

Mystery (Classic)

White, Level 30+, 1010L

Origin of Text: UK

Summary: Mr Wilson has a strange case that both Sherlock Holmes and Watson find funny, but Holmes also realises something serious may be behind it.

Themes: making deductions, clues, helping others

Text Features: introduction, notice, dialogue

Literature Focus: foreshadowing

Spelling:

- 'or' sound: 'oor' (door, poor), 'ore' (before, forehead), 'our' (armour, course, four, your, yours)
- '-able' suffix: remarkable, considerable
- silent letters: 'e' in advertisement; 'i' in business; 'n' in solemnly

Vocabulary/Grammar/

Punctuation:

- pawnbroker (noun): moneylender who holds something as security
- rueful (adjective): sorrowful, regretful
- comma after interjection: Oh,...; Yes, sir
- broken dialogue sentence, in which second part begins with a small letter

The Red-Headed League



Focus Question: Who is a good detective?

PREPARE & READ

- Read the title and ask students what they think about it.
- Read the introduction, explaining that most of the sixty Sherlock Holmes stories follow the pattern of a client coming to ask for help with a mystery. Dr Watson, Holmes's friend and colleague, narrates the stories.
- Ask students to read the card.

READ CLOSELY

Problem

What problem does Mr Wilson have? (*turns up to work to find the league he has been working for has dissolved; finds out no-one else ever heard of it; wants to keep working, so needs to find out where it has gone*) 2-3

Text Features

Why do you think the words written on the card have been set apart from the rest of the text? (*for emphasis; seem more like a real card, so is convincing*) 3

Make Inferences

Why do Holmes and Watson find Mr Wilson's story funny? Why don't you think anyone else tries to help solve the mystery? 4-6

... Holmes and Watson don't say why they think Mr Wilson's story is funny, but they seem to find the idea of being employed to copy pages from an encyclopaedia by a fictitious league ridiculous, especially as Mr Wilson is so serious about it. This is probably why the police are also unwilling to investigate.

Characters

Describe Mr Wilson. 2-17

... Mr Wilson seems to be very trusting because he agreed to carry out the strange task of copying the encyclopaedia, didn't look into the Red-Headed League before starting work, and trusted Spaulding to mind his shop, even though the man had worked for him for only a month.

Make Connections: Foreshadowing

How does the author foreshadow what will happen? (*Holmes's comments such as: issue might be grave, doesn't find Spaulding's behaviour surprising, says can give answer soon*) Why do you think the author does this? (*shows Holmes already close to solving mystery; builds suspense, as we don't know what Holmes knows*) 6 10-18

Make Predictions

How does the author indicate that Holmes suspects Spaulding is up to no good? (*Holmes asks lots of questions about Spaulding; says some information confirms his ideas about Spaulding*) Based on the information in the postscript, what do you think might happen? (*I think Spaulding gets Wilson out of the shop each day, then digs a tunnel from inside pawnshop to bank, robs bank*) 12-17

1 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



2 '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:

3 The Red-Headed League is dissolved October 9, 1890

4 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.

5 '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.'

6 '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?'

7 '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.'

8 '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.'

9 '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.'

10 '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.'

11 '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?'

12 'About a month.'

13 'How did he get the job?'

14 'He answered an advertisement.'

15 'Was he the only applicant?'

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

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

18 '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.'

19 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?'

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

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

22 '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.'

23 '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.



DISCUSS

These questions can be used for paired discussion. Ask students to use the text to support their reasoning. Then, ask them to share their conclusions with the group.

- Why might Wilson's story be dismissed by most people? (*sounds ridiculous; Wilson would probably be seen as foolish*) Why do you think the story arouses Holmes's suspicions? (*story so ridiculous that suspects something behind it; might be a set up to put people off investigating*)
- Discuss whether the author might have included some irrelevant information about Spaulding and why. (*hard to tell which facts relevant; could include some irrelevant facts to distract reader; makes Holmes look smart when he solves case*)
- Consider why the author might have used this title. (*intriguing and mysterious, but also shows silly side to it; misleads reader, like Wilson is misled*) Think of an alternative title.

WRITE

Have students choose either one of the following options for writing, or do both.

- Consider what you have learned so far about Spaulding. Write a scene where Holmes and Watson meet him. What might they ask? What might they observe? (**Information/Explanation**)
- Do you think this story would make a good film about Sherlock Holmes? Use evidence from the story to support your answer. (*hint: consider characters, dialogue, action*) (**Opinion**)

Author Note: Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) graduated as a doctor from the University of Edinburgh in 1885. He was impressed by the ability of his teacher, surgeon Dr Joseph Bell, to deduce patients' backgrounds, symptoms and illnesses before they spoke. The character of Sherlock Holmes was based partly on Dr Bell.