The Red-Headed League

Arthur Conan Doyle · 1891

A pawnbroker with fiery red hair is paid four pounds a week to copy out the Encyclopædia Britannica — until the League is dissolved. Doyle's second Holmes story and one of his two favourites, complete: Fleet Street choked with red-headed men, a three pipe problem, Sarasate at St. James's Hall, and an hour and a quarter in the dark.

LISTEN FOR

— Holmes reads Jabez Wilson before the story starts: manual labour, snuff, Freemasonry, China, writing; listen for what Wilson says once each is explained.

— The dates: an advertisement of April 27, a card of October 9, and 'just two months ago'; listen for how the story counts its weeks.

— What Watson sees and does not understand on Saxe-Coburg Square: the stick on the pavement, the question about the Strand, the knees of the trousers.

— Once the lantern is shut, the vault scene is what Watson can hear, and then a single spark of what he can see.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

Dr. Watson	the narrator · a married man, calling at Baker Street
Sherlock Holmes	in deep conversation
Jabez Wilson	pawnbroker, of Saxe-Coburg Square · red-headed
Vincent Spaulding	the assistant · at half wages
Peter Jones	of Scotland Yard
Mr. Merryweather	a bank director · missing his rubber

THE PLACES

Baker Street · Aldersgate · Saxe-Coburg Square · St. James's Hall · Farringdon Street

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	I had called upon my friend
4:51	The obvious facts
7:26	The advertisement
8:46	Jabez Wilson's story
13:57	Fleet Street, choked with red-headed men
20:37	The Encyclopædia Britannica
24:08	Dissolved
30:01	A three pipe problem
31:12	Saxe-Coburg Square
34:59	Sarasate at St. James's Hall
38:26	Mr. Jones and Mr. Merryweather
42:33	The vault
47:31	An hour and a quarter in the dark
52:07	The explanation

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

Omne ignotum pro magnifico Latin, from Tacitus: 'everything unknown is taken for magnificent'. Holmes regrets explaining; the trick looks smaller once seen.

Four pounds a week About £550 a week today, for four hours a day of copying. A clerk earned a pound or two. Wilson calls it 'a couple of hundred a year'; the sum is the bait.

April 27, 1890 Doyle's famous slip: the advertisement is dated April 27, 'just two months ago', but the League is dissolved on October 9, after eight weeks' work. The dates cannot be made to agree; readers have tried for a century.

The Encyclopædia Britannica The ninth edition, twenty-five volumes, 1875–1889. Copying it at four hours a day would take, by one estimate, a little over a hundred years.

A three pipe problem Fifty minutes, by Holmes's own estimate. The pipe is black clay; the pose, knees to nose, is Paget's drawing.

Thumping the pavement Holmes is listening for a hollow. The reader is told nothing; Watson sees it and does not understand it, which is the method of every Holmes story.

The knees of his trousers Worn, wrinkled and stained — from burrowing. Holmes went to the door to look at the man's knees, not his face.

French gold Thirty thousand napoleons — twenty-franc gold pieces — borrowed from the Bank of France and packed in lead foil. About £1,200,000 today, in two thousand pieces to a crate.

An hour and a quarter In the dark, with a cocked revolver on a crate. Watson's hearing becomes the story: the breathing of three men, a scratch of light.

Royal blood John Clay — Eton and Oxford, grandson of a royal duke — asks to be addressed as 'sir' while being handcuffed. Jones obliges.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"for strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination."
Holmes to Watson, before Wilson has told a word of his story.

"I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all."
Wilson, after Holmes has explained the tattoo and the coin.

"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."
Holmes, when Wilson has gone and Watson can make nothing of it.

"My dear doctor, this is a time for observation, not for talk. We are spies in an enemy's country."
On the pavement outside the pawnbroker's, when Watson asks why he beat it with his stick.

"What a time it seemed! From comparing notes afterwards it was but an hour and a quarter, yet it appeared to me that the night must have almost gone, and the dawn be breaking above us."
Watson in the dark of the vault, before the first spark of light.

"My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so."
Holmes over the whisky and soda in the early hours, yawning.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Holmes names five things he can see in Jabez Wilson. Go through each: what mark on the man gives it away, and which one does Holmes refuse to explain?
2. Read the advertisement again. What does it promise, who is eligible, and where and when must a man apply? Compare it with what Spaulding tells Wilson the vacancy is worth.

3. Duncan Ross calls it ‘very serious indeed’ that Wilson is a bachelor, and then lets it pass. What conditions of the post does he state, and which one does he repeat?
4. Wilson says the joke cost its makers ‘two and thirty pounds’; Holmes says Wilson is ‘richer by some £30’. Follow the money through the story: what is paid, by whom, and for what?
5. Holmes asks Wilson a string of questions about his assistant and then sits up ‘in considerable excitement’. Which answer does it, and what does Holmes say he has ‘known’ before?
6. On Saxe-Coburg Square Holmes thumps the pavement, knocks at the door and asks the way to the Strand. What does Watson take each of these to be for, and what does Holmes say afterwards each was for?
7. Holmes names the shops on the street behind the square in order. Which one matters, and at what point does Watson learn why?
8. Jones calls Holmes’s methods ‘a little too theoretical and fantastic’; Holmes calls Jones ‘an absolute imbecile in his profession’ with ‘one positive virtue’. What does each say the other is good for, and what does each actually do in the vault?
9. In the dark Watson can tell the two men beside him apart by their breathing. List, in order, what he sees from the spark on the floor to the face at the hole. Keep to what the text says.
10. John Clay compliments Holmes and Holmes compliments him back. What exactly does each praise? Then compare Clay’s request about ‘sir’ and ‘please’ with Jones’s reply.

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