The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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(Chapter III—Continued.)

"Then you are mistaken, M. Rouletabille," replied the magistrate. "Mlle. Stangerson that evening had her hair drawn up in a knot on the top of her head, her usual way of arranging it, her forehead completely uncovered. I can assure you, for we have carefully examined the wound. There was no blood on the hair, and the arrangement of it has not been disturbed since the crime was committed."

"You are sure? You are sure that, on the night of the crime she had no her hair in braids?"

"Quite sure," the magistrate continued, smiling, "because I remember the doctor saying to me while he was examining the wound: 'It is a great pity Mlle. Stangerson was in the habit of drawing her hair back from her forehead. If she had worn it in bands the blow she received on the temple would have been weakened.' It seems strange to me that you should attach so much importance to this point."

"Oh, [illegible] not her hair in bands, I give it up," said Rouletabille, with a despairing gesture.

"And was the wound on her temple a [illegible]?" he asked presently.

"[illegible]"

"[illegible] what weapon was it made?"

"That is a secret of the investigation."

"Have you found the weapon—whatever it was?"

The magistrate did not answer.

"And the wound in the throat?"

Here the examining magistrate readily confirmed the decision of the doctor that, if the murderer had pressed her throat a few seconds longer, Mlle. Stangerson would have died of strangulation.

"The affair as reported in the Matin," said Rouletabille eagerly, "seems to me more and more inexplicable. Can you tell me, monsieur, how many openings there are in the pavilion? I mean doors and windows."

"There are five," replied Monsieur de Marquet, after having coughed once or twice, but no longer resisting the desire he felt to talk of the whole of the incredible mystery of the affair he was investigating. "There are five, of which the door of the vestibule is the only entrance to the pavilion—a door always automatically closed, which cannot be opened, either from the outer or inside, except with the two special keys which are never out of the possession of either Daddy Jacques or M. Stangerson. Mlle. Stangerson had no need for me, since Daddy Jacques lodged in the pavilion and because, during the daytime, she never left her father. When they, all four, rushed into the yellow room, after breaking open the door of the laboratory, the door in the vestibule remained closed as usual and of the two keys for opening it Daddy Jacques had one in his pocket and M. Stangerson the other. As to the windows of the pavilion, there are four, the one window of the yellow room and those of the laboratory looking out on to the country, the window in the vestibule looking into the park."

"It is by that window that he escaped from the pavilion!" cried Rouletabille.

"How do you know that?"

"How? Oh, the thing is simple enough! As soon as he found he could not escape by the door of the pavilion his only way out was by the window in the vestibule, unless he could pass through a grated window. The window of the yellow room is secured by iron bars, because it looks out upon the open country; the two windows of the laboratory have to be protected in like manner for the same reason. As the murderer got away I conceive that he found a window that was not barred—that of the vestibule, which opens on to the park—that is to say, into the interior of the estate. There's not much magic in all that."

"Yes," said M. de Marquet, "but what you have not guessed is that this single window in the vestibule, though it has no iron bars, has solid iron blinds. Now, these iron blinds have remained fastened by their iron latch, and yet we have proof that the murderer made his escape from the pavilion by that window! Traces of blood on the inside wall and on the blinds as well as on the floor, and footmarks, of which I have taken the measurements, attest the fact that the murderer made his escape that way. But, then, how did he do it, seeing that the blinds remained fastened on the inside? He passed through them like a shadow. But what is more bewildering than all is that it is impossible to form any idea as to how the murderer got out of the yellow room or how he got across the laboratory to reach the vestibule!"

"Could that window have been closed and refastened after the flight of the assassin?" asked Rouletabille.

"That is what occurred to me for a moment, but it would imply an accomplice or accomplices, and I don't see"—

After a short silence he added:

"Oh, if Mlle. Stangerson were only well enough today to allow of her being questioned!"

Rouletabille, following up his thought, asked:

"And the other? There must be some reason to that?"

"Yes; there is a window or, rather, skylight in it, which, as it looks out toward the country, M. Stangerson has had barred, like the rest of the windows. These bars, as in the other windows, have remained intact, and the blinds, which naturally open inward, have not been unfastened. For the rest, we have not discovered anything to lead us to suspect that the murderer had passed through the attic."

"It seems clear to you, then, monsieur, that the murderer escaped—nobody knows how—by the window in the vestibule?"

"Everything goes to prove it."

"I think so, too," confessed Rouletabille gravely.

After a brief silence he continued:

"If you have not found any traces of the murderer in the attic, such as the dirty footmarks similar to those on the floor of the yellow room, you must come to the conclusion that it was not he who stole Daddy Jacques' revolver."

"There are no footmarks in the attic other than those of Daddy Jacques himself," said the magistrate with a significant turn of his head. Then, after an apparent decision, he added: "Daddy Jacques was with M. Stangerson in the laboratory, and it was lucky for him he was."

"Then what part did his revolver play in the tragedy? It seems very clear that this weapon did less harm to Mlle. Stangerson than it did to the murderer."

The magistrate made no reply to this question, which doubtless embarrassed him. "M. Stangerson," he said, "tells us that the two bullets have been found in the yellow room, one embedded in the wall stained with the impression of a red hand—a man's large hand—and the other in the ceiling."

"Oh, oh, in the ceiling!" muttered Rouletabille. "In the ceiling! That's very curious! In the ceiling!"

He puffed awhile in silence at his pipe, enveloping himself in the smoke. When we reached Epinay-sur-Orge I had to tap him on the shoulder to arouse him from his dream and come out on to the platform of the station.

There the magistrate and his registrar bowed to us and, by rapidly getting into a cab that was awaiting them, made us understand that they had seen enough of us.

"How long will it take to walk to the Chateau du Glandier?" Rouletabille asked one of the railway porters.

"An hour and a half or an hour and three-quarters—easy walking," the man replied.

Rouletabille looked up at the sky and, no doubt finding its appearance satisfactory, took my arm and said:

"Come on! I need a walk. It was a bit of luck our falling in with that examining magistrate and his registrar, eh? What did I tell you about that revolver?"

His head was bent down, he had his hands in his pockets, and he was whistling. After awhile I heard him murmur:

"Poor woman!"

"Is it Mlle. Stangerson you are pitying?"

"Yes. She's a noble woman and worthy of being pitied—a woman of a great, a very great, character, I imagine—I imagine."

"You know her, then?"

"Not at all. I have never seen her but once."

"Why, then, do you say that she is a woman of great character?"

"Because she bravely faced the murderer, because she courageously defended herself, and, above all, because of the bullet in the ceiling."

CHAPTER IV.

"In the Bosom of Wild Nature."

THE Chateau du Glandier is one of the oldest chateaux in the Ile de France, where so many building remains of the feudal period are still standing. Built originally in the heart of the forest in the reign of Philip le Bel, it now could be seen a few hundred yards from the road leading from the village of Sainte-Geneviève to Montlhery. A mass of inharmonious structures, it is dominated by a donjon.

It was in this place, seemingly belonging entirely to the past, that Professor Stangerson and his daughter installed themselves to lay the foundations for the science of the future.

When M. Stangerson bought the estate, fifteen years before the tragedy with which we are engaged occurred, the Chateau du Glandier had for a long time been unoccupied. Another old chateau in the neighborhood, built in the fourteenth century by Jean de Echmont, was also abandoned, so that that part of the country was very little populated. Some small houses on the side of the road leading to Corbeil, an inn, called the Auberge du Donjon, which offered passing hospitality to wayfarers—these were about all to represent civilization in this out of the way part of the country, but a few leagues from the capital.

[illegible] this deserted condition of the place had been the determining reason for the choice made by M. Stangerson and his daughter. M. Stangerson was already celebrated. He had returned from America, where his works had made a great stir. The book which he had published at Philadelphia, on the "Dissociation of Matter by Electric Action," had aroused opposition throughout the whole scientific world. M. Stangerson was a Frenchman, but of American origin. Important matters relating to a legacy had kept him for several years in the United States, where he had continued the work begun by him in France, whither he had returned in possession of a large fortune.

Mlle. Stangerson was at the time when her father returned from America and bought the Glandier estate twenty years of age. She was exceedingly pretty, having at once the Parisian grace of her mother, who had died in giving her birth, and all the splendor, all the riches of the young American blood of her parental grandfather, William Stangerson. A citizen of Philadelphia, William Stangerson had been obliged to become naturalized in obedience to family exigencies at the time of his marriage with a French lady.

Twenty years of age, a charming blond, with blue eyes, milk white complexion and radiant with divine health, Mathilde Stangerson was one of the most beautiful marriageable girls in either the old or the new world. It was her father's duty, in spite of the inevitable pain which a separation from her would cause him, to think of her marriage, and he was fully prepared for it. Nevertheless he buried himself and his child at the Glandier at the moment when his friends were expecting him to bring her out into society.

Questioned by her friends, the young girl replied calmly, "Where could we work better than in this solitude?" For Mlle. Stangerson had already begun to collaborate with her father in his work. It could not at the time be imagined that her passion for science would lead her so far as to refuse all the suitors who presented themselves to her for over fifteen years. The young girl's extreme reserve did not at first discourage suitors, but at the end of a few years they tired of their quest.

One alone persisted with tender tenacity and deserved the name of "eternal fiance," a name he accepted with melancholy resignation; that was M. Robert Darzac. Mlle. Stangerson was now no longer young, and it seemed that, having found no reason for marrying at five and thirty, she would never find one.

Suddenly some weeks before the events with which we are occupied a report—to which nobody attached any importance, so incredible did it sound—was spread about Paris that Mlle. Stangerson had at last consented to "crown" the inextinguishable flame of M. Robert Darzac! It needed that M. Robert Darzac himself should not deny this matrimonial rumor to give it an appearance of truth, so unlikely did it seem to be well founded. One day, however, M. Stangerson, as he was leaving the Academy of Science, announced that the marriage of his daughter and M. Robert Darzac would be celebrated in the privacy of the Chateau du Glandier as soon as he and his daughter had put the finishing touches to their report summing up their labors on the "Dissociation of Matter." The new household would install itself in the Glandier, and the son-in-law would lend his assistance in the work to which the father and daughter had dedicated their lives.

The scientific world had barely had time to recover from the effect of this news when it learned of the attempted assassination of mademoiselle.

CHAPTER V.

In Which Joseph Rouletabille Makes a Remark to M. Robert Darzac Which Produces Its Little Effect.

ROULETABILLE and I had been walking for several minutes by the side of a long wall bounding the vast property of M. Stangerson and had already come within sight of the entrance gate when our attention was drawn to an individual who, half bent to the ground, seemed to be so completely absorbed in what he was doing as not to have seen us coming toward him. At one time he stooped so low as almost to touch the ground. At another he drew himself up and attentively examined the wall. Then he looked into the palm of one of his hands and walked away with rapid strides. Finally he set off running, still looking into the palm of his hand. Rouletabille had brought me to a standstill by a gesture.

"Hush! Frederic Larsan is at work! Don't let us disturb him!"

Rouletabille had a great admiration for the celebrated detective. I had never seen him, but I knew his writings by reputation. At that time [illegible] Rouletabille had given proof of [illegible] indeed. Larsan was reputed as the most skillful unraveler of the most mysterious and complicated crimes. His reputation was world-wide, and the police of London and even of America often called him to their aid when their own national inspectors and detectives found themselves at the end of their wits and resources.

No one was astonished, then, that the head of the Paris police had at the outset of the mystery of the yellow room telegraphed his precious subordinate in London, where he had been sent on a big case of stolen securities, to return with all haste. Frederic had made all speed, doubtless knowing by experience that if he was interrupted in what he was doing it was because his services were urgently needed in another direction, so, as Rouletabille said, he was that morning already "at work." We soon found out in what it consisted.

What he was continually looking at in the palm of his right hand was nothing but his watch, the minute hand of which he appeared to be noting intently. Then he turned back, still running, stopping only when he reached the park gate, where he again consulted his watch and then put it away in his pocket, shrugging his shoulders with a gesture of discouragement. He pushed open the park gate, reclosed and locked it, raised his head and through the bars perceived us. Rouletabille rushed after him, and I followed. Frederic Larsan waited for us.

"M. Fred," said Rouletabille, raising his hat, and showing the profound respect, based on admiration, which the young reporter felt for the celebrated detective, "can you tell me whether M. Robert Darzac is at the chateau at this moment? Here is one of his friends of the Paris bar, who desires to speak with him."

"I really don't know, M. Rouletabille," replied Fred, shaking hands with my friend, whom he had several times met in the course of his difficult investigations. "I have not seen him."

"The concierges will be able to inform us, no doubt?" said Rouletabille, pointing to the lodge, the door and windows of which were close shut.

"The concierges will not be able to give you any information, M. Rouletabille."

"Why not?"

"Because they were arrested half an hour ago."

"Arrested!" cried Rouletabille. "Then they are the murderers!"

Frederic Larsan shrugged his shoulders.

"When you can't arrest the real murderer," he said, with an air of supreme irony, "you can always indulge in the luxury of discovering accomplices."

"Did you have them arrested, M. Fred?"

"Not I! I haven't had them arrested. In the first place, I am pretty sure that they have not had anything to do with the affair and then because"—

"Because of what?" asked Rouletabille eagerly.

"Because of nothing," said Larsan, shaking his head.

"Because there were no accomplices!" said Rouletabille.

"Aha! You have an idea, then, about this matter?" said Larsan, looking at Rouletabille intently, "yet you have seen nothing, young man—you have not yet gained admission here!"

"I shall get admission."

"I doubt it. The orders are strict."

"I shall gain admission if you let me see M. Robert Darzac. Do that for me. You know we are old friends. I beg of you, M. Fred. Do you remember the article I wrote about you on the gold bar case?"

Larsan might be about fifty years of age. He had a fine head, his hair turning gray, a colorless complexion and a firm profile. His forehead was prominent, his chin and cheeks clean shaven. His upper lip, without mustache, was finely chiseled. His eyes were rather small and round, with a look in them that was at once searching and disquieting. He was of middle height and well built, with a general bearing elegant and gentlemanly.

Larsan turned his head at the sound of a vehicle which had come from the chateau and reached the gate behind him. We recognized the cab which had conveyed the examining magistrate and his registrar from the station at Epinay.

"Ah!" said Frederic Larsan. "If you want to speak with M. Robert Darzac, he is here."

The cab was already at the park gate, and Robert Darzac was begging Frederic Larsan to open it for him, explaining that he was pressed for time to catch the next train leaving Epinay for Paris. Then he recognized me. While Larsan was unlocking the gate M. Darzac inquired what had brought me to the Glandier at such a tragic moment. I noticed that he was frightfully pale and that his face was lined as if from the effects of some terrible suffering.

"Is mademoiselle getting better?" I immediately asked.

"Yes," he said. "She will be saved perhaps. She must be saved!"

He did not add "or it will be my death," but I felt that the phrase trembled on his pale lips.

Rouletabille intervened:

"You are in a hurry, monsieur, but I must speak with you. I have something of the greatest importance to tell you."

Frederic Larsan interrupted:

"May I leave you?" he asked of Robert Darzac. "Have you a key or do you wish me to give you this one?"

"Thank you. I have a key and will lock the gate."

Larsan hurried off in the direction of the chateau, the imposing [illegible] of which could be perceived a few hundred yards away.

Robert Darzac, with soft brow, was beginning to show impatience. I presented Rouletabille as a good friend of mine, but as soon as he learned that the young man was a journalist he looked at me very reproachfully, excused himself under the necessity of having to reach Epinay in twenty minutes, bowed and whipped up his horse. But Rouletabille had seized the bridle and, to my utter astonishment, stopped the carriage with a vigorous hand. Then he gave utterance to a sentence which was utterly meaningless to me.

"The presbytery has lost nothing of its charm, nor the garden its brightness."

The words had hardly left the lips of Rouletabille than I saw Robert Darzac quail. Pale as he was, he became paler. His eyes were fixed on the young man in terror, and he immediately descended from the vehicle in an inexpressible state of agitation.

"Come—come in!" he stammered.

Then suddenly and with a sort of fury he repeated:

"Let us go, monsieur."

He turned up by the road he had come from the chateau, Rouletabille still retaining his hold on the horse's bridle. I addressed a few words to M. Darzac, but he made no answer. My looks questioned Rouletabille, but his gaze was elsewhere.

CHAPTER VI.

In the Heart of the Oak Grove.

WE reached the chateau and, as we approached it, saw four gendarmes pacing in front of a little door in the ground floor of the donjon. We soon learned that in this ground floor, which had formerly served as a prison, M. and Mme. Bernier, the concierges, were confined.

M. Robert Darzac led us into the modern part of the chateau by a large door, protected by a projecting awning—a "marquise" as it is called. Rouletabille, who had resigned the horse and the cab to the care of a servant, never took his eyes off M. Darzac. I followed his look and perceived that it was directed solely toward the gloved hands of the Sorbonne professor. When we were in a tiny sitting room fitted with old furniture, M. Darzac turned to Rouletabille and said sharply:

"What do you want?"

The reporter answered in an equally sharp tone:

"To shake you by the hand."

Darzac shrank back.

"What does that mean?"

Evidently he understood, what I also understood, that my friend suspected him of the abominable attempt on the life of Mlle. Stangerson. The impression of the blood stained hand on the walls of the yellow room was in his mind. I looked at the man closely. His haughty face, with its expression ordinarily so straightforward, was at this moment strangely troubled. He held out his right hand and, referring to me, said:

"As you are a friend of M. Sainclair, who has rendered me invaluable services in a just cause, monsieur, I see no reason for refusing you my hand"—

Rouletabille did not take the extended hand. Lying with the utmost audacity, he said:

"Monsieur, I have lived several years in Russia, where I have acquired the habit of never taking any but an ungloved hand."

I thought that the Sorbonne professor would express his anger openly, but, on the contrary, by a visibly violent effort, he calmed himself, took off his gloves and showed his hands. They were unmarked by any cicatrice.

"Are you satisfied?"

"No!" replied Rouletabille. "My dear friend," he said, turning to me, "I am obliged to ask you to leave us alone for a moment."

I bowed and retired, stupefied by what I had seen and heard. I could not understand why M. Robert Darzac had not already shown the door to my impertinent, insulting and stupid friend. I was angry myself with Rouletabille at that moment for his suspicions which had led to this scene of the gloves.

For some twenty minutes I walked about in front of the chateau, trying vainly to link together the different events of the day.

When Rouletabille came out of the chateau in the company of M. Robert Darzac, extraordinary to relate, I saw at a glance that they were the best of friends.

"We are going to the yellow room. Come with us," Rouletabille said to me. "You know, my dear boy, I am going to keep you with me all day. We'll breakfast together somewhere about here"—

"You'll breakfast with me here, gentlemen"—

"No, thanks," replied the young man. "We shall breakfast at the Donjon inn."

"You'll fare very badly there. You'll not find anything"—

"Do you think so? Well, I hope to find something there," replied Rouletabille. "After breakfast we'll set to work again. I'll write my article, and if you'll be good as to take it to the office for me"—

"Won't you come back with me to Paris?"

"No; I shall remain here."

I turned toward Rouletabille. He spoke quite seriously, and M. Robert Darzac did not appear to be in the least degree surprised.

We were passing by the donjon and heard wailing voices. Rouletabille asked:

"Why have these people been arrested?"

"It is a little my fault," said M. Darzac. "I hoped to remove by the examining magistrate [illegible] that [illegible] by M. de Marquet surrounding had had time to hear the revolver shots, to dress themselves and to cover so great a distance as that which lies between their lodge and the pavilion in the space of two minutes, for not more than that interval of time had elapsed after the firing of the shots when they were met by Daddy Jacques."

"That was suspicious evidently," acquiesced Rouletabille. "And were they dressed?"

"That is what is so incredible. They were dressed completely—not one part of their costumes wanting. The woman wore wooden shoes, but the man had on laced boots. Now they assert that they went to bed as half past 9. On arriving this morning the examining magistrate brought with him from Paris a revolver of the same caliber as that found in the room, for he couldn't use the one held for evidence, and made his registrar fire two shots in the yellow room while the doors and windows were closed. We were with him in the lodge of the concierges, and yet we heard nothing—not a sound. The concierges have lied, of that there can be no doubt. They must have been already waiting not far from the pavilion—waiting for something! Certainly they are not to be accused of being the authors of the crime, but their complicity is not improbable. That was why M. de Marquet had them arrested at once."

"If they had been accomplices," said Rouletabille, "they would not have been there at all. When people throw themselves into the arms of justice with the proofs of complicity on them, you can be sure they are not accomplices. I don't believe there are any accomplices in this affair."

"Then why were they abroad at midnight? Why don't they say?"

"They have certainly some reason for their silence. What that reason is has to be found out, for, even if they are not accomplices, it may be of importance. Everything that took place on such a night is important."

We had crossed an old bridge thrown over the Douve and were entering the part of the park called the Oak grove. The oaks here were centuries old. Autumn had already shriveled their tawny leaves. This place, which mademoiselle found cheerful and in which she lived in the summer season, appeared to us as sad and funereal now. The soil was black and muddy from the recent rains and the rotting of the fallen leaves. The trunks of the trees were black, and the sky above us was now, as if in mourning, charged with great, heavy clouds.

And it was in this somber and desolate retreat that we saw the white walls of the pavilion as we approached. It was a queer looking building, without a window visible on the side by which we neared it. A little door alone marked the entrance to it. It might have passed for a tomb, a vast mausoleum in the midst of a thick forest. As we came nearer we were able to make out its disposition. The building obtained all the light it needed from the south—that is to say, from the open country. The little door closed on the park. M. and Mlle. Stangerson must have found it an ideal seclusion for their work and their dreams.

The pavilion had a ground floor which was reached by a few steps, and above it was an attic, with which we need not concern ourselves. The rooms of the pavilion were as follows:

The yellow room, with its one window and its one door opening into the laboratory.

The laboratory, with its two large barred windows and its doors, one serving for the vestibule, the other for the yellow room.

The vestibule, with its unbarred window and door opening into the park.

The lavatory, between the vestibule and the yellow room.

Besides these chambers there was a flight of stairs leading to the attic. The only chimney was the large one in the laboratory.

Before mounting the three steps leading up to the door of the pavilion Rouletabille stopped and asked M. Darzac point blank:

"What was the motive for the crime?"

"Speaking for myself, monsieur, there can be no doubt on the matter," said Mlle. Stangerson's fiance, greatly distressed. "The marks of the fingers, the deep scratches on the chest and throat of Mlle. Stangerson, show that the wretch who attacked her attempted to commit a frightful crime. The medical experts who examined these traces yesterday affirm that they were made by the same hand as that which left its red imprint on the wall—an enormous hand, monsieur, much too large to go into my gloves," he added, with an indefinable smile.

"Could not that blood stained hand," I interrupted, "have been the hand of Mlle. Stangerson, who, in the moment of falling, had pressed it against the wall and, in slipping, enlarged the impression?"

"There was not a drop of blood on either of her hands when she was lifted up," replied M. Darzac.

"We are now sure," said I, "that it was Mlle. Stangerson who was armed with Daddy Jacques' revolver, since she wounded the hand of the murderer. She was in fear, then, of somebody or something."

"Probably."

"Do you suspect anybody?"

"No," replied M. Darzac, looking at Rouletabille.

Rouletabille then said to me:

"You must know, my friend, that the inquiry is a little more advanced than M. de Marquet has chosen to tell us. He not only knows that Mlle. Stangerson defended herself with the revolver, but he knows what the weapon was that was used to attack her. M. Darzac tells me it was a mitron bone, [illegible] by M. de Marquet surrounding