

The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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CHAPTER XIX.

Roulettable Invites Me to Breakfast at the Donjon Inn.

It was not until later that Roulettable sent me the notebook in which he had written at length the story of the phenomenon of the inexplicable gallery. On the day I arrived at the Glandier and joined him in his room he recounted to me, with the greatest detail, all that I have related, telling me also how he had spent several hours in Paris, where he had learned nothing that could be of any help to him.

The event of the inexplicable gallery had occurred on the night between the 29th and 30th of October—that is to say, three days before my return to the chateau. It was on the 2d of November, then, that I went back to the Glandier, summoned there by my friend's telegram and taking the revolver with me.

I am now in Roulettable's room, and he has finished his recital.

While he had been telling me the story I noticed him continually rubbing the glass of the eyeglasses he had found on the side table. From the evident pleasure he was taking in handling them I felt they must be one of those sensible evidences destined to enter what he had called the circle of the right end of his reason.

When he had finished his recital he asked me what I thought of it. I replied that I was much puzzled by his question. Then he begged me to try, in my turn, to take my reason in hand "by the right end."

"Very well," I said. "It seems to me that the point of departure of my reason would be this—there can be no doubt that the murderer you pursued was in the gallery." I paused.

"After making so good a start, you ought not to stop so soon," he exclaimed. "Come, make another effort."

"I'll try. Since he disappeared from the gallery without passing through any door or window, he must have escaped by some other opening."

Roulettable looked at me pityingly, smiled carelessly and remarked that I was reasoning like a postman or—like Frederic Larsan.

Roulettable had alternate fits of admiration and disdain for the great Fred. It all depended as to whether Larsan's discoveries tallied with Roulettable's reasoning or not. When they did he would exclaim, "He is really great!" When they did not, he would grunt and mutter, "What an ass!" It was a petty side of the noble character of this strange youth.

We had risen, and he led me into the park. When we reached the court and were making toward the gate, the sound of blinds thrown back against the wall made us turn our heads, and we saw at a window on the first floor of the chateau the ruddy and clean shaven face of a person I did not recognize.

"Hello!" muttered Roulettable. "Arthur Rance?" He lowered his head, quickened his pace, and I heard him ask himself between his teeth: "Was he in the chateau that night? What is he doing here?"

We had gone some distance from the chateau when I asked him who this Arthur Rance was and how he had come to know him. He referred to his story of that morning, and I remembered that Mr. Arthur W. Rance was the American from Philadelphia with whom he had had so many drinks at the Elysee reception.

"But was he not to have left France almost immediately?" I asked.

"No doubt; that's why I am surprised to find him here still and not only in France, but above all, at the Glandier. He did not arrive this morning, and he did not get here last night. He must have got here before dinner, then. Why didn't the concierges tell me?"

I reminded my friend, apropos of the concierges, that he had not yet told me what had led him to get them set at liberty.

We were close to their lodge. M. and Mme. Bernier saw us coming. A frank smile lit up their happy faces. They seemed to harbor no ill feeling because of their detention. My young friend asked them at what hour Mr. Arthur Rance had arrived. They answered that they did not know he was at the chateau. He must have come during the evening of the previous night, but they had not had to open the gate for him, because, being a great walker and not wishing that a carriage should be sent to meet him, he was accustomed to get off at the little hamlet of Saint Michel, from which he came to the chateau by way of the forest. He reached the park by the grotto of Sainte Genevieve, over the little gate of which, giving us to the park, he climbed.

As the concierges spoke I saw Roulettable's face cloud over and exhibit disappointment—a disappointment, no doubt, with himself. Evidently he was a little vexed, after having worked so much on the spot, with so minute a study of the people and events at the Glandier, that he had to learn now that Arthur Rance was accustomed to visit the chateau.

"You say that M. Arthur Rance is accustomed to come to the chateau. When did he come here last?"

"We can't tell you exactly," replied Mme. Bernier. "We couldn't know while they were keeping us in prison. Besides, as the gentleman comes to the chateau without passing through our gate he goes away by the way he comes."

"Do you know when he came the first time?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur! Nine years ago."

"He was in France nine years ago, then," said Roulettable, "and since that time, as far as you know, how many times has he been at the Glandier?"

"Three times."

"When did he come the last time, as far as you know?"

"A week before the attempt in the yellow room."

Roulettable put another question, this time addressing himself particularly to the woman:

"In the grove of the parquet?"

"In the grove of the parquet," she replied.

"Thanks!" said Roulettable. "Be ready for me this evening."

He spoke the last words with a fnger on his lips as if to command silence and discretion.

We left the park and took the way to the Donjon Inn.

"Do you often eat here?"

"Sometimes."

"But you also take your meals at the chateau?"

"Yes, Larsan and I are sometimes served in one of our rooms."

"Hasn't M. Stangerson ever invited you to his own table?"

"Never."

"Does your presence at the chateau displease him?"

"I don't know; but, in any case, he does not make us feel that we are in his way."

"Doesn't he question you?"

"Never. He is in the same state of mind as he was in at the door of the yellow room when his daughter was being murdered and when he broke open the door and did not find the murderer. He is persuaded since he could discover nothing that there's no reason why we should be able to discover more than he did. But he has made it his duty since Larsan expressed his theory not to oppose us."

Roulettable buried himself in thought again for some time. He aroused himself later to tell me of how he came to set the two concierges free.

"I went lately to see M. Stangerson and took with me a piece of paper on which was written, 'I promise, whatever others may say, to keep in my service my two faithful servants, Bernier and his wife.' I explained to him that by signing that document he would enable me to compel those two people to speak out, and I declared my own assurance of their innocence of any part in the crime. That was also his opinion. The examining magistrate after it was signed presented the document to the Berniers, who then did speak. They said what I was certain they would say as soon as they were sure they would not lose their places."

"They confessed to poaching on M. Stangerson's estates, and it was while they were poaching, on the night of the crime, that they were found not far from the pavilion at the moment when the outrage was being committed. Some rabbits they caught in that way were sold by them to the landlord of the Donjon Inn, who served them to his customers or sent them to Paris. That was the truth, as I had guessed from the first. Do you remember what I said on entering the Donjon Inn?"

"We shall have to eat red meat—now!" I had heard the words on the same morning when we arrived at the park gate. You heard them also, but you did not attach any importance to them. You recollect when we reached the park gate that we stopped to look at a man who was running by the side of the wall, looking every minute at his watch. That was Larsan. Well, behind us the landlord of the Donjon Inn, standing on his doorstep, said to some one inside, 'We shall have to eat red meat—now!'"

"Why that 'now'? When you are, as I am, in search of some hidden secret, you can't afford to have anything escape you. You've got to know the meaning of everything. We had come into a rather out of the way part of the country which had been turned topsy turvy by a crime, and my reason led me to suspect every phrase that could bear upon the event of the day. 'Now,' I took to mean, 'since the outrage.' In the course of my inquiry, therefore, I sought to find a relation between that phrase and the tragedy. We went to the Donjon Inn for breakfast. I repeated the phrase and saw by the surprise and trouble on Daddy Mathieu's face that I had not exaggerated its importance so far as he was concerned."

"I had just learned that the concierges had been arrested. Daddy Mathieu spoke of them as of dear friends—people for whom one is sorry. That was a reckless conjunction of ideas, I said to myself. 'Now,' that the concierges are arrested. 'We shall

have to eat red meat.' No more concierges, no more game! The hatred expressed by Daddy Mathieu for M. Stangerson's forest keeper—a hatred he pretended was shared by the concierges—led me easily to think of poaching. Now, as all the evidence showed the concierges had not been in bed at the time of the tragedy, why were they abroad that night? As participants in the crime? I was not disposed to think so. I had already arrived at the conclusion, by steps of which I will tell you later—that the assassin had had no accomplice and that the tragedy held a mystery between Mlle. Stangerson and the murderer, a mystery with which the concierges had nothing to do.

"With that theory in my mind, I searched for proof in their lodge, which, as you know, I entered. I found there under their bed some springs and brass wire. 'Ah,' I thought, 'these things explain why they were out in the park at night!' I was not surprised at the dogged silence they maintained before the examining magistrate, even under the accusation so grave as that of being accomplices in the crime. Poaching would save them from the assize court, but it would lose them their places, and as they were perfectly sure of their innocence of the crime they hoped it would soon be established, and then their poaching might go on as usual. They could always confess later. I, however, hastened their confession by means of the document M. Stangerson signed. They gave all the necessary 'proofs,' were set at liberty and have now a lively gratitude for me. Why did I not get them released sooner? Because I was not sure that nothing more than poaching was against them. I wanted to study the ground. As the days went by, my conviction became more and more certain. The days after the events of the inexplicable gallery I had need of help I could rely on, so I resolved to have them released at once."

We reached the Donjon Inn and entered it.

This time we did not see the landlord, but were received with a pleasant smile by the charming hostess.

"How's Daddy Mathieu?" asked Roulettable.

"Not much better, not much better. He is still confined to his bed."

"His rheumatism still sticks to him, then?"

"Yes. Last night I was again obliged to give him morphine, the only drug that gives him any relief."

She spoke in a soft voice. Everything about her expressed gentleness. She was, indeed, a beautiful woman, somewhat with an air of indolence, with great eyes seemingly black and blue, amorous eyes. Was she happy with her crabbed, rheumatic husband? The scene at which we had once been present did not lead us to believe that she was. Yet there was something in her bearing that was not suggestive of despair. She disappeared into the kitchen to prepare our repast, leaving on the table a bottle of excellent cider. Roulettable filled our earthenware mugs, loaded his pipe and quietly explained to me his reason for asking me to come to the Glandier with revolvers.

"Yes," he said contemplatively, looking at the clouds of smoke he was puffing out, "yes, my dear boy, I expect the assassin tonight."

A brief silence followed, which I took care not to interrupt, and then he went on:

"Last night just as I was going to bed M. Robert Darzac knocked at my room. When he came in he confided to me that he was compelled to go to Paris the next day—that is, this morning. The reason which made this journey necessary was at once peremptory and mysterious. It was not possible for him to explain its object to me. 'I go, and yet,' he added, 'I would give my life not to leave Mlle. Stangerson at this moment.' He did not try to hide that he believed her to be once more in danger. 'It will not greatly astonish me if something happens tomorrow night,' he avowed, 'and yet I must be absent. I cannot be back at the Glandier before the morning of the day after tomorrow.'"

"I asked him to explain himself, and this is all he would tell me. His anticipation of coming danger had come to him solely from the coincidence that Mlle. Stangerson had been twice attacked, and both times when he had been absent. Now a man so moved who should still go away must be acting under compulsion—must be obeying a will stronger than his own. That was how I reasoned, and I told him so. He replied 'Perhaps.' I asked him if Mlle. Stangerson was compelling him. He protested that she was not. His determination to go to Paris had been taken without any conference with Mlle. Stangerson."

"To cut the story short, he repeated that his belief in the possibility of a fresh attack was founded entirely on the extraordinary coincidence. 'If anything happens to Mlle. Stangerson,' he said, 'it would be terrible for both of us—for her, because her life would be in danger; for me, because I could neither defend her from the attack nor tell of where I had been. I am perfectly aware of the suspicious cast on me.

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The examining magistrate and M. Larsan are both on the point of believing in my guilt. Larsan tracked me the last time I went to Paris, and I had all the trouble in the world to get rid of him.

"Why do you not tell me the name of the murderer now if you know it?" I cried.

"M. Darzac appeared extremely troubled by my question and replied to me in a hesitating tone:

"I? I know the name of the murderer? Why, how could I know his name?"

"I at once replied, 'From Mlle. Stangerson.'"

"He grew so pale that I thought he was about to faint, and I saw that I had hit the right nail on the head. Mademoiselle and he knew the name of the murderer! When he recovered himself, he said to me: 'I am going to leave you. Since you have been here I have appreciated your exceptional intelligence and your unequalled ingenuity. But I ask this service of you. Perhaps I am wrong to fear an attack during the coming night, but as I must act with foresight I count on you to frustrate any attempt that may be made.'"

"Have you spoken of all this to M. Stangerson?"

"No. I do not wish him to ask me, as you just now did, for the name of the murderer. I tell you all this, M. Roulettable, because I have great, very great, confidence in you. I know that you do not suspect me."

"The poor man spoke in jerks. He was evidently suffering. I pitied him, the more because I felt sure that he would rather allow himself to be killed than tell me who the murderer was. As for Mlle. Stangerson, I felt that she would rather allow herself to be murdered than denounce the man of the yellow room and of the inexplicable gallery. The man must be dominating her or both by some insurmountable power. They were dreading nothing so much as the chance of M. Stangerson knowing that his daughter was 'held' by her assailant. I made M. Darzac understand that he had explained himself sufficiently and that he might refrain from telling me any more than he had already told me. I promised him to watch through the night. He insisted that I should establish an absolutely impassable barrier about Mlle. Stangerson's chamber, around the boudoir where the nurses were sleeping and around the drawing room where since the affair of the inexplicable gallery M. Stangerson had slept. In short, I was to put a cordon round the whole apartment."

"From his insistence I gathered that M. Darzac intended not only to make it impossible for the expected man to reach the chamber of Mlle. Stangerson, but to make that impossibility so visibly clear that, seeing himself expected, he would at once go away. That was how I interpreted his final words when we parted. 'You may mention your own suspicions of the expected attack to M. Stangerson, to Daddy Jacques, to Frederic Larsan and to anybody in the chateau.'"

"When he was gone I began to think that I should have to use even a greater cunning than his so that if the man should come that night he might not for a moment suspect that his coming had been expected. Certainly! I would allow him to get in far enough, so that, dead or alive, I might see his face clearly. He must be got rid of. Mlle. Stangerson must be freed from this continual impending danger."

The landlady reappeared at that moment, bringing in the traditional bacon omelet. Roulettable chafed her a little, and she took the chaff with the most charming good humor.

"She is much jollier when Daddy Mathieu is in bed with his rheumatism," Roulettable said to me.

When he had finished his omelet and we were again alone Roulettable continued the tale of his confidences.

"When I sent you my telegram this morning," he said, "I had only the word of M. Darzac that 'perhaps' the assassin would come tonight. I can now say that he will certainly come. I expect him."

"What has made you feel this certainty?"

"I have been sure since half past 10 o'clock this morning that he would

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I knew that before we saw Arthur Rance at the window in the court."

"Ah!" I said. "But, again, what made you so sure? And why since half past 10 this morning?"

"Because at half past 10 I had proof that Mlle. Stangerson was making as many efforts to permit of the murderer's entrance as M. Robert Darzac had taken precautions against it."

"Is that possible?" I cried. "Haven't you told me that Mlle. Stangerson loves M. Robert Darzac?"

"I told you so because it is the truth."

"Then do you see nothing strange?" "Everything in this business is strange, my friend; but take my word for it, the strangeness you now feel is nothing to the strangeness that's to come!"

"It must be admitted, then," I said, "that Mlle. Stangerson and her murderer are in communication—at any rate in writing?"

"Admit it, my friend; admit it! You don't risk anything! I told you about the letter left on her table on the night of the inexplicable gallery affair—the letter that disappeared into the pocket of Mlle. Stangerson. Why should it not have been a summons to a meeting? Might he not, as soon as he was sure of Darzac's absence, appoint the meeting for the coming night?"

And my friend laughed silently. There are moments when I ask myself if he is not laughing at me.

The door of the inn opened. Roulettable was on his feet so suddenly that one might have thought he had received an electric shock.

"Mr. Arthur Rance!" he cried.

Mr. Arthur Rance stood before us calmly bowing.

CHAPTER XX.

An Act of Mlle. Stangerson.

"YOU remember me, monsieur?" asked Roulettable. The American extended his hand, and Roulettable, relaxing his frown, shook it and introduced Mr. Arthur Rance to me. He invited him to share our meal.

"No, thanks. I breakfasted with M. Stangerson."

Arthur Rance spoke French perfectly, almost without an accent.

"I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing you again, monsieur. I thought you were to have left France the day after the reception at the Elysee."

Roulettable and I, outwardly indifferent, listened most intently for every word the American would say.

The man's purplish red face, his heavy eyelids, the nervous twitchings, all spoke of his addiction to drink. How came it that so sorry a specimen of a man should be so intimate with M. Stangerson?

Some days later I learned from Frederic Larsan—who, like ourselves, was surprised and mystified by Rance's appearance and reception at the chateau—that Mr. Rance had been an inmate for about fifteen years only—that it is to say, since the professor and his daughter left Philadelphia. During the time the Stangersons lived in America they were very intimate with Arthur Rance, who was one of the most distinguished phrenologists of the new world. Owing to new experiments he had made enormous strides beyond the science of Gall and Lavater. The friendliness with which he was received at the Glandier may be explained by the fact that he had rendered Mlle. Stangerson a great service by stopping, at the peril of his own life, the runaway horses of her carriage. The immediate result of that could, however, have been no more than a mere friendly association with the Stangersons, certainly not a love affair.

Frederic Larsan did not tell me where he had picked up this information, but he appeared to be quite sure of what he said.

The American must have been at least forty-five years old. He spoke in a perfectly natural tone in reply to Roulettable's question.

"I put off my return to America

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when I heard of the attack on Mlle. Stangerson. I wanted to be certain the lady had not been killed, and I shall not go away until she is perfectly recovered."

(Continued next week.)

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