famous criminal, John Clay.



Every time that Holmes asks Watson what he thinks of the case, it is as if he is in some way also addressing the reader and involving them in the narrative, asking them what they, too, think of the mystery.



Holmes inspects the property carefully as he tries to assess the nature of the crime. He taps on the pavement, the reader will later learn, because he suspects that there is a tunnel beneath it.



Vincent Spaulding, later revealed as master criminal John Clay, is introduced as a respectable-looking figure. It is only when Holmes refers to him as the "assistant" that the reader realizes Spaulding was the man who answered the door. It is also made especially obvious here that Watson is lagging several steps behind Holmes in solving the crime. Holmes checks Spaulding's trousers to see if he has been digging, and beats the pavement to check for a tunnel—two connections Watson fails to make.



Holmes then walks around the property and observes the neighboring buildings. He explains to Watson that he wishes to remember their exact order, and notices, amongst other buildings, the City and Suburban Bank. Holmes is content, and he and Watson leave for the concert.

Holmes asks Watson to meet him at ten that night at Holmes' apartment on Baker Street, and to bring his revolver. Watson still has no idea what is going on but trusts Holmes completely, for Holmes "saw clearly not only what had happened but what was about to happen."

Later that night, Holmes and Watson reconvene. They are joined by Detective Jones, the policeman assigned to the case, and Mr. Merryweather, the manager of the City and Suburban Bank. As the men make their way to the bank, Holmes explains that Mr. Merryweather could save 30,000 pounds this evening, and that Jones could catch a master criminal, John Clay. He explains that Clay is the grandson of a royal duke, and has attended both Eton and Oxford. Holmes declares that Clay's "brain is as cunning as his fingers."

Merryweather leads the party to the **cellar** of the bank, which is filled with crates of French gold, yet to be unpacked. Holmes tells everyone to be quiet and still, especially Merryweather, who is currently tapping the floor and making too much noise. Holmes tells him that: "You have already imperiled the whole success of our expedition. Might I beg that you would have the goodness to sit down upon one of those boxes, and not to interfere?"

As Mr. Merryweather taps on the floor of the bank **cellar** to demonstrate to Holmes how thick the floor is, he notices how hollow it suddenly sounds. Holmes bends down and starts meticulously examining each stone in the floor with his magnifying glass.

Holmes at last extinguishes his lamp, telling everyone to wait silently in the dark **cellar** for the criminals to emerge. Watson claims that he has never experienced such "absolute darkness."

Again, Holmes makes a point of noting the specific details of the case as he pursues his logical methods of crime-solving. When he notices the bank here, he seems to realize that a robbery is intended.



The contrast between Holmes and Watson again emphasizes Sherlock Holmes' intellectual superiority. Watson nevertheless holds such a great deal of respect for and trust in Holmes that he is willing to accompany him to a clearly dangerous crime scene.



From these discussions, the reader begins to get a real sense of the nature of the crime. Clearly, the scheme is to rob 30,000 pounds from Merryweather's bank, and the person responsible will be John Clay. The mention of Clay's "royal blood" explains his respectable-looking visage. Perhaps were he not criminally inclined, he would be a respectable young man.



The narrative gradually leads the reader further towards an understanding of what is really going on, just as the men who are being led down into the cellar must be experiencing a similar realization. As he reprimands Merryweather, Holmes appears to be very much in control of the situation. He knows exactly what he's doing, whereas Merryweather is presented as being naive and incompetent.



The hollow-sounding floor implies that there is a tunnel lying beneath it. Holmes is clearly aware of this, and attempts to find the tunnel exit on the floor with his magnifying glass.



The "absolute darkness" of the cellar represents the relative ignorance of all characters other than Holmes. His light represents his enlightened position, and when this is extinguished, the others are left both physically and metaphorically "in the dark" about the case and the crime that's about to unfold.



A brief flash illuminates the dark **cellar**, and a hand emerges from the floor, pushing a large stone aside. Through this “gaping hole” appears a “clean-cut, boyish face.” The boy, later revealed as John Clay, hoists himself up through the hole and calls down to his accomplice, Archie, to see if he has “the chisel and the bags.”

Suddenly, Holmes springs from his hiding place and grabs the boy. The boy’s accomplice, Archie, plunges back down the hole, as Detective Jones fails to catch hold of him. Holmes addresses the captured boy as John Clay, and tells him that he has “no chance at all.” Clay answers “with the utmost coolness,” saying that at least his accomplice got away successfully. Holmes says this isn’t the case—there are three police officers waiting on the other side of the escape route. Clay appears impressed and “compliment[s]” Holmes for being so careful and thorough. Holmes offers his compliments as well, declaring that Clay’s “red-headed idea was very new and effective.”

Jones pulls out a pair of handcuffs, and Clay balks at the idea of Jones touching him with his “filthy hands.” Haughtily, Clay declares that he has “royal blood in [his] veins.” He also tells the men that they must address him as “sir,” and remember to say “please.” With a laugh, Jones asks the “sir” to “please” accompany him to the police station. Clay looks satisfied, and, after a “sweeping bow,” follows Jones.

Holmes ends the story by explaining to Watson how he managed to solve the crime. Firstly, Holmes realized that the **Red-Headed League** must simply be a ruse intended to keep Wilson out of the shop for several hours a day. He was suspicious of Wilson’s assistant, Spaulding, because he was happy to be paid half wages, and so correctly assumed that he must be the culprit. Wilson mentioned that the assistant spent many hours in the **cellar**, so Holmes realized that this must be the scene of the crime, and that Spaulding was likely digging a tunnel. Holmes then identified Spaulding as the notorious criminal John Clay by the acid splash on his forehead, as Holmes had known of Clay beforehand.

The owner of this “clean-cut, boyish face” is clearly the same man who earlier answered the door when Holmes asked for directions. It is John Clay, who was earlier disguised as Vincent Spaulding. Clay is instantly incriminated by his call for “the chisel,” as it becomes very clear that he had some part in digging this tunnel and intending to rob the bank.



Holmes is the clear victor of this scene, as he is the only person to successfully capture one of the criminals. Detective Jones fails to hold on to Archie, but fortunately Holmes has the situation under control. He has already stationed three other policemen at the only other exit to the tunnel. This thoroughness earns Clay’s respect, just as Clay’s brilliant plan earns Holmes’ respect. Through this interaction, the story implies that intelligence is always something that must be duly rewarded, even if it is intended for criminal purposes.



It is perhaps interesting that Clay still assumes superiority over the policemen because of his royal bloodline, even though he has just been arrested. This may be a veiled reference to royals thinking they are above the law, as the real Prince Edward VII was at the time involved in various illegal scandals.



This final passage reveals how truly ingenious Holmes has been throughout the story. Simply through his keen powers of observation and rationality, Holmes was able to solve the mystery. It certainly helped that he was able to overlook the façade of the Red-Headed League, realizing that it was only intended as a ruse. The other intellectually inferior characters in the story, such as Watson, got so caught up in the bizarre circumstances of the case that they were unable to see its logical solution.



When he went to visit Wilson's property, Holmes carefully observed the nearby buildings and realized that there was a bank only meters away from the property, which was likely the target. Holmes then wished to observe Clay's knees, so he knocked on the door to take a look at Clay. The knees of Clay's trousers were, as Holmes suspected, thoroughly worn down, signifying that he had been doing a lot of digging recently. Since Wilson's job had just ended, meaning that he was no longer required to be out of the house, Holmes realized the tunnel must be finished, and that the robbery was likely to take place that very night.

Watson praises Holmes for his remarkable work, declaring that Holmes "reasoned it out beautifully." Holmes brushes off Watson's lavish praise, claiming that he just solved a "little problem" that may be "of some little use." In French, Holmes quotes Gustave Flaubert, stating, "The man is nothing, the work—all."

The fact that Holmes wished to catch a glimpse of John Clay with the specific intention of looking at his knees is testament to Holmes' unwavering rationality. Whereas Watson, and indeed the reader, were probably preoccupied by the unexpectedly bright and "clean-shaven" face of the young man, Holmes was so focused on the case that he did not get distracted for one moment by the man's face. He wished only to look at the knees, as only the knees would provide the answers he needed in order to solve the crime.



Watson is always full of praise and admiration for Holmes, and although sometimes Holmes is happy to accept it, here he is especially modest. It is this modesty and selflessness that is particularly praised in this story, in contrast to the greed and entitlement of the criminals.





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Rainbow, Sophie. "The Red-Headed League." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 6 Sep 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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