

The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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CHAPTER IX.

Reporter and Detective.

ROULETABILLE, Darzac and I went back toward the pavilion. At some distance from the building the reporter made us stop and, pointing to a small clump of trees to the right of us, said:

"That's where the murderer came from to get into the pavilion." As there were other patches of trees of the same sort between the great oaks, I asked why the murderer had chosen that one rather than any of the others. Rouletabille answered me by pointing to the path which ran quite close to the thicket to the door of the pavilion.

"That path is, as you see, topped with gravel," he said. "The man must have passed along it going to the pavilion, since no traces of his steps have been found on the soft ground. The man didn't have wings; he walked, but he walked on the gravel, which left no impression of his tread. The gravel has, in fact, been trodden by many other feet, since the path is the most direct way between the pavilion and the chateau. As to the thicket, made of the sort of shrubs that don't flourish in the rough season—laurels and fuchsias—it offered the murderer a sufficient hiding place until it was time for him to make his way to the pavilion. It was while hiding in that clump of trees that he saw M. and Mlle. Stangerson and then Daddy Jacques leave the pavilion. Gravel has been spread nearly, very nearly, up to the windows of the pavilion. The footprints of a man parallel with the wall, marks which we will examine presently and which I have already seen, prove that he only needed to make one stride to find himself in front of the vestibule window, left open by Daddy Jacques. The man drew himself up by his hands and entered the vestibule."

"After all, it is very possible," I said. "If I did not reason as I do in regard to this gravel," Rouletabille went on, "I should have to assume a balloon. So don't say a thing is possible when it could not be otherwise. We know now how the man entered by the window, and we also know the moment at which he entered—during the 5 o'clock walk of the professor and his daughter. The fact of the presence of the chambermaid, who had come to clean up the yellow room, in the laboratory when M. Stangerson and his daughter returned from their walk at half past 1 permits us to affirm that at half past 1 the murderer was not in the chamber under the bed unless he was in collusion with the chambermaid. What do you say, M. Darzac?"

M. Darzac shook his head and said he was sure of the chambermaid's fidelity and that she was a thoroughly honest and devoted servant.

"Besides," he added, "at 5 o'clock M. Stangerson went into the room to fetch his daughter's hat."

"There is that also," said Rouletabille.

"That the man entered by the window at the time you say, I admit," I said, "but why did he shut the window? It was an act which would necessarily draw the attention of those who had left it open."

"It may be the window was not shut at once," replied the young reporter. "But if he did shut the window it was because of the bend in the gravel path a dozen yards from the pavilion and on account of the three oaks that are growing at that spot."

"What do you mean by that?" asked M. Darzac, who had followed us and listened with almost breathless attention to all that Rouletabille had said.

"I'll explain all to you later on, monsieur, when I think the moment to be ripe for doing so. But I don't think I have anything of more importance to say on this affair if my hypothesis is justified."

"And what is your hypothesis?"

"You will never know if it does not turn out to be the truth. It is of much too grave a nature to speak of it so long as it continues to be only a hypothesis."

"Have you at least some idea as to who the murderer is?"

"No, monsieur, I don't know who the murderer is. But don't be afraid, M. Robert Darzac, I shall know."

I could not but observe that M. Darzac was deeply moved, and I suspected that Rouletabille's confident assertion was not pleasing to him. Why, I asked myself, if he was really afraid that the murderer should be discovered, was he helping the reporter to find him? My young friend seemed to have received the same impression, for he said bluntly:

"M. Darzac, don't you want me to find out who the murderer was?"

"Oh, I should like to kill him with my own hand!" cried Mlle. Stangerson's fiancé, with a vehemence that amazed me.

"I believe you," said Rouletabille gravely. "But you have not answered my question."

We were passing by the thicket of which the young reporter had spoken to us a minute before. I entered it and pointed out evident traces of a

man who had been hidden there. Rouletabille once more was right.

"Yes, yes," he said. "We have to do with a thing of flesh and blood, who uses the same means that we do. It'll all come out on those lines."

Having said this, he asked me for the paper pattern of the footprint which he had given me to take care of and applied it to a very clear footprint behind the thicket. "Aha!" he said, rising.

I thought he was now going to trace back the track of the murderer's footmarks to the vestibule window, but he led us instead far to the left, saying that it was useless ferreting in the mud and that he was sure now of the road taken by the murderer.

"He went along the wall to the hedge and dry ditch, over which he jumped. See, just in front of the little path leading to the lake, that was his nearest way to get out."

"How do you know he went to the lake?"

"Because Frederic Larsan has not quitted the borders of it since this morning. There must be some important marks there."

A few minutes later we reached the lake.

It was a little sheet of marshy water, surrounded by reeds, on which floated some dead water lily leaves. The great Fred may have seen us approaching, but we probably interested him very little, for he took hardly any notice of us and continued to be stirring with his cane something which we could not see.

"Look!" said Rouletabille. "Here again are the footmarks of the escaping man. They skirt the lake here and finally disappear just before this path, which leads to the high road to Epinay. The man continued his flight to Paris."

"What makes you think that?" I asked, "since these footmarks are not continued on the path?"

"What makes me think that? Why, these footprints, which I expected to find!" he cried, pointing to the sharply outlined imprint of a neat boot. "See!" And he called to Frederic Larsan.

"M. Fred, these neat footprints seem to have been made since the discovery of the crime."

"Yes, young man, yes. They have been carefully made," replied Fred without raising his head. "You see, there are steps that come and steps that go back."

"And the man had a bicycle!" cried the reporter.

Here, after looking at the marks of the bicycle, which followed, going and coming, the neat footprints, I thought I might intervene.

"The bicycle explains the disappearance of the murderer's big footprints," I said. "The murderer, with his rough boots, mounted a bicycle. His accomplice, the wearer of the neat boots, had come to wait for him on the edge of the lake with the bicycle. It might be supposed that the murderer was working for the other."

"No, no!" replied Rouletabille, with a strange smile. "I have expected to find these footmarks from the very beginning. These are not the footmarks of the murderer."

"Then there were two?"

"No; there was but one, and he had no accomplice."

"Very good! Very good!" cried Frederic Larsan.

"Look!" continued the young reporter, showing us the ground where it had been disturbed by big and heavy heels. "The man seated himself there and took off his hobbled boots which he had worn only for the purpose of misleading detection, and then no doubt, taking them away with him, he stood up in his own boots and quietly and slowly regained the high road, holding his bicycle in his hand, for he could not venture to ride it on this rough path. That accounts for the lightness of the impression made by the wheels along it in spite of the softness of the ground. If there had been a man on the bicycle the wheels would have sunk deeply into the soil. No, no; there was but one man there—the murderer on foot."

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried Fred again. And, coming suddenly toward us and planting himself in front of M. Robert Darzac, he said to him:

"If we had a bicycle here we might demonstrate the correctness of the young man's reasoning, M. Robert Darzac. Do you know whether there is one at the chateau?"

"No," replied M. Darzac, "there is not. I took mine four days ago to Paris, the last time I came to the chateau before the crime."

"That's a pity," replied Fred very coldly. Then, turning to Rouletabille, he said: "If we go on at this rate we'll both come to the same conclusion. Have you any idea as to how the murderer got away from the yellow room?"

"Yes," said my young friend, "I have an idea."

"So have I," said Fred, "and it must be the same as yours. There are no two ways of reasoning in this affair. I am waiting for the arrival of my chief before offering any explanation to the examining magistrate."

"Ah! Is the chief of the police coming?"

"Yes, this afternoon. He is going to summon before the magistrate in the laboratory all those who have played any part in this tragedy. It will be very interesting. It is a pity you won't be able to be present."

"I shall be present," said Rouletabille confidently.

"Really you are an extraordinary fellow for your age!" replied the detective in a tone not wholly free from irony. "You'd make a wonderful detective—if you had a little more method—if you didn't follow your instincts and that bump on your forehead. As I have already several times observed, M. Rouletabille, you reason too much. You do not allow yourself to be guided by what you have seen. What do you say to the handkerchief full of blood and the red mark of the hand on the wall? You have seen the stain

on the wall, but I have only seen the handkerchief."

"Bah!" cried Rouletabille. "The murderer was wounded in the hand by Mlle. Stangerson's revolver."

"Defective observation—defective observation! The examination of the handkerchief, the numberless little round scarlet stains, the impression of drops which I found in the tracks of the footprints at the moment when they were made on the floor, prove to me that the murderer was not wounded at all. M. Rouletabille, the murderer bled at the nose!"

The great Fred spoke quite seriously. However, I could not refrain from uttering an exclamation.

The reporter looked gravely at Fred, who looked gravely at him. And Fred immediately concluded:

"The man allowed the blood to flow into his hand and handkerchief and dried his hand on the wall. The fact is highly important," he added, "because there is no need of his being wounded in the hand for him to be the murderer."

Rouletabille seemed to be thinking deeply. After a moment he said:

"There is something—a something. M. Frederic Larsan, much graver than the misuse of logic, the disposition of mind in some detectives which makes them in perfect good faith twist logic to the necessities of their preconceived ideas. Beware of judicial error, M. Fred; it will trip you up."

And, laughing a little in a slightly bantering tone, his hands in his pockets, Rouletabille fixed his cunning eyes on the great Fred.

Frederic Larsan silently contemplated the young reporter who pretended to be as wise as himself. Shrugging his shoulders, he bowed to us and moved quickly away, hitting the stones on his path with his stout cane.

Rouletabille watched his retreat and then turned toward us, his face joyous and triumphant.

"I shall beat him!" he cried. "I shall beat the great Fred, clever as he is! I shall beat them all!"

And he danced a double shuffle. Suddenly he stopped. My eyes followed his gaze. They were fixed on M. Robert Darzac, who was looking anxiously at the impression left by his feet side by side with the elegant footmarks. There was not a particle of difference between them!

We thought he was about to faint. His eyes, bulging with terror, avoided us, while his right hand, with a spasmodic movement, twitched at the beard that covered his honest, gentle and now despairing face. At length regaining his self possession, he bowed to us and, remarking in a changed voice that he was obliged to return to the chateau, left us.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Rouletabille. He also appeared to be deeply concerned. From his pocketbook he took a piece of white paper, as I had seen him do before, and with his scissors cut out the shape of the neat bootmarks that were on the ground. Then he fitted the new paper pattern with the one he had previously made. The two were exactly alike. Rising, Rouletabille exclaimed suddenly, "The deuce!" Presently he added, "Yet I believe M. Robert Darzac to be an honest man." He then led me on the road to the Donjon Inn, which we could see on the highway by the side of a small clump of trees.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I.—A mysterious attempt is made at midnight to murder Mlle. Stangerson, daughter and assistant of Prof. Stangerson, who is at work on his theory of the dissociation of matter in a pavilion near his chateau. Pistol shots and the young woman's cries for help are heard behind the locked and bolted door of her chamber, the yellow room. The cries are answered by Professor Stangerson and Daddy Jacques, an aged servant. Aided by the concierges, Bernier and his wife, they break open the door and find Mlle. Stangerson swooning and half strangled, with a wound in her temple, but find no trace of her assailant. The only possible outlet from the yellow room is the door. The weird cry of the "tete du bon Dieu," a cat belonging

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Siletz Decision Eagerly Awaited. Postland—A proceeding that is attracting a great deal of attention from homesteaders and others interested in the acquisition of title to the public domain has been in progress all this week before the register and receiver of the Portland land office and several days longer may be required in the hearing of the issues involved.

It appears from the evidence already adduced that settlers in the vicinity of Euchre Mountain, in the former Siletz Indian reservation, commuted their homestead entries at the end of 14 months from the date of filing. The forestry service instituted a contest and is prosecuting the same on behalf of the government, on the ground that the submission of proof at the end of only eight months' residence is evidence of bad faith. If this contention is sustained by the local land office officials and confirmed by the land department, it is claimed that it will have the effect of establishing a dangerous precedent and place many other homestead claims in timbered districts in peril, as it has heretofore been common practice to accept eight months' actual and continuous residence as sufficient to sustain a commutation proof.

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