

Detective Sherlock Holmes solves crimes with the help of his partner, Dr Watson. This story, narrated by Dr Watson, is about a small-business owner who needs help to solve a strange mystery. Mr Jabez Wilson, a pawnbroker with bright red hair, is concerned about a group called The Red-Headed League. For four hours each day, the league has employed Wilson to travel to an office in town and transcribe pages from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—by hand!

**SHORT
READS**
Fiction

THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE



‘Eight weeks passed away like this, and I had written about Abbots and Archery and Armour and Architecture and Attica, and hoped with diligence that I might get onto the B’s before very long. I had pretty nearly filled a shelf with my writings, when suddenly the whole business came to an end. I went to work as usual at ten o’clock, but the door was shut and locked, with a little square of cardboard hammered onto the middle of the panel with a tack. Here it is—you can read for yourself.’

He held up a piece of white cardboard about the size of a sheet of notepaper.

It read:

The Red-Headed League is dissolved
October 9, 1890

Sherlock Holmes and I surveyed this curt announcement and the rueful face behind it, until the comical side of the affair so completely overtopped every other consideration that we both burst out into a roar of laughter.

‘I cannot see that there is anything very funny,’ objected our client, flushing up to the roots of his flaming head. ‘If you can do nothing better than laugh at me, I can go elsewhere.’

‘No, no,’ cried Holmes, shoving him back into the chair from which he had half-risen. ‘I really wouldn’t miss your case for the world. It is most refreshingly unusual, yet there is, if you will excuse my saying so, something just a little funny about it. What steps did you take when you found the card on the door?’

‘I was staggered and, quite simply, I did not know what to do. I called at all the nearby offices, but nobody has even heard of the Red-Headed League or Mr Duncan Ross, the manager. Nobody was willing to investigate the matter at the police station, or even take me seriously, but I had heard that you were good enough to give advice to poor folk who were in need of it, so I came right away to you.’

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 SCHOLASTIC

‘And you did very wisely,’ said Holmes, ‘for your case is an exceedingly remarkable one, and I shall be happy to look into it. From what you have told me, I think that it is possible that graver issues hang from it than might at first sight appear.’

‘Yes indeed, things are grave!’ said Mr Jabez Wilson, shaking his head solemnly. ‘Why, I won’t be earning those four pounds each week, now.’

‘As far as you are personally concerned,’ remarked Holmes, ‘I do not see that you have any grievance against this extraordinary league. On the contrary, you are, as I understand, richer by some thirty 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 by them.’

‘Now,’ Holmes continued, ‘before we start investigating, I must ask you one or two further questions, Mr Wilson. The assistant of yours who first called your attention to the advertisement for the Red-Headed League in the newspaper—how long had he been working for you?’

‘About a month.’

‘How did he get the job?’

‘He answered an advertisement.’

‘Was he the only applicant?’

‘No, I had a dozen, but he was willing to work for half-wages as he really needed to have a job.’

‘Hardly surprising under the circumstances; and what is he like, this Vincent Spaulding?’

‘Small, stout-built, very quick in his ways, no hair on his face, though he’s not short of thirty, and he has a white splash of acid upon his forehead.’

Holmes sat up in his chair in considerable excitement. ‘I thought as much,’ said he. ‘Have you ever observed if his ears are pierced for earrings?’

‘Yes, sir. He told me that a gypsy had done it for him when he was a lad.’

‘Hmm!’ said Holmes, sinking back in deep thought. ‘He is still with you, I assume?’

‘Oh, yes, sir, I have only just left him to come and see you now. He is a good worker, and nothing at all has gone missing while he has looked after the shop. The shop is never very busy during the day, as I get most of my business in the evening.’

‘That will do, Mr Wilson. You have given me all the information I need for the moment. I shall be happy to give you an opinion upon the subject in the course of a day or two. Today is Saturday, and I hope that by Monday we may come to a conclusion.’

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson begin their investigations straight away, with their next significant clues being the dusty knees of Vincent Spaulding, and the fact that a large bank is located close to Wilson’s pawnshop. They will need to act quickly if they are to prevent a dastardly crime from being committed.

