

## The Red-headed League

### Focus

“The Red-headed League” is a **detective story**, and as such, is **plotted** to provide clues to the reader without giving away the ending. This carefully crafted tale includes the elements of **exposition** (an introduction to the characters, setting and situations that are important to the plot), **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action** and **resolution**. The story is told from the first-person perspective by Dr. Watson, a friend and sidekick of Sherlock Holmes. Watson’s detailed narrative, in fact, gives the reader all of the clues. But whereas Sherlock Holmes uses deductive reasoning to solve the mystery, the accommodating Dr. Watson—functioning as character, participant, audience, and foil for Holmes—like the reader, is always in the dark. He can be called a naive first-person narrator, as he often misses the significance of what he is reporting.

### Notice

The fun of reading mysteries is trying to figure out how all the details and clues come together in the end. Of course, the linking of the clues and the solution to the puzzle must be realistic and make sense. A mystery also needs to be a good piece of logically-grounded fiction.

For the reader, a mystery requires careful attention. Notice how the beginning of the story, the **exposition**, shows Sherlock Holmes using deductive reasoning to gather information about Mr. Wilson, based only on his appearance. Look for the clues that follow to try to solve the mystery *before* Holmes reveals the solution.

### Vocabulary

Note that the definitions given here are the meanings appropriate to the selection. Since “The Red-headed League” was written in the late Victorian period (circa 1840 to 1900), some of the words still in use today have slightly different meanings. Examples of words with shifting meanings include *grotesque*, *lurid*, *occupation*, *positive*, *relapsing*, and *retired*. Do you see any others? As language changes over time, often the **connotative** meaning comes to replace the **denotative** meaning. In other words, the *real* meaning of the word, which is the dictionary definition, is replaced by associations that people have with the word. *Lurid* is a good example of this. As we see in “The Red Headed League,” *lurid* meant *a red fiery glow*. It went from *a fiery light* to meaning *shocking* to its current most popular meaning of *gruesome* and *horrible*. If you use a good dictionary, you will see dates given for the definitions, or the first use of a particular definition. This helps us track the development of language over time.

## Vocabulary

- abutted** (uh BUT tid) *v.*: touched along a border; bordered on (p. 12)
- animated** (AN ih MATE id) *adj.*: full of vigor and spirit; lively (p. 13)
- astute** (uh STOOT) *adj.*: having or showing shrewdness and acute mental vision (p. 12)
- bequest**: (bee KWEST) *n.*: a gift by will, especially of money or other personal property (p. 6)
- berths**: (BIRTHS) *n.*: places to sit or sleep, especially on a ship or vehicle; accommodations (p. 7)
- bizarre** (bih ZAR) *adj.*: strikingly out of the ordinary; odd, extravagant, or eccentric in style or mode; involving sensational contrasts or incongruities (p. 4)
- candid** (KAN did) *adj.*: marked by honest sincere expression; indicating or suggesting sincere honesty and absence of deception (p. 5)
- chronicle** (KRAHN ih kul) *v.*: to record in, or as if in, a chronicle; to list, describe (p. 4)
- compunction** (kum PUNGK shun) *n.*: distress of mind or guilt over an anticipated action or result (p. 15)
- deference** (DEF er intz) *n.*: respect and esteem due a superior or an elder (p. 14)
- embellish** (em BELL ish) *v.*: to heighten the attractiveness of by adding ornamental details; enhance (p. 4)
- formidable** (FOR mih dih bul) *adj.*: causing fear, dread, or apprehension; having qualities that discourage approach or attack; tending to inspire awe or wonder (p. 13)
- genteel** (jen TEEL) *adj.*: having an aristocratic quality (p. 12)
- humdrum** (HUM DRUM) *adj.*: monotonous, dull (p. 4)
- introspect** (IN truh SPEKT) *v.*: look inward; examine one's own thoughts and feelings (p. 11)
- judicial** (joo DISH il) *adj.*: of, characterized by, or able to express judgment; critical (p. 4)
- languid** (LANG gwid) *adj.*: drooping or flagging from, or as if from, exhaustion; sluggish (p. 12)
- lurid** (LUR id) *adj.*: of any of several light or medium grayish colors ranging in hue from yellow to orange; shining with the red glow of fire seen through smoke or cloud (p. 16)
- nocturnal** (nahk TUR nil) *adj.*: of, relating to, or occurring in the night (p. 13)
- nominal** (NAHM ih nul) *adj.*: existing in name only; slight amount (p. 9)
- occupation** (AHK yoo PAY shun) *n.*: an activity in which one engages (p. 5)
- ominous** (AHM ih nis) *adj.*: foreshadowing evil; threatening; menacing (p. 13)
- oppressively** (oh PRESS siv lee) *adv.*: depressing to the spirit or senses (p. 13)
- particulars** (per TIK yih lurz) *n.*: facts or details (p. 7)
- pompous** (PAHM piz) *adj.*: having or exhibiting self-importance (p. 5)
- positive** (PAHZ ih tiv) *adj.*: not fictitious, not speculative (as in any positive crime) (p. 4)
- relapsing** (ree LAPS ing) *v.*: to become sick again after a partial recovery (p. 4)
- singular** (SING gyoo ler) *adj.*: being out of the ordinary, unusual; peculiar, odd (p. 4)
- stagnant** (STAG nint) *adj.*: not advancing or developing (p. 12)
- tenacious** (tih NAY shus) *adj.*: persistent in maintaining or adhering to one's opinions, rights, etc. (p. 14)
- uncongenial** (UN kun JEEN yil) *adj.*: not to one's taste; incompatible (p. 12)

# The Red-headed League

*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

I had called upon my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, one day in the autumn of last year and found him in deep conversation with a very stout, florid-faced, elderly gentleman with fiery red hair. With an apology for my intrusion, I was about to withdraw when Holmes pulled me abruptly into the room and closed the door behind me.

“You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson,” he said cordially.

“I was afraid that you were engaged.”

“So I am. Very much so.”

“Then I can wait in the next room.”

“Not at all, Watson. Mr. Wilson, I would like you to meet Dr. Watson, my partner, friend, and helper in many of my most successful cases.”

The stout gentleman half rose from his chair and gave a bob<sup>1</sup> of greeting, with a quick little questioning glance from his small, fat-encircled eyes.

“Try the settee,”<sup>2</sup> said Holmes, relapsing into his armchair, and putting his fingertips together, as was his custom when in judicial moods. “I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions and humdrum routine of everyday life. You have shown your relish for it by the enthusiasm which has prompted you to chronicle, and, if you will excuse my saying so, somewhat to embellish so many of my own little adventures.”

“Your cases have indeed been of the greatest interest to me,” I observed.

“You will remember that I remarked the other day, just before we went into the very simple problem presented by Miss Mary Sutherland, that for

strange effects and extraordinary combinations we must go to life itself, which is always far more daring than any effort of the imagination.”

“A proposition which I took the liberty of doubting.”

“You did, Doctor, but none the less you must come round to my view, for otherwise I shall keep on piling fact upon fact on you until your reason breaks down under them and acknowledges me to be right. Now, Mr. Jabez Wilson here has been good enough to call upon me this morning, and to begin a narrative which promises to be one of the most singular which I have listened to for some time. You have heard me remark that the strangest and most unique things are very often connected not with larger but with the smaller crimes, and occasionally, indeed, where there is room for doubt whether any positive crime has been committed. As far as I have heard it is impossible for me to say whether the present case is an instance of crime or not, but the course of events is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to. Perhaps, Mr. Wilson, you would have the great kindness to recommence<sup>3</sup> your narrative. I ask you, not merely because my friend, Dr. Watson, has not heard the opening part but also because the peculiar nature of the story makes me anxious to have every possible detail from your lips. As a rule, when I have heard some slight indication of the course of events, I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory. In the present instance I am forced to admit that the facts are, to the best of my belief, unique.”

The portly<sup>4</sup> client puffed out his chest with an appearance of some little pride and pulled a dirty

---

1. **bob** (BAHB): a short, quick down-and-up motion; a nod or brief curtsy (as a *bob of greeting*).

2. **settee** (set TEE): medium-sized sofa with arms and a back.

---

3. **recommence** (REE kuh MENTZ): to start again.

4. **portly** (PORT lee): dignified, stately; heavy or rotund of body, stout.

and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his greatcoat. As he glanced down the advertisement column, with his head thrust forward and the paper flattened out upon his knee, I took a good look at the man and endeavored, 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,<sup>5</sup> obese,<sup>6</sup> pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy, gray shepherd's check<sup>7</sup> trousers, a not over clean black frock coat,<sup>8</sup> unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat<sup>9</sup> with a heavy, brassy Albert chain,<sup>10</sup> and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin<sup>11</sup> and discontent upon his features.

Sherlock Holmes's quick eye took in my occupation, and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labor,<sup>12</sup> that he takes snuff,<sup>13</sup> that he is a Freemason,<sup>14</sup> that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else."

Mr. Jabez Wilson started up in his chair, with

his forefinger upon the paper, but with his eyes upon my companion.

"How, in the name of good fortune, did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "How did you know, for example, that I did manual labor? It's as true as can be, for I began as a ship's carpenter."

"Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed."

"Well, the snuff, then, and the Freemasonry?"

"I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how I read that, especially as, rather against the strict rules of your order, you use an arc-and-compass shirtpin."

"Ah, of course, I forgot that. But the writing?"

"What else can be indicated by that right cuff so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk?"

"Well, but China?"

"The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks and have even contributed to the literature of the subject. That trick of staining the fishes' scales of a delicate pink is quite peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple."

Mr. Jabez Wilson laughed heavily. "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."

"I begin to think, Watson," said Holmes, "that I make a mistake in explaining. '*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*,'<sup>15</sup> you know, and my poor little reputation, such as it is, will suffer shipwreck if I am so candid. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes, I have got it now," he answered, with his thick, red finger planted halfway down the column.

---

5. **tradesman** (TRAIDZ min): a worker in a skilled trade.

6. **obese** (oh BEECE): excessively fat.

7. **shepherd's check** (SHEP erdz CHEK): having a pattern of small even black-and-white checks; *also*, a fabric woven in this pattern—called also *shepherd's plaid*.

8. **frock coat** (FRAHK KOTE): a man's knee-length, usually double-breasted, coat.

9. **waistcoat** (WESS kit): *chiefly British*, vest.

10. **Albert chain** (AL bert CHAIN): a Victorian pocket watch chain, with the links of a particular style.

11. **chagrin** (shuh GRIN): distress of mind caused by humiliation, disappointment, or failure.

12. **manual labor** (MAN yoo il LAY ber): work requiring or using physical skill and energy.

13. **snuff** (SNUFF): a preparation of pulverized tobacco to be inhaled through the nostrils, chewed, or placed against the gums.

14. **Freemason** (FREE MAY sin): a member of a major fraternal organization called Free and Accepted Masons or Ancient Free and Accepted Masons that has certain secret rituals.

---

15. **Omne ignotum pro magnifico** (AHM nay ig NO tim PRO mag NEE fee ko): Latin for "Whatever is known is magnified."

“Here it is. This is what began it all. You just read it for yourself, sir.”

I took the paper from him and read as follows:

## CLASSIFIED

### TO THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE:

On account of the bequest of the late Ezekiah Hopkins, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., there is now another vacancy open which entitles a member of the League to a salary of four pounds<sup>16</sup> a week for purely nominal services. All red-headed men who are sound in body and mind, and above the age of twenty-one years, are eligible. Apply in person on Monday, at eleven o'clock, to Duncan Ross, at the offices of the League, 7 Pope's Court, Fleet Street.

“What on earth does this mean?” I exclaimed after I had twice read over the extraordinary announcement.

Holmes chuckled and wriggled in his chair, as was his habit when in high spirits. “It is a little off the beaten track, isn't it?” said he. “And now, Mr. Wilson, off you go at scratch<sup>17</sup> and tell us all about yourself, your household, and the effect which this advertisement had upon your fortunes. You will first make a note, Doctor, of the paper and the date.”

“It is *The Morning Chronicle* of April 27, 1890. Just two months ago.”

“Very good. Now, Mr. Wilson?”

“Well, it is just as I have been telling you, Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” said Jabez Wilson, mopping his

forehead; “I have a small pawnbroker's<sup>18</sup> business at Coburg Square, near the City. It's not a very large affair, and of late years it has not done more than just give me a living. I used to be able to keep two assistants, but now I only keep one; and I would have a job to pay him but that he is willing to come for half wages so as to learn the business.”

“What is the name of this obliging youth?” asked Sherlock Holmes.

“His name is Vincent Spaulding, and he's not such a youth, either. It's hard to say his age. 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. But, after all, if he is satisfied, why should I put ideas in his head?”

“Why, indeed? You seem most fortunate in having an employee who comes under the full market price. It is not a common experience among employers in this age. I don't know that your assistant is not as remarkable as your advertisement.”

“Oh, he has his faults, too,” said Mr. Wilson. “Never was such a fellow for photography. Snapping away with a camera when he ought to be improving his mind, and then diving down into the cellar like a rabbit into its hole to develop his pictures. That is his main fault, but, on the whole, he's a good worker. There's no vice<sup>19</sup> in him.”

“He is still with you, I presume?”

“Yes, sir. He and a servant, who does a bit of simple cooking and keeps the place clean—that's all I have in the house, for I am a widower<sup>20</sup> and never had any family. We live very quietly, sir, the three of us; and we keep a roof over our heads and pay our debts, if we do nothing more.

“The first thing that put us out was that advertisement. Spaulding, he came down into the office just this day eight weeks, with this very paper in his hand, and he says:

“ ‘I wish, Mr. Wilson, that I was a red-headed

16. **4 pounds**: four pounds in British currency, which in American currency is approximately equal to \$10.00. This was a considerable sum of money during the time in which this story is set.

17. **scratch** (SKRACH): a point at the beginning of a project at which nothing has been done.

18. **pawnbroker** (PAWN BRO kur): a person who lends money on the security of personal property placed in his keeping.

19. **vice** (VYCE): corruption; a moral fault or failing; a habitual and usually trivial defect or shortcoming.

20. **widower** (WID oh er): a man who has lost his wife by death and usually has not remarried.

from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so.”

“And you are a benefactor of the race,” said I.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, perhaps, after all, it is of some little use,” he remarked. “*L’homme c’est rien-l’oeuvre c’est tout*,”<sup>57</sup> as Gustave Flaubert<sup>58</sup> wrote to George Sand.<sup>59</sup>

---

57. *L’homme c’est rien-l’oeuvre c’est tout* (LUM SAY REE en - LOOV ruh SAY TOO): French for “Man is nothing, the work is everything.”

58. **Flaubert, Gustave** (flo BAIR, goo STAHV): 1821-1880 French novelist.

59. **George Sand**: 1804-1876 pseudonym of *Amandine-Aurore-Lucie* nee *Dupin* French writer; noted for her novels.

---

## —Studying the Selection—

### Recalling

1. What kind of business does Mr. Wilson have? Is his business successful?
2. Sherlock Holmes deduces a number of things about Mr. Wilson just from his appearance. What does he deduce? From which details of appearance does Holmes make his deductions?
3. In addition to copying the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, what is the most important requirement for Mr. Wilson’s maintaining his “billet” with the Red-headed League?
4. What details does Holmes observe when he goes to see Vincent Spaulding?

### Interpreting

5. Which two characteristics of Sherlock Holmes do we come to appreciate from his conclusions about Mr. Wilson?
6. What does Mr. Wilson say, that makes Holmes suspicious of Vincent Spaulding, before he has even seen him?
7. Why does Holmes tap on the sidewalk with his cane, outside of Mr. Wilson’s storefront? What does he discover from doing this?
8. What causes Holmes to suspect a tunnel has been dug?

### Concluding

9. Why did John Clay create the fictitious Red-headed League? Why does his plan have so much promise?
10. Sherlock Holmes is the **protagonist**—the main character—of the story. John Clay is the **antagonist**—the character on the other side of the conflict. Why is it appropriate to the story that John Clay is not just an ordinary criminal, but a master criminal?

**Sir Arthur Conan Doyle** — (1859-1930) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was famous for that most shrewd of detectives, Sherlock Holmes. Doyle's first career was as an eye specialist. He was thirty-two when he turned to writing full time. That was three years after the first appearance of the famous detective, his sidekick, Dr. Watson, and his nemesis, Moriarty. After six years, Doyle was tired of writing about his famous character, Sherlock Holmes, and had him killed in one of his stories. But, ten years later, Holmes was brought back as a result of popular demand. In addition to his mysteries, Doyle wrote about war, drawing on his experiences as an army physician. By 1920, he was one of the world's most highly paid writers.

## Examining Fiction

➤ Watson is a **naive first-person narrator**, meaning his narration accurately reports the events, but he himself does not understand their significance. He can also be called a **comic foil** to Sherlock Holmes. A **foil character** is in a situation similar to that of the main character, but by **juxtaposition**—placing them close together or

side-by-side for contrast—his thinking and behavior throw light on the main character.


1. What are the similarities between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson? What are the differences?
2. In light of the similarities and differences, explain how Watson is a comic character.


## Thinking About Fiction

1. The plot of “The Red-headed League” includes the elements of **exposition**, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. An **exposition** is an introduction to the important people and situations in the plot. Identify the passages in the story that are **exposition**.
2. Another element of plot is the **narrative hook**. This is the statement or action that begins the rise of the action toward the climax. At what point in the story does the action begin to rise?

## Creating and Writing

### Choose one:

 Imagine you are Mr. Wilson. Write a letter to a friend explaining the whole affair of the Red-headed League, John Clay, and Sherlock Holmes. Write in the persona of Mr. Wilson, a simple, elderly man who is not a deep thinker.

 Write an evaluation of “The Red-headed League.” First, decide whether you liked the story. Then list specific reasons why you did or did not

care for it. Although your reasons depend to some degree on taste and preference, your reasoning must be founded on sound argument, with specific reference to sections in the story, so that even those who disagree with you can understand your position. Write your evaluation in the form of a well-supported essay. Begin with a statement of your thesis; quote from the selection where appropriate, as you move along with your argument; and use good transitions to lead from point to point.