

THE RED HEADED LEAGUE

One day last autumn a man by the name of Mr Wilson came to see Holmes.

Mr Wilson explained to Holmes how he had got involved with an organisation called the Red-Headed League.

“My assistant” said Mr Wilson “is a young man called Vincent Spaulding. He showed me an advertisement in the newspaper explaining how something called the Red-Headed League had a vacancy for one more red headed man. The League would pay the successful candidate four pounds a week to do light work.”

Apparently this League had been started by an American who had bright red hair. In America his hair had been the subject of much mirth, but in London nobody had commented upon it. So by way of gratitude this American had left all his money to red headed Londoners.

Mr Wilson then went on to tell us how, as his own hair was a wonderful bright red, he had managed to win the much coveted place in the League and the light work referred to in the advertisement was simply to copy out the dictionary.

He told us that the only conditions had been that he must do the work at the League’s office; and that he must arrive promptly at ten and leave at two o’clock. This wasn’t a problem as although Mr Wilson owned a small grocer’s shop in Coburg Square his assistant Mr Vincent Spaulding was quite capable of looking after the shop in the mornings.

Everything had proceeded happily and every Saturday he had received his wages of four pounds, until this morning. Mr Wilson had arrived at the office at ten o’clock to find a note pinned on the door saying that the Red-Headed League had come to an end. He had asked everyone where he could trace the League...nobody seemed to know anything about them... which was why he had come for help to Holmes.

“I shall be happy to help you” said Holmes “but first tell me more about your assistant Vincent Spaulding.”

Mr Wilson told us that Vincent Spaulding was a man of about thirty; He was a good worker; His only fault, if fault it was, was his passion for photography. He developed his photographs in Mr Wilson’s basement.

“Why did you choose Vincent Spaulding, to be your assistant?” asked Holmes

“He offered to work for half the usual pay, provided he could indulge his hobby as a photographer” replied Wilson.

“What does he look like?”

“He’s small and fat and has a long white mark above his right eye”. Wilson told us.

This information seemed to greatly excite Holmes. He told Wilson that by Monday he

would have the full story. As it was already Saturday this didn't leave Holmes long to solve the mystery of the Red-Headed League.

Once Wilson had left, Holmes suggested we should go to an afternoon concert. On the way we would stop at Coburg Square.

"We can have a look at Mr Wilson's shop." said Holmes.

When we arrived in Coburg Square it wasn't difficult to find Mr Wilson's shop. It was the only grocer in the square and had a large sign saying "Jabez Wilson, Grocer".

Holmes looked at the building, he then walked down the street and finally returned to the shop. He then hit the ground with his stick three times. Finally he went to the side door and knocked. A fat young man appeared.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Could you tell me the way to the Strand?" politely inquired Holmes.

"First right, second left" said the man and closed the door.

Holmes was obviously pleased with himself and asked me "Did you see the knees of his trousers?"

I replied in the negative and asked him why he had hit the ground three times.

"My dear Doctor we haven't time to talk" replied Holmes "We have seen Coburg Square. Now I wish to see behind it."

The buildings in Coburg Square had been small and old but behind the Square it was all quite different. The street was wide and the buildings tall and modern. There were several large shops and one big bank, the City Bank.

"Very good" said Holmes. "As I expected. Now, our work is done, let us forget the Red-Headed League for an hour or two and go to the concert."

Two hours later when we emerged from the concert Holmes said "Today is Saturday. The crime will happen tonight. I shall need your help Watson. Will you come to Baker Street tonight at ten?"

Of course I agreed.

That evening when I arrived at Holmes' apartment he introduced me to a Mr Merryweather, who worked for the City Bank and to Inspector Lestrade. Apparently they were to join the expedition.

Mr Merryweather was unhappy about missing his Saturday evening game of cards.

"This game will be more exciting" said Holmes "You, Mr Merryweather will be playing for thirty thousand pounds, and you Inspector will have the chance to lay

your hands upon John Clay, murderer, thief smasher and forger.”

“I would rather have the bracelets on him than on any other criminal in London.” said the delighted Inspector.

We drove straight to the City Bank. Mr Merryweather opened the door and we went in. We went through a heavy door and down some steps into the cellar.

“You are not vulnerable from above” Holmes remarked as he held up the lantern.

“Nor from below” said Merryweather striking the floor with his stick. “Why, dear me, it sounds quite hollow” he said in surprise.

“Be Quiet” said Holmes sharply “now all of you get behind those boxes, and stay well hidden. Mr Merryweather why don’t you entertain us by quietly telling us about the contents of those boxes.”

“Gold” whispered Mr Merryweather “Thirty thousand gold coins. Borrowed from the Bank of France. The directors have had misgivings about storing it here.”

“With justification.” retorted Holmes.

At that moment we heard a slight scraping sound...Holmes doused the lantern and I cocked my revolver.

A small line of light appeared on the floor...gradually it got wider ..and then with a rending tearing sound one of the broad stones turned over and left a gaping hole. A head appeared and a man climbed from the hole. A second man, who had bright red hair, followed him.

Holmes sprang forward and seized the first man by the collar. The other man dived back down the hole. The light glinted upon the barrel of a revolver, but Holmes’ hunting crop came down on the man’s wrist and the pistol clinked upon the stone floor.

“It’s no use John Clay” said Holmes “You have no chance at all.”

“So I see” the other answered “I fancy that my pal is alright though.”

“There are four policeman waiting for him in Coburg Square” replied Holmes with a certain amount of complacency.

In the early hours of the morning we got back to Baker Street, and over a large whiskey and soda Holmes explained the mystery of the Red-Headed league.

“John Clay’s friend” Holmes told me “ had bright red hair. Mr Wilson also had red hair. This gave John Clay an idea. John Clay adopts a new name and a new persona. He becomes Vincent Spaulding and gets a job as assistant to Mr Wilson. Mr Wilson is then made to believe in the Red-Headed league, and is therefore out of the shop every morning.”

“When I heard that Vincent Spaulding took photographs and spent a lot of time in the cellar” continued Holmes “I suspected that something was maybe going on in that cellar. When we went to the shop I saw Spaulding and recognised him as John Clay.

What was he doing in the cellar? He was digging. There was earth on his trouser knees. Now Watson what did I do when we first arrived outside the shop in Coburg Square?”

“You hit the ground with your stick.”

“Precisely. By that means I discovered the cellar was not at the front. It must therefore be at the back. We went into the street behind Coburg Square and there directly behind the Grocer’s shop was the City Bank. There was the answer to the problem.”

“But how did you know that it was tonight that they would attempt the robbery.”

“They closed the League’s office. That was a sign that they no longer needed Mr Wilson out of the way. Also Saturday night gave them almost two days before the theft would be noticed. Two days for their escape. Poor Clay!”

“Why do you say that, Holmes?” I asked.

“”Because he did all that work for nothing” smiled Holmes.