Name: _____ Date: _____

The Red-Headed League

Reading level 15 · 1499 words

One autumn morning I called upon my friend Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street and found him engaged in conversation with a stout, florid gentleman whose hair was the most brilliant shade of red I had ever observed. His name was Mr. Jabez Wilson, and he appeared to be an ordinary, slow-moving London tradesman. Holmes, however, examined him for a moment and announced that he had formerly done manual labor, belonged to a secret society, had recently traveled to China and had written a considerable amount. Mr. Wilson was astonished. Holmes explained that the cuff of his right sleeve was shiny and his left elbow was worn smooth from resting on a desk, and that a small fish tattooed above his wrist could only have been produced in China.

Mr. Wilson then began his remarkable story. He owned a small pawnbroker's shop in a shabby square near the City, and his only assistant was a cheerful young man named Vincent Spaulding, who had agreed to work for half the usual wages. He was an excellent clerk, Mr. Wilson said, with only one fault, which was an absorbing passion for photography. Whenever there was a spare moment, Spaulding would vanish into the cellar like a rabbit into its burrow to develop his photographs. Mr. Wilson had no complaints, and for several months his respectable little business had continued exactly as it always had, until one morning, eight weeks earlier, when his assistant came hurrying upstairs, waving a newspaper with considerable excitement.

The advertisement announced that a wealthy American, named Ezekiah Hopkins, who had himself been red-headed, had bequeathed his fortune to establish a League for men with hair of that color. Whenever a member of the League died, a vacancy opened, and the new member would receive four pounds a week for work that was almost entirely nominal. "Why do you not apply, sir?" Spaulding said eagerly. "Your hair is the richest red in London." Mr. Wilson hardly believed that such an offer could be genuine, but he put on his hat and followed his assistant to the address in Fleet Street, where he discovered the whole street so crowded with red-headed men of every conceivable shade that he could scarcely force his way along.

Spaulding pushed and pulled him through the throng until they reached the office, where a small man with flaming hair of his own, who introduced himself as Mr. Duncan Ross, examined each candidate in turn. When Mr. Wilson's turn came, Mr. Ross studied him carefully, closed the door, and then grasped his hair in both hands and tugged until Mr. Wilson cried out in pain. "I have to be careful," said Mr. Ross apologetically, "because we have been deceived twice already by wigs and once by paint." Satisfied that every strand was genuine, he declared Mr. Wilson elected, shook his hand warmly, and informed him that the League

would expect him to begin his duties at precisely ten o'clock the very next morning, with a pen, ink and a great deal of patience.

The work itself seemed almost too easy to be true. Mr. Wilson was required to sit in a small room every weekday from ten o'clock until two, copying out the Encyclopaedia Britannica, beginning with the letter A, and he might not leave the room for any reason whatever, not even for illness, or he would forfeit his position. He could easily spare those hours, because his assistant promised to attend to the shop, and for eight weeks he copied faithfully while Mr. Ross appeared at intervals to see that he was working. Every Saturday afternoon, Mr. Ross counted out four golden sovereigns, and by the end of the eighth week, Mr. Wilson had written about Abbots, Archery, Armor and Architecture.

Then, one morning, he arrived to find the door of the office locked and a small card nailed to it. It read, "The Red-Headed League is dissolved." Mr. Wilson was dumbfounded. He questioned the landlord, who had never heard of Mr. Duncan Ross, and he went to the address that the landlord recommended, which turned out to be a factory manufacturing artificial kneecaps, where nobody had ever heard of any such person. He returned to his shop in a state of complete confusion, and he had come to Baker Street, he explained, because he did not wish to lose such a comfortable salary without at least understanding the reason, and because he was beginning to feel extremely uneasy about the whole affair.

Holmes listened with his fingertips pressed together and his eyes half closed, and then he inquired about several unusual particulars concerning Spaulding. The man had been hired three months earlier, he was short, quick and clean-shaven, and he had a splash of white acid on his forehead and pierced ears. Holmes sat back, lit his pipe and informed us, with a very thoughtful expression, that this was a three-pipe problem. For the next hour he would not speak, but sat curled in his chair with his knees drawn up, and when he finally uncurled, he asked me whether I would care to accompany him to a concert, because there was nothing more that could be accomplished until the evening.

First, however, we walked to Saxe-Coburg Square, where Mr. Wilson lived, and Holmes stopped outside the pawnbroker's shop. He struck the pavement twice with his stick, then walked up to the door and knocked. A bright, clean-shaven young man opened it and answered a polite question about the way to the Strand. Holmes thanked him, and I noticed that he gave only one quick glance, not at the man's face, but at his trousers. "The knees of his trousers," he said afterward. "They were wrinkled, stained and worn." Then he walked around the corner and examined the buildings at the back of the square, which included a large bank, and for the first time that day he smiled.

That night we met Holmes's associates in Baker Street. One was Mr. Peter Jones, an official detective of Scotland Yard, and the other was Mr. Merryweather, a director of the bank, who was not at all pleased to be spending a Saturday night in this unusual manner. "I think you will

find," said Holmes, "that the stake tonight is considerably higher than you have ever played for, and that the play will be a good deal more exciting." The bank was holding thirty thousand gold napoleons, borrowed from France, and the man Holmes expected to encounter was John Clay, who was one of the cleverest criminals in London, and whose grandfather had been a duke. Jones was eager to put handcuffs on him, and Holmes added that he had a private score to settle.

The director led us through a side door, down a stone staircase and into a cold, dark vault piled with enormous wooden boxes. We concealed our lantern behind a crate and sat down in the darkness to wait. Holmes whispered that we were in no danger so long as nobody spoke, and the minutes crept past, one after another, until my legs ached. Suddenly a tiny spark of light appeared between two flagstones in the floor, and it widened into a long, yellow line. A white hand, as delicate as a woman's, came groping up through the crack, and then a stone lifted slowly out of its place, and a head rose from the hole, looking quickly about. It was Vincent Spaulding.

Holmes pounced like a cat and seized the intruder by the collar, while Jones, who had been stationed beside the hole, seized the second man as he tried to scramble back through the tunnel, and the whole vault rang with shouting. "It is no use, John Clay," Holmes said pleasantly. "You have no chance at all." The thief answered coolly that he supposed he had not, but that he was sure Holmes had noticed his companions' excellent behavior. Then he turned to Jones and asked, with a splendid bow, whether he might be taken away without having a policeman's dirty hands upon him. "And please be so good as to say 'please' when you speak to me." The detective was so astonished that he did exactly as he was told.

On the way home, Holmes explained the whole puzzle. The League, he said, had been invented for one purpose only, which was to send the pawnbroker away from his shop for several hours every day. Spaulding had chosen a man with remarkable hair, which he had once seen and never forgotten, and he had spent those hours digging a tunnel from the cellar to the vault of the bank, using the camera only as an excuse to go below. "When the tunnel was ready, the League was no longer needed, so the notice was posted. They chose Saturday night because they would then have the whole of Sunday to escape." Holmes yawned. "It saved me from boredom. My life is a long effort to escape from the commonplace."

Questions

1. How much did the League pay Mr. Wilson each week?

A. Four shillings
B. Forty pounds
C. Four pounds

2. Who was Vincent Spaulding really?

A. John Clay, a clever thief
B. A friend of Mr. Wilson's
C. A police officer

3. What does "nominal" mean in "almost entirely nominal" work?

A. Very hard
B. Hardly real work at all
C. Done for a name

4. Why did the thieves invent the League?

A. To find red-headed workers
B. To make Mr. Wilson rich
C. To keep Mr. Wilson away from his shop every day

5. What did the knees of Spaulding's trousers tell Holmes?

A. He had been digging
B. He was very poor
C. He was a good worker

6. What does this story suggest about an offer that seems too good to be true?

A. It is a gift
B. It deserves a closer look
C. It always works out

Words to know

pawnbroker: loan shopkeeper
vacancy: open job
nominal: in name only
vault: strong room
commonplace: ordinary
dissolved: ended

Answer key: The Red-Headed League

1. C. Four pounds
2. A. John Clay, a clever thief
3. B. Hardly real work at all
4. C. To keep Mr. Wilson away from his shop every day
5. A. He had been digging
6. B. It deserves a closer look