

The Victorian Gothic Short Story

Lecture - 15

Arthur Conan Doyle 'The Red- Headed League' Summary and Interview of the Author

Good morning. Today, we will be covering a short summary of the story, The Red Headed League. The story opens into Holmes's drawing room on an autumn day. Doctor Watson finds Holmes deep in conversation with Jabez Wilson, a stout and portly elderly man with fiery red hair. Holmes invites Watson to join them as Watson shares his love for all that is bizarre and has chronicled his little adventures, albeit with embellishments. Holmes states that it is life itself that holds the most extraordinary of combinations and as a case in point asks Mister Jabez Wilson to narrate, his own singular extraordinary story. Jabez Wilson begins his narration with a little pride. He takes out a wrinkled newspaper from his greatcoat and as he is glancing down the advertisement column, Watson attempts to inspect his appearance as Holmes is often wont to do. Jabez Wilson is described with the most average, common place adjectives- obese, pompous and slow like any British tradesman. He wears baggy trousers, a not over-clean frock coat, a drab waistcoat with a heavy brass chain and a dangling metal ornament. Watson finds nothing remarkable in the man, save for his expression of chagrin and discontent.

Holmes remarks there is nothing to be deduced except the obvious, which is that he has done manual labour, he takes snuff, he is a freemason and that he has been to China and that he has done quite a bit of writing lately. Mister Wilson is surprised and Holmes demystifies his deductions in his usual nonchalant manner, making it appear as if it was nothing at all. Mister Wilson produces an advertisement, which invited red headed people over the age of 21, to a vacancy open in the Red Headed League. The post offered a pay of 4 pounds a week with purely nominal obligations. Jabez Wilson is a small pawnbroker from Coburg square. He employs an assistant, Vincent Spaulding, who brought the advertisement to his notice and urged him to apply. Spaulding is described as a man, whose age cannot be quite determined, very smart, but with a penchant for photography and spending a lot of his time in the cellar, to develop the films. Wilson says that, he is a good worker with no vice in him and goes on to narrate the dialogue that passed between them, as the assistant brought the advertisement to his attention offering him a short history of the Red Headed League.

Wilson was interested in the pay and right away, he left with Spaulding to the address given. He encountered many red headed people on the streets, but Spaulding encouraged him, that none had the vivid flame coloured tint of his own hair. In a sparsely furnished room, they meet with Mister Duncan Ross, who introduced himself as one of the pensioners of the league. He was instantly favorable towards Mister Jabez Wilson and offered him the post. But only after tugging at his hair to ascertain its authenticity, until Mister Jabez Wilson's eyes were filled with tears.

The scene has an absurdly real quality to it, with the whole enterprise gaining a surreal believability by the antics of Ross and by his obvious disappointment in learning that Mister Wilson has no family of his own. The work assigned to him is to stay put in the office for 4 hours every day and copy the Encyclopedia Britannica. He is not allowed leaves of absence or to venture outside during the work hours without forfeiting the week's pay. For 8 weeks, he works there. That day when he showed up for work, he found the door shut and locked with a square cardboard piece that declared that the Red Headed League had been dissolved. The comedy of it all makes Holmes and Watson break into laughter, at which Wilson is not a little offended.

Holmes mollifies him by saying that he is interested in this refreshingly unusual case. Wilson tells him that he enquired of the whereabouts of Mister Duncan Ross with the landlord, whom he identified as William Morris, a solicitor. The landlord refers to him to another address, which turns out to be a dead end. Holmes continues to ask Wilson a few questions, including a physical description of his assistant. He is described as a man, who is quick in his ways, not short of 30, with a white splash of acid on his face and pierced ears. Upon Wilson's leaving, Holmes retires to smoke, calling it a three pipe problem. When he springs out of his (Refer Time: 5:51) curled up position in the chair, it is to see Sarrasate playing in Saint James's Hall. On their way they take a walk through Saxe Coburg square. The appearance of the street with Wilson's shop is described as pokey and shabby genteel with weedy grass and a few clumps of faded laurel bushes. He thumbs the pavement in front of the pawnbroker's house with a stick and then knocks on the door and asks the clean shaven fellow who opens the door for directions to the strand. Holmes observes that he is a smart fellow, who is the fourth smartest man in London and has a claim to the third as the most daring.

When Watson asks him, Holmes says that it was to see not him, but the knees of his trousers that he had made the enquiry. They explore the other side of the square and just by rounding a corner, they enter what is described as a stately business premise with fine shops and bustling footpaths. Holmes takes a note of the buildings, which include the Coburg branch of the city and suburban bank. From the streets, they go to the concert and Holmes appears perfectly happy as he languidly listens to the music. At 10 in the night they meet again, along with Jones from the Scotland Yard and Mister Merryweather, the director of the bank. It is from Jones, whom Holmes compares to a bulldog who is an imbecile at his profession, that we get the first mention of John Clay the murderer, thief, smasher and forger, who has been eluding the law for a long time. Young, but at the head of his profession and with royal ancestry, Jones confesses that he has been on this man's trail for years. They go to the underground cellar of the bank, where 30000 Napoleons from the bank of France is stored.

Holmes is in control of the scene and he insists on quietness as everyone waits in the dark cellar in anticipation of what is going to happen. Watson waits with his revolver, and Holmes, with his hunting crop ready. John Clay emerges from beneath the ground and the narrative turns immensely atmospheric, with a lurid spark on the stone pavement opening up like a gash, from which appears Clay's almost womanly hand. There is a confrontation and Clay is captured while his accomplice is taken into custody by Jones's men waiting at the door of the pawnbroker's establishment. Clay is unperturbed by his capture. He regards Jones's hands as filthy, which he does not desire to be touched with, proud as he is about his own lineage. The scene is interesting, as Jones plays along with mock respect and Clay answers in the most serene manner. What follows is Holmes making obvious the patterns of his reasoning which led him to this finale. The scheme was to have the not over bright pawnbroker out of the way for a couple of hours every day. The assistant's habit of vanishing into the cellar, the intactness of the pavement in the front of the building and the conveniently situated bank on the other side, allowed Holmes to reason in the direction of the robbery and the worn and stained knees of the assistant's trousers confirmed his suspicions of their borrowing a tunnel. The story draws to a close with Watson's unfeigned admiration and Holmes's comment, that his life is spent in a long effort to escape the commonplaceness of existence and that this case saved him from his ennui. It ends with a quote attributed to Flaubert, (Refer Time:

10:05), that all that matters is the work of the man and not the man himself. And that was the end of this short summary of the Red Headed League, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

This is a selection, from a talk with Doctor Conan Doyle. A great big breezy athlete not in the least once ideal literateur, came forward to meet me as I entered Doctor Conan Doyle's little house in Norwood, wherein having altogether given up his medical practice, he now devotes himself entirely to books and bookmaking. He told me, he was looking forward with great joy to the cricket season. He talked of his travels and how he had once spent seven months in the Arctic regions. Never had such a jolly time in my in my life. He spoke of his experiences in Vienna, where he had lived a year in order that he might make a special study of the eye. We discussed mutual friends in South Sea, where he had practiced as a doctor for 8 years. We exchanged opinions on America and the Americans. He would fain establish a more friendly and familial footing between the two countries. And then, at last we got to his books. I asked him how on earth he had evolved apparently out of his own inner consciousness, such an extraordinary person as his detective Sherlock Holmes. With which the readers of *The Strand* are so familiar. 'Oh but!' he cried with a hearty ringing laugh, and his is a laugh that does one good to hear, 'Oh but, if you please, he is not evolved out of any one's inner consciousness. Sherlock Holmes is the literary embodiment, if I may so express it, of my memory of a professor of medicine at Edinburgh University, who would sit in the patients' waiting room with a face like a red-Indian and diagnose the people as they came in, before even they had opened their mouths. He would tell them their symptoms, he would give them details of their lives and he would hardly ever make a mistake. Gentlemen, he would say to us students standing around, I am not quite sure whether this man is a cork cutter or a slater. I observe a slight callous or hardening on one side of his forefinger and a little thickening on the outside of his thumb and that is a sure sign he is either one or the other. His great faculty of deduction was at times highly dramatic. Ah, he would say to another man, you are a soldier- a noncommissioned officer and you have served in Bermuda.

Now how did I know that gentleman, he came into the room without taking his hat off, as he would go into an orderly room. He was a soldier. A slight authoritative air combined with his age shows he was an NCO. A slight rash on the forehead tells me he was in Bermuda and subject to a certain rash known only there. So, I got the idea for Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock is utterly inhuman. No heart, but with a beautifully logical intellect. I

know nothing about detective work, but theoretically, it has always had a great charm for me. The best detective in fiction is Edgar Allan Poe's Monsieur Dupain. Then Monsieur Lecoq, Gaboriau's hero. The great defect in the detective of fiction is that he obtains results without any obvious reason. That is not fair. It is not art. I have written two little books about him. A Study in Scarlet, the first thing I wrote and Sign of Four. (Refer Time: 13:55) I get many letters from all over the country about Sherlock Holmes. Sometimes from schoolboys, sometimes from commercial travelers who are great readers, sometimes from lawyers pointing out mistakes in my law.

One letter actually contained a request for portraits of Sherlock at different periods of his life. And that is the end of this short excerpt from an interview of Arthur Conan Doyle written as an article by Raymond Blathwayt and published in The Bookman in May 1892.

Thank you.