

The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

—as I told you—on the day of the crime, toward half past five, mademoiselle and her father were taking a little walk before dinner here in the laboratory. The next day the examining magistrate came and saw all the marks there were on the floor as plainly as if they had been found with ink on white paper. Well, neither in the laboratory nor in the vestibule, which were both as clean as a new pin, were there any traces of a man's footmarks. Since they have been found near this window outside, he must have made his way through the ceiling of the yellow room into the attic, then cut his way through the roof and dropped to the ground outside the vestibule window. But there's no hole, neither in the ceiling of the yellow room nor in the roof of the attic; that's absolutely certain. And nothing will ever be known! It's a mystery of the devil's own making.

Rouletabille went down upon his knees again almost in front of a small doorway at the back of the vestibule. That position he remained for about a minute.

"Well?" I asked him when he got up.

"Oh, nothing very important. A drop of blood," he replied, turning toward Daddy Jacques as he spoke. "While you were washing the laboratory and this vestibule was the vestibule window open?" he asked.

"No, monsieur, it was closed. But after I had done washing the floor I saw some charcoal for monsieur in the laboratory furnace, and as I lit it with old newspapers it smoked, so I opened both the windows in the laboratory and this one to make a current of air. Then I shut those in the laboratory and left this one open when I went out. When I returned to the vestibule this window had been closed and monsieur and mademoiselle were busy at work in the laboratory."

"M. or Mlle. Stangerson had no doubt shut it?"

"No doubt."

"You did not ask them?"

"No."

After a close scrutiny of the little laboratory and of the staircase leading up to the attic Rouletabille—to whom it seemed no longer to exist—entered the laboratory. I followed him. I was I confess, in a state of great excitement. Robert Darzac lost none of his friend's movements. As for me, my eyes were drawn at once to the floor of the yellow room. It was closed as I immediately saw, partially opened and out of commission.

My friend, who went about his work methodically, silently studied the room which we lit. It was large and well lighted. Two big windows—aluminum bars were protected by strong iron bars and looked out upon a wide extent of country.

The whole of one side of the laboratory was taken up with a large chimney, crucibles, ovens and such implements as are needed for chemical experiments; tables loaded with vials, papers, reports, an electrical machine apparatus, as M. Darzac informed me, employed by Professor Stangerson to demonstrate the dissociation of matter under the action of solar light—other scientific implements.

Along the walls were cabinets, plain glass-fronted, through which were visible microscopes, special photographic apparatus and a large quantity of crystals.

Rouletabille, who was ferreting in the chimney, put his fingers into one of the crucibles. Suddenly he drew himself up and held up a piece of half-burned paper in his hand. He stepped up to where we were talking by the side of the windows.

"Keep that for us, M. Darzac," he said.

I bent over the piece of scorched paper which M. Darzac took from the hand of Rouletabille and read distinctly the only words that remained legible:

"Fidelity—lost nothing—charm, the ear—its brightness."

Twice since the morning these same meaningless words had struck me, and the second time I saw that they produced on the Sorbonne professor the same paralyzing effect. M. Darzac's first anxiety showed itself when he turned his eyes in the direction of Daddy Jacques. But, occupied as he was at another window, he had seen nothing. Then, tremblingly opening his pocketbook, he put the piece of paper into it, sighing, "My God!"

During this time Rouletabille had turned into the opening of the fireplace—that is to say, he had got upon the bricks of a furnace—and was attentively examining the chimney, which grew narrower toward the top, the outlet from it being closed with the bars of iron fastened into the brick-work, through which passed three small chimneys.

"Impossible to get out that way," he said, jumping back into the laboratory. "Even if he had tried to do it, he would have brought all that iron down to the ground. No, no; it is not on that side we have to search."

Rouletabille next examined the furniture and opened the doors of the cabinets. Then he came to the windows, through which, he declared, no one could possibly have passed. At the second window he found Daddy Jacques in contemplation.

"Well, Daddy Jacques," he said, "what are you looking at?"

"That policeman who is always going round and round the lake. Another of those fellows who think they can see better than anybody else."

"You don't know Frederic Larsen, Daddy Jacques, or you wouldn't speak of him in that way," said Rouletabille in a melancholy tone. "If there is any one who will find the murderer it will be he." And Rouletabille heaved a deep sigh.

CHAPTER VII.

In Which Rouletabille Sets Out on an Expedition Under the Bed.

ROULETABILLE, having pushed open the door of the yellow room, paused on the threshold. The chamber was dark. Daddy Jacques was about to open the blinds when Rouletabille stopped him.

"Did not the tragedy take place in complete darkness?" he asked.

"No, young man; I don't think so. Mademoiselle always had a night light on her table, and I lit it every evening before she went to bed. I was a sort of chambermaid, you must understand, when the evening came. The real chambermaid did not come here much before the morning. Mademoiselle worked late—far into the night."

"Where did the table with the night light stand—far from the bed?"

"Some way from the bed."

"Can you light the burner now?"

"The lamp is broken and the oil that was in it was spilled when the table was upset. All the rest of the things in the room remain just as they were. I have only to open the blinds for you to see."

"Wait."

Rouletabille went back into the laboratory, closed the shutters of the two windows and the door of the vestibule. When we were in complete darkness he lit a wax vesta and asked Daddy Jacques to move to the middle of the chamber with it to the place where the night light was burning that night.

Daddy Jacques, who was in his stockings—he usually left his sabots in the vestibule—entered the yellow room with his bit of a vesta. We vaguely distinguished objects overthrown on the floor, a bed in one corner and in front of us to the left the gleam of a looking glass hanging on the wall near to the bed.

"That will do. You may now open the blinds," said Rouletabille.

"Don't come any farther," Daddy Jacques begged. "You may make marks with your boots, and nothing must be damaged. It's an idea of the magistrate's, though he has nothing more to do here."

And he pushed open the shutter. The pale daylight entered from without, throwing a winster light on the saffron-colored walls. The floor—though the laboratory and the vestibule were fitted the yellow room had a flooring of wood—was covered with a single yellow mat which was large enough to cover nearly the whole room, under the bed and under the dressing table, the only piece of furniture that remained upright. The center table, the night table and two chairs had been overturned. These did not prevent a large stain of blood being visible on the mat, made, as Daddy Jacques informed us, by the blood which had flowed from the wound on Mlle. Stangerson's forehead. Besides these stains drops of blood had fallen in all directions in line with the visible traces of the murderer's large and black, of the murderer's. Everything led to the presumption that these drops of blood had fallen from the wound of the man who had for a moment placed his red hand on the wall. There were other traces of the same hand on the wall, but much less distinct.

"See—see this blood on the wall?" I could not help exclaiming. "The man who pressed his hand so heavily upon it in the darkness must certainly have thought that he was pushing at a door. That's why he yellow paper the terrible evidence. I don't think there are any hands in the world of that sort. It is big and strong, and the fingers are nearly all one as long as the other. The thumb is wanting, and we have only the mark of the palm, but if we follow the trace of the hand," I continued, "we see that after leaving its imprint on the wall the touch sought the door, found it and then felt for the lock."

"No doubt," interrupted Rouletabille, chuckling, "only there is no blood either on the lock or on the bolt."

"What does that prove?" I rejoined, with a good sense of which I was proud. "He might have opened the lock with his left hand, which would have been quite natural, his right hand being wounded."

"He didn't open it at all," Daddy Jacques again exclaimed. "We are not fools, and there were four of us when we burst open the door."

"What a queer hand! Look what a queer hand it is!" I said.

"It is a very natural hand," said Rouletabille, "of which the shape has been deformed by its having slipped on the wall. The man dried his hand on the wall. He must be a man about five feet eight in height."

"How do you come at that?"

"By the height of the marks on the wall."

My friend next occupied himself with the mark of the bullet in the wall. It was a round hole.

"This ball was fired straight, not from above, and consequently not from below."

Rouletabille went back to the door and carefully examined the lock and the bolt, satisfying himself that the door had certainly been burst open from the outside, and, further, that the key had been found in the lock on the inside of the chamber. He finally satisfied himself that with the key in the lock the door could not possibly be opened from without with another key. Having made sure of all these details, he left those words, "That's better!" Then, sitting down on the ground, he hastily took off his boots and in his socks went into the room.

The first thing he did was to examine minutely the overturned furniture. We watched him in silence.

"Young fellow, you are giving your self a great deal of trouble," said Daddy Jacques ironically.

Rouletabille raised his head and said:

"You have spoken the simple truth, Daddy Jacques. Your mistress did not have her hair in bands that evening. I was a donkey to have believed she did."

Then, with the suppleness of a serpent, he slipped under the bed. Presently we heard him ask:

"At what time, M. Jacques, did M. and Mlle. Stangerson arrive at the laboratory?"

"At 6 o'clock."

The voice of Rouletabille continued:

"Yes, he's been under here, that's certain. In fact, there was nowhere else where he could have hidden himself. Here, too, are the marks of his hobnails. When you entered, all four of you, did you look under the bed?"

"At once. We drew it right out of its place."

"And between the mattresses?"

"There was only one on the bed, and on that mademoiselle was placed, and M. Stangerson and the concierge immediately carried it into the laboratory. Under the mattress there was nothing but the metal netting, which could not conceal anything or anybody. Remember, monsieur, that there were four of us, and we couldn't fail to see everything; the chamber is so small and scantily furnished, and all was looked behind in the pavilion."

I ventured on a hypothesis:

"Perhaps he got away with the mattress—in the mattress! Anything is possible in the face of such a mystery. In their distress of mind M. Stangerson and the concierge may not have noticed they were bearing a double weight, especially if the concierge were an accomplice. I throw out this hypothesis for what it is worth, but it explains many things and particularly the fact that neither the laboratory nor the vestibule bears any traces of the footmarks found in the room. If in carrying mademoiselle on the mattress from the laboratory they rested for a moment there might have been an opportunity for the man in it to escape."

"And then?" asked Rouletabille, deliberately laughing under the bed.

I felt rather vexed and replied:

"I don't know, but anything appears possible."

"The examining magistrate had the same idea, monsieur," said Daddy Jacques, "and he carefully examined the mattress. He was obliged to laugh at the idea, monsieur, as your friend is doing now, for whoever heard of a mattress having a double bottom?"

My friend alone seemed able to talk intelligently. He called out from under the bed:

"The mat here has been moved out of place. Who did it?"

"We did, monsieur," explained Daddy Jacques. "When we could not find the assassin we asked ourselves whether there was not some hole in the floor."

"There is not," replied Rouletabille.

"Is there a cellar?"

"No, there's no cellar. But that has not stopped our searching and has not prevented the examining magistrate and his registrar from studying the floor plank by plank, as if there had been a cellar under it."

The reporter then reappeared. His eyes were sparkling and his nostrils quivered. Thus he made his way to the four corners of the room, so to speak, sniffing and going around everything—everything that we could see, which was not much, and everything that we could not see, which must have been infinite.

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"Yes, he's been under here, that's certain. In fact, there was nowhere else where he could have hidden himself. Here, too, are the marks of his hobnails. When you entered, all four of you, did you look under the bed?"

"At once. We drew it right out of its place."

"And between the mattresses?"

"There was only one on the bed, and on that mademoiselle was placed, and M. Stangerson and the concierge immediately carried it into the laboratory. Under the mattress there was nothing but the metal netting, which could not conceal anything or anybody. Remember, monsieur, that there were four of us, and we couldn't fail to see everything; the chamber is so small and scantily furnished, and all was looked behind in the pavilion."

I ventured on a hypothesis:

"Perhaps he got away with the mattress—in the mattress! Anything is possible in the face of such a mystery. In their distress of mind M. Stangerson and the concierge may not have noticed they were bearing a double weight, especially if the concierge were an accomplice. I throw out this hypothesis for what it is worth, but it explains many things and particularly the fact that neither the laboratory nor the vestibule bears any traces of the footmarks found in the room. If in carrying mademoiselle on the mattress from the laboratory they rested for a moment there might have been an opportunity for the man in it to escape."

"And then?" asked Rouletabille, deliberately laughing under the bed.

I felt rather vexed and replied:

"I don't know, but anything appears possible."

"The examining magistrate had the same idea, monsieur," said Daddy Jacques, "and he carefully examined the mattress. He was obliged to laugh at the idea, monsieur, as your friend is doing now, for whoever heard of a mattress having a double bottom?"

My friend alone seemed able to talk intelligently. He called out from under the bed:

"The mat here has been moved out of place. Who did it?"

"We did, monsieur," explained Daddy Jacques. "When we could not find the assassin we asked ourselves whether there was not some hole in the floor."

"There is not," replied Rouletabille.

"Is there a cellar?"

"No, there's no cellar. But that has not stopped our searching and has not prevented the examining magistrate and his registrar from studying the floor plank by plank, as if there had been a cellar under it."

The reporter then reappeared. His eyes were sparkling and his nostrils quivered. Thus he made his way to the four corners of the room, so to speak, sniffing and going around everything—everything that we could see, which was not much, and everything that we could not see, which must have been infinite.

"You have spoken the simple truth, Daddy Jacques. Your mistress did not have her hair in bands that evening. I was a donkey to have believed she did."

Then, with the suppleness of a serpent, he slipped under the bed. Presently we heard him ask:

"At what time, M. Jacques, did M. and Mlle. Stangerson arrive at the laboratory?"

"At 6 o'clock."

The voice of Rouletabille continued:

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