

## THE HANSOMS OF JOHN CLAY

by Rick Lai

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Why were John Clay's ears pierced? Allegedly a gypsy had done it for him in his youth. At least that was the explanation that he gave while posing as Vincent Spaulding in a successful effort to gain employment in Jabez Wilson's pawnshop during the events of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." Since the clever criminal lied to Wilson about his name and background, the justification for his pierced ears could also be untrue. John Clay's pierced ears could have resulted from a ruse in which he wore earrings to impersonate a woman.

During his battle of wits with Clay in the matter of the Red-Headed League, Sherlock Holmes cited one or two prior run-ins with the master crook. It has been assumed that these earlier encounters were unrecorded. However, Clay's ears shed new light on an incident from *A Study in Scarlet*.

Jefferson Hope had accidentally dropped Lucy Ferrier's wedding ring after murdering Enoch J. Drebber. Seeking to lure Hope into a trap, Holmes published an advertisement in the London newspapers offering to return the ring if its owner arrived in Baker Street to claim it. Having already deduced Hope's appearance from the scene of Drebber's death, Holmes was surprised when a wrinkled old woman instead of a tall florid man appeared to assert ownership of the ring. Pretending to be fooled by the woman's story, Holmes surrendered the ring in order to follow her trail. Much to Holmes's chagrin, the old lady was actually a young man in disguise. Unaware of his quarry's physical agility, Holmes discovered too late that the skilled thespian had jumped out of a four-wheeled cab in motion. Although Holmes later apprehended Hope, the murderer refused to divulge the name of the accomplice who had outwitted the detective.

If John Clay was Hope's confederate, it would seem odd that he failed to recognize Holmes and Watson when the pair inquired for directions at Jabez Wilson's pawnshop. Of course, many years had passed between the respective events of *A Study in Scarlet* and "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." According to Watson's chronology, the arrest of John Clay transpired nine years after the arrest of Jefferson Hope in 1881. William S. Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (1967) argues the "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League" took place during 1887. Even if we accept Baring-Gould's arguments, six years is still a sufficient passage of time for John Clay to forget a face.

Another possibility is that Clay recognized Holmes and Watson, but did not view them as a potential threat. Due to their prior meeting, Clay might have formed a low opinion of Holmes's talents. Suffering from the delusion that Holmes was overrated, Clay could have found it quite credible that the investigator and his chronicler had lost their way in London.

How could John Clay have become acquainted with Jefferson Hope? Hope stalked his victims while posing as the driver of a cab. It would not be inconceivable that Hope was familiar with another cab driver from the Holmes series, John Clayton from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Clayton remarked that he had been driving a hansom cab for seven years. Watson dates *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as occurring in 1889, but Baring-Gould present a strong case for presenting the novel in 1888. Accepting Baring-

Gould's chronological arguments would have Clayton driving a cab in 1881, the same year when Jefferson Hope committed the murders.

We know that John Clay and John Clayton were relatives due to exhaustive genealogical research done by Philip Jose Farmer. *Tarzan Alive* (1972) disclosed that John Clayton was the fifth Duke of Greystoke. The Duke converted to socialism, renounced his life of ease, and sought employment as a common workman. The antecedents of John Clay are documented in Farmer's *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life* (1973, revised in 1975). Clay was the illegitimate offspring of the Countess Cagliostro and Sir William Clayton, John Clayton's uncle. The Countess christened her son Paul and gave him to the custody of a young English couple named Finglemore. Raised as Paul Finglemore, Sir William's son adopted aliases in pursuing a criminal career. Not only did he combat Sherlock Holmes as John Clay, but he also functioned as Colonel Clay, the ingenious master of disguise from Grant Allen's *An African Millionaire* (1897).

When Paul Finglemore reached manhood, he could have discovered that he was adopted. Paul may have suspected the truth because the Finglemores were showering more attention on his foster brother. The Finglemores' natural son appears briefly as a prosperous stockbroker in *An African Millionaire*. In his efforts to discover the true identity of his parents, Paul may have unearthed his father's surname. Under the mistaken belief that John rather than Sir William was his father, Paul searched for the Duke of Greystoke among the ranks of the proletariat. Learning that the Duke was the driver of a hansom cab, Paul conducted inquiries among London cabbies and befriended Jefferson Hope. Acting on invaluable information supplied by Hope, Paul located John Clayton. When Paul confronted the object of his quest, the Duke vehemently denied that he was the young man's father. Embittered by the rejection of the man whom he wrongly acknowledged as his father, the brooding Paul Finglemore embarked on an infamous course.

Paul had originally intended to pursue a career on the stage. Aware of Paul's histrionic ability, Jefferson Hope requested his friend's assistance in tricking Holmes. The thrill of an easy victory over Holmes made Paul eager for more illegal endeavors. In order to spite his "father," Paul adopted a variant of John Clayton, John Clay, as his sobriquet among London's criminal classes. After Holmes foiled Paul's intended robbery of the City and Suburban Bank, he was imprisoned as John Clay. He escaped from prison and fled to France where he secured employment as a maker of wax figures in the Musee Grevin. There he made advances in the use of wax makeup that permitted him to plague society as Colonel Clay.

In "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League," Inspector Peter Jones asserted that John Clay was actually the grandson of a royal duke. Philip Jose Farmer maintained that the story was a fabrication spread by John Clay to hide his true origins. This speculation is plausible if Clay was talking about his paternal grandfather, but I suspect that Clay was talking about his maternal grandfather.

Clay's mother was known as Countess Cagliostro. This name was used by three different blonde women also called Josephine Balsamo in Maurice Leblanc's *La Comtesse de Cagliostro* (1924). The first Josephine was born in 1788. She was the illegitimate daughter of Joseph Balsamo, the adventurer known as Count Cagliostro, and Josephine de Beauharnais, the future Empress of France. In 1870, a woman appeared in Paris pretending to be Josephine Balsamo. This woman proclaimed that she had achieved

immortality from an elixir invented by Count Cagliostro. In reality, this 1870 charlatan merely resembled the original. The novel implied that the second Countess Cagliostro was the granddaughter of the original. The second Countess had a daughter born in 1868. In the 1890's, the daughter also pretended to be the woman born in 1788. She became the archenemy of Arsene Lupin, the greatest thief in Europe.

John Clay was thirty years old in "The Adventure of the Red-Headed League." Based on Baring-Gould's chronology, Clay was born in 1857. The second Countess was somewhere between twenty-five and thirty years old in 1870. She couldn't have been more than seventeen when John Clay was born. It would have been impossible for her to pretend to be the immortal Countess in order to romance Sir William Clayton.

We are left with the intriguing possibility that there is a fourth woman who pretended to be the Countess in the 1850's. There was a female criminal with similarities to the Josephine Balsamo who fought Lupin. This woman also was a blonde rumored to be an immortal. Unlike Lupin's nemesis, there is evidence to support that this other female was ageless. In 1899, she looked the same as in 1869. Her age always appeared to be twenty-five years. Her name was Madame Sara, the villainess of *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1903) by L. T. Meade and Robert Eustace

Sara's background is rather nebulous. Her father was Italian and her mother was Indian. Her father could easily be Joseph Balsamo, Count Cagliostro. He always professed to have traveled widely into Asia before he gained notoriety in Europe. Cagliostro could have romanced an Indian woman who gave birth to Madame Sara. It was Madame Sara who assumed the alias of Countess Cagliostro to seduce Sir William.

The title of Count Cagliostro was generally assumed to be a bogus appellation that Joseph Balsamo bestowed on himself. This assumption is now known to be false. The Duchy of Cagliostro was visited by Arsene Lupin III, the grandson of the original. His adventures there are recorded in the animated film *The Castle of Cagliostro* (1979). There are two branches in the reigning Cagliostro family of the Duchy. The first branch holds the title of Duke (the ruler in the film is a young Duchess). The other branch holds the title of Count. The original Joseph Balsamo must have felt that he was the rightful heir to become the reigning Duke. When the throne was given to a brother, he became a wanderer and assumed the lesser title of Count. Eventually a descendant of Joseph Balsamo must have been invited back into the Duchy as Count Cagliostro in the hopes of healing the rifts between the two sides of the family.

If Joseph Balsamo protested that he was the legitimate heir to the Duchy's throne, he could claim to be a royal duke. John Clay was aware of his grandfather's true history. Hence, his tale about his grandfather's royal blood had a basis in fact. It seems odd that the dark-haired Joseph Balsamo would have two blonde daughters. At least, Balsamo had black hair in a series of historical novels by Alexander Dumas. According to historical records, Cagliostro was a short corpulent bald man. Dumas depicted Cagliostro as a thin man of medium height and the possessor of a full head of hair. Cagliostro headed a Freemason conspiracy in the novels by Dumas. The Freemasons must have altered all historical records about their master including the details of his appearance.

Joseph's offspring couldn't have inherited their golden locks from their respective mothers. Madame Sara's Indian mother must have had black hair. Josephine de Beauharnais certainly did. I can only assume that Joseph Balsamo was deceiving everyone about his true appearance, He must have been dying his natural blonde hair

black. Joseph Balsamo was just as skillful in the art of disguise as his descendant, John Clay alias Colonel Clay.