The Red-Headed League

By Arthur Conan Doyle

Adapted to make it easier to read and follow

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Waymark Classics

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A note to the reader

This is The Red-Headed League, by Arthur Conan Doyle. It was first published in 1891. The story is the author's own. We have set it out so that it is easy to read.

You can read it in your own time. Stop whenever you like. If you go straight on to the next chapter, you can skip its first box.

Before the first chapter there is the story in a paragraph, and a list of the people in it. At the start of every chapter, a box tells you the story so far. At the end, a box says what happened. If you lose the thread, those boxes will bring you back to it.

After the last chapter you will find the whole story on one page, the list of people again, and some things to talk about.

A note for the person reading with them

Read at the reader’s pace. Stop whenever the reader is tired.

Read each opening box aloud and the closing box when you finish. They do the remembering for both of you. Skip the next opening box if you carry straight on.

Use the people page whenever you need it. Offer a gentle reminder if something is forgotten. Do not quiz the reader.

The whole story on one page gives the ending. Save it until after the last chapter.

The story in a paragraph

Mr Wilson is a London pawnbroker with fiery red hair. One day he answers a strange advertisement. The Red-Headed League will pay him £4 a week because his hair is red. All he must do is sit in an office each morning and copy out the encyclopaedia. Eight weeks later the League shuts its door and is gone. Puzzled, Mr Wilson takes his story to Holmes, the great detective. Holmes's friend Watson is there too, and tells the story. The two friends laugh at first. Then Holmes sees that something serious lies behind the joke.

The people in this story

- **Holmes** (also: Sherlock Holmes, Mr Holmes): the great detective. Holmes lives in Baker Street, London.
- **Watson**: Holmes's friend, a doctor. Watson tells the story and says "I".
- **Mr Wilson**: a pawnbroker with fiery red hair. He asks Holmes for help.
- **Spaulding**: Mr Wilson's assistant.
- **Duncan Ross** (also: Mr Duncan Ross): a small man with very red hair, manager of the Red-Headed League.
- **Jones** (also: Mr Jones): a police detective from Scotland Yard, as brave as a bulldog.
- **John Clay**: a young thief, hunted by Jones.
- **The bank director**: a tall, thin, sad-faced man who misses his game of cards.

In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, Mr Wilson tells his own tale. Inside his speech marks, "I" means Mr Wilson.

Contents

The times are for reading aloud at an easy pace. You can stop at the end of any chapter.

Sitting 1: about 18 minutes

Chapter 1. A visitor with red hair	6 minutes	7
Chapter 2. Mr Wilson tells his story	6 minutes	15
Chapter 3. A strange job	6 minutes	23

Sitting 2: about 18 minutes

Chapter 4. The card on the door	6 minutes	30
Chapter 5. Holmes asks some questions	6 minutes	37
Chapter 6. A visit to Coburg Square	6 minutes	45

Sitting 3: about 20 minutes

Chapter 7. Saturday night	7 minutes	54
Chapter 8. Waiting in the dark	7 minutes	63
Chapter 9. Holmes explains	6 minutes	73

Chapter 1. A visitor with red hair

The story so far. The story begins in London, on a Saturday morning in the autumn of 1890. We are in the rooms of Holmes, the great detective, in Baker Street. We will meet Watson, Holmes's friend, who tells the story, and Mr Wilson, a visitor with fiery red hair.

In this chapter: Holmes, Watson, Mr Wilson.

Holmes has a visitor

One Saturday morning in the autumn of 1890, I called upon my friend Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street. I found Holmes in deep conversation with a stout, red-faced, elderly gentleman with fiery red hair. I was about to withdraw, but Holmes pulled me into the room and closed the door.

“You could not possibly have come at a better time, my dear Watson,” said Holmes. “This gentleman is Mr Wilson, a pawnbroker.”

Mr Wilson half rose from his chair and gave a bob of greeting.

“Try the settee,” said Holmes. “Mr Wilson has been good enough to call upon me this morning, and to begin a most singular story. You have heard me remark, Watson, that the strangest things are very often connected not with the larger but with the smaller crimes.”

Holmes turned to Mr Wilson. “Perhaps you would have the great kindness to begin your story again.”

What Holmes could see

Mr Wilson puffed out his chest and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from his greatcoat. While our visitor looked down the advertisement column, I took a good look at the man. I tried, after the fashion of Holmes, to read what his dress or appearance might tell me.

Our visitor bore every mark of an average tradesman. There was nothing remarkable about Mr Wilson save his blazing red head.

Holmes saw what I was doing, and shook his head with a smile. “I can deduce nothing else, Watson, beyond the obvious facts. Mr Wilson has done manual labour, and has been in China. And he has done a considerable amount of writing lately.”

“How, in the name of good fortune, did you know all that, Mr Holmes?” asked Mr Wilson. “It’s as true as gospel that I did manual labour, for I began as a ship’s carpenter.”

“Your hands, my dear sir,” said Holmes. “Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left.”

“But the writing?” asked Mr Wilson.

“What else can be shown by that right cuff, so very shiny for five inches?” said Holmes. “And the left one has a smooth patch near the elbow, where you rest it upon the desk.”

“Well, but China?” asked Mr Wilson.

“The fish that you have tattooed just above your right wrist could only have been done in China,” said Holmes. “When I also see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple.”

Mr Wilson laughed heavily. “Well, I never! 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. Can you not find the advertisement, Mr Wilson?”

The advertisement

“Yes, I have got it now,” answered Mr Wilson, with his thick red finger planted halfway down the column. “This is what began it all. You just read it for yourself, sir.”

I took the paper from Mr Wilson and read it.

“TO THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE. There is now another vacancy open. It entitles a member of the League to £4 a week for purely nominal services. All red-headed men over twenty-one may apply in person at the offices of the League, 7 Pope’s Court, Fleet Street.”

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

Holmes chuckled and wriggled in his chair. “It is a little off the beaten track, isn’t it? And now, Mr Wilson, off you go and tell us all about yourself, and the effect which this advertisement had upon your fortunes.”

What happened in this chapter.
Mr Wilson, a pawnbroker with fiery red hair, brought Holmes a strange puzzle. Holmes could tell at a glance that Mr Wilson had been to China. Watson read out an advertisement offering red-headed men £4 a week for almost no work.