



The Perfume of the Lady In Black

By GASTON LEROUX,
Author of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room"

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The gripping qualities of this story reveal a gifted French author in his best vein. While it is a detective story ranking with the Sherlock Holmes series, revealing further adventures of Rouletabille, the sensational solver of mysteries, the narrative also presents several character studies of engrossing interest—Rouletabille, the bewildering hero of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room," who is here confronted by the nerve racking mystery of "the body too many;" Larzan, the fugitive from justice and master mind of the polished criminals of two hemispheres, who reveals himself only when he wishes to show where he is not, and the Lady in Black, whose inspiring faith is unshaken by the unspeakable tragedies in which she is the central figure. The dreadful power for evil that can be exerted by a perverted brain has never been more clearly portrayed. The heart-breaking test of the unfortunate son who realizes that he must kill his father, who has never known his son, to save his mother, whom he might never see again, is a vivid portrayal of some of the penalties of human existence.

CHAPTER I.

A Foredoomed Marriage.

THE marriage of M. Robert Darzac and Mile. Mathilde Stangerson took place in Paris at the Church of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet on April 6, 1895, everything connected with the occasion being conducted in the quietest fashion possible. A little more than two years had rolled by since the events which I have recorded in a previous volume—events so sensational that it is not speaking too strongly to say that an even longer lapse of time would not have sufficed to blot out the memory of the famous "Mystery of the Yellow Room."

In this almost unknown parish it was easy enough to maintain the utmost privacy. Only a few friends of M. Darzac and Professor Stangerson, on whose discretion they felt assured that they might rely, had been invited. I had the honor to be one of the number.

I reached the church early, and naturally my first thought was to look for Joseph Rouletabille. I was somewhat surprised at not seeing him; but, having no doubt that he would arrive shortly, I entered the pew already occupied by M. Henri-Robert and M. Andre Hesse, who in the quiet shades of the little chapel exchanged in undertone reminiscences of the strange affair at Versailles, which the approaching ceremony brought to their memories.

"I never felt quite easy about Robert and Mathilde," he said, "not even after the happy termination of the affair at Versailles," said Henri-Robert, "until I knew that the information of the death of Frederic Larzan had been officially confirmed. That man was a pitiless enemy."

It will be remembered perhaps by readers of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room" that a few months after the acquittal of the professor in Sorbonne there occurred the terrible catastrophe of La Dordogne, a transatlantic steamer running between Havre and New York. In the broiling heat of a summer night upon the coast of the new world La Dordogne had caught fire from an overheated boiler. Before help could reach her the steamer was utterly destroyed. Scarcely thirty passengers were able to leap into the life boats, and these were picked up the next day by a merchant vessel, which conveyed them to the nearest port. For days thereafter the ocean cast up on the beach hundreds of corpses, and among these they found Larzan.

The papers which were found carefully hidden in the clothing worn by the dead man proved beyond a doubt his identity. Mathilde Stangerson was at last delivered from this monster of a husband to whom, through the facility of the American laws, she had given her hand in secret in the unthinking ardor of girlish romance. This wretch, whose real name, according to court records, was Balmeyer and who had married her under the name of Jean Roussel, could no longer rise like a dark shadow between Mathilde and the man whom she had loved so long and so well without daring to become his bride. In "The Mystery of the Yellow Room" I have related all the details of this remarkable affair, one of the strangest which has ever been known in the annals of the court of assizes and which without doubt would have had a most tragic denouement had it not been for the extraordinary part played by a boy reporter, scarcely eighteen years old, Joseph Rouletabille, who was the

only one to discover that Frederic Larzan, the celebrated secret service agent, was none other than Balmeyer himself.

"You see, my dear fellow," said M. Henri-Robert to M. Andre Hesse, "you see, in this world one can always find the bright side. See how beautifully everything has turned out, even the troubles of Mile. Stangerson. But why are you constantly looking around you? Do you expect any one?" "Yes, I expect Frederic Larzan."

M. Henri-Robert laughed. But I felt no inclination to join in his mirth. "What's the matter, Sainclair?" whispered M. Henri-Robert, who noticed my expression. "Hesse was only joking."

"I don't know anything about it," I answered. And I looked attentively around me, as M. Andre Hesse had done. And indeed we had believed Larzan dead so often when he was known as Balmeyer that it seemed quite possible that he might be once more brought to life in the guise of Larzan.

"Here comes Rouletabille," remarked M. Henri-Robert. "I'll wager that he isn't worrying."

The young reporter joined us and pressed our hands in an absentminded manner.

"Good morning, Sainclair. Good morning, gentlemen. I am not late, I hope?"

It seemed to me that his voice trembled. He left our pew immediately and withdrew to a dark corner, where he knelt like a child and prayed. His fervent devotion astonished us. When he raised his head his eyes were filled with tears. He did not even try to hide them. He was lost completely in his prayers and, one might imagine, in his grief.

But what could be the occasion of his sorrow? Had not the good fortune of Mathilde Stangerson and Robert Darzac been in a great measure brought about by his efforts? Perhaps from joy that he wept. He rose from his knees and was hidden behind a pillar.

And the next moment Mathilde Stangerson made her entrance into the church upon the arm of her father, Robert Darzac walking behind them. Ah, the drama of the Glandier had been a sorrowful one for these three!

But, strange as it may seem, Mathilde Stangerson appeared only the more beautiful for all that she had passed through. True, she was no longer the beautiful statue, the living marble, the ancient goddess, the cold pagan divinity, who at the official functions at which her father's position had forced her to appear had excited a flutter of admiration whenever she was seen. It seemed, on the contrary, that fate in making her expiate for so many long years an imprudence committed in early youth had cast her into the depths of madness and despair, only to tear away the mask of stone which hid from sight the tender, delicate spirit. And it was this spirit which shone forth on her wedding day, in the sweetest and most charming smile, playing on her curved lips, hiding in her eyes, filled with pensiveness and leaving its impress on her forehead.

But what I shall always remember in the strange expression which came over her visage when she looked through the rows of faces in the pews without seeming to discover the one she sought. In a moment she had regained her composure and was mistress of herself once more. She had seen Rouletabille behind his pillar. She smiled at him and my companions, and I smiled in our turn.

"She has the eyes of a mad woman!" I turned to see who spoke the heartless words. It was a poor fellow whom Robert Darzac out of kindness had made his assistant in the laboratory at the Sorbonne. The man was named Brignolles and was a distant cousin of the bridegroom. Long ago he had lost both father and mother. He had neither brother nor sister and seemed to have broken off all intercourse with his native province, from which he had brought an eager desire for success, an exceptional ability to work and a strong intellect.

One beautiful morning in the preceding spring and consequently a year after the occurrences in the yellow room Darzac had presented Brignolles to his pupils. The new assistant had come direct from Aix, where he had been a tutor in the natural sciences and where he had committed some fault of discipline which had caused his dismissal. Darzac was suffering from the reaction following the strong emotions which had nearly weighed him down at the Glandier and at the court of assizes. We remarked that from the day that Brignolles came to him—Brignolles, whose friendship should have been a precious source—the weakness of M. Darzac seemed to increase. However, we were obliged to acknowledge that Brignolles was not to blame for that. For two unfortunate and unforeseen accidents had occurred in the course of some experiments which would have seemed on the face of them not at all dangerous. The first resulted from the unexpected explosion of a Gessler tube. The second, which might have been extremely grave, happened through the explosion of a tiny lamp against which Darzac was leaning.

At the time of the second accident I was present, having come to seek Darzac at the Sorbonne. I myself led our friend to a druggist and then to a doctor, and I begged Brignolles when he wished to accompany us to remain at his post. On the way Darzac asked why I had wounded the poor fellow's feelings. I told him that I did not care for Brignolles' society for the abstract reason that I did not like his manners and for the concrete reason on this special occasion that I believed him to be responsible for the accident. Darzac demanded why I thought so, and I did not know how to answer, and he laughed.

My suspicions of Brignolles were doubtless ridiculous. All the same, I was so strongly prejudiced against the young man that I blamed him for the slow improvement in Darzac's physical condition. At the beginning of the winter Darzac had such a bad cough that I entreated him to ask for leave of absence and to take a trip to the Midi. The physician advised San Remo. He went thither, and a week later he wrote us that he felt much better. "I can breathe here," he wrote. "When I left Paris I seemed to be stifling."

This letter gave me much food for thought, and I took Rouletabille into my confidence.

He agreed with me that it was a most peculiar coincidence that Darzac was so ill when Brignolles was with him and so much better when he and his young assistant were separated. The impression that this was actually the fact was so strong in my mind that I would on no account have permitted myself to lose sight of Brignolles. No, indeed! I verily believe that if he had attempted to leave Paris I should have followed him.

Darzac returned home at the end of four weeks almost completely restored to health. His eyes, however, were still weak, and he was under the necessity of taking the greatest care of them. Rouletabille and myself had resolved to keep a close watch on Brignolles, but we were satisfied that everything would be right when we were informed that the long deferred marriage was to occur almost immediately and that Darzac would take his wife away on a long honeymoon trip far from Paris—and from Brignolles.

And now we all—a dozen or so persons—were gathered in the sacristy. The witnesses signed the register, and the rest of us congratulated the newly wedded pair. The sacristy was yet more dismal than the church, and I might have thought that it was on account of the darkness that I could not perceive Joseph Rouletabille. But as surely he was not there. Mathilde had already asked for him twice, and Darzac requested me to go and look for him. I did so, but he had disappeared.

When the bridegroom brought this news to his wife she appeared to be both pained and anxious. She called me to her side and said: "My dear M. Sainclair, you know that we are to take the train in two hours. Will you hunt up our little friend and bring him to me and tell him that his strange behavior is grieving me very much."

And I began a wild goose chase after Rouletabille. But I appeared at the station without him. Neither at his home nor at the office of his paper nor at the Cafe du Barreau, where the necessities of his work often called him at this hour of the day, could I lay my hand on him.

There was three minutes yet before the departure of the train. But no Rouletabille. We were all so grieved and moreover so surprised that we remained on the platform, looking at M. Darzac, without thinking to wish her a pleasant journey. She cast a long glance upon the quay, and at the moment that the speed of the train began to accelerate, certain now that she was not to see her "little friend" again, she threw me an envelope from the car window.

"For him," she said. And almost as though moved by an irresistible impulse, her face wearing an expression of something that resembled terror, she added in a tone so strange that I could not help recalling the horrible speeches of Brignolles: "Au revoir, my friends—or adieu."

CHAPTER II.

Rouletabille's Revelation.

ROULETABILLE had been treated by the Stangersons and by M. Darzac as their deliverer, and especially since Mathilde had left the sanitarium, in which for several months he shattered nervous system had needed and received the most assiduous care—since the daughter of the famous professor had been able to understand the extraordinary part which the boy had played in the drama that without his help would inevitably have ended in the bitterest grief for all those whom she loved—since she had read by the light of her restored reason the shorthand reports of the trial, at which Rouletabille appeared at the last moment like some hero of a miracle—who had surrounded the youngster with an affection little less than maternal. She interested herself in everything which concerned him. She begged for his confidence. She wanted to know more about him

than I knew and perhaps more even than he knew himself. She had shown an unobtrusive but strong curiosity in regard to the mystery of his birth, of which all of us were ignorant and on which the young man had kept silence with a sort of savage pride.

I returned from the Lyons station still pondering over the numerous fantasies, the strange caprices of Rouletabille during the last two years. But nothing that entered my mind could have warned me of what had happened or, still less, have explained it to me. Where was Rouletabille? I went to his rooms in the Boulevard St. Michel, telling myself that if I did not find him there I could at least leave M. Darzac's letter. What was my astonishment when I entered the building to see my own servant carrying my bag. I asked him to tell me what he was doing and why, and he replied that he did not know—that I must ask M. Rouletabille.

The boy had been, as it turned out, while I had been seeking him everywhere (except naturally in my own house), in my apartments in the Rue de Rivoli. He had ordered my servant to take him to my rooms and had made the man fill a valise with everything necessary for a trip of three or four days. Then he had directed the man to bring the bag in about an hour to the hotel in the "Bouff' Mich."

I made one bound up the stairs to my friend's bedroom, where I found him packing in a tiny hand satchel an assortment of toilet articles, a change of linen and a nightshirt. Until this task was ended I could obtain no satisfaction from Rouletabille, for in regard to the little affairs of everyday life he was extremely particular and despite the modesty of his means succeeded in living very well, having a horror of everything which could be called bohemian. He finally deigned to announce to me that "we were going to take our Easter vacation" and that since I had nothing to do and the Epoch had granted him a three days' holiday we couldn't do better than to go and take a short rest at the seaside. But my silence did not disturb Rouletabille in the least, and, taking my valise in one hand, his satchel in the other, he hustled me down the stairs and pushed me into a hack which awaited us before the door of the hotel. Half an hour later we found ourselves in a first class carriage of the Northern railway, which was carrying us toward Trepot by way of Amiens. As we entered the station he said:

"Why don't you give me the letter that you have for me?"

I gazed at him in amazement. He had guessed that M. Darzac would be greatly grieved at not seeing him before her departure and would write to him. He had been positively malicious, I answered: "Because you don't deserve it."

And I gave him a good scolding, to which he interposed no defense. He did not even try to excuse himself, and that made me angrier than ever. Finally I handed him the letter. He took it, looked at it and inhaled its fragrance. As I sat looking at him curiously he frowned, trying, as I could see, to repress some strong feeling. His face betrayed the fact that he was suffering profoundly.

"Well!" I said. "Aren't you going to read the letter?" "No," he replied; "not here; when we are yonder."

We arrived at Trepot in the blackest night that I remember after six hours of an interminable trip and in wretched weather. The wind from the sea chilled us to the bone and swept over the deserted quay with weird sounds of lamentation. I walked behind Rouletabille, who made his way with difficulty in this damp obscurity. However, he appeared to know the place, for we finally arrived at the door of a queer little inn which remained open during the early spring for the fishermen. Rouletabille demanded supper and a fire, for we were half starved and half frozen.

"Ah, now, my friend," I said when we were settled after a fashion, "will you condescend to explain to me what we have to come to look for in this place aside from rheumatism and pneumonia?"

But Rouletabille at this moment coughed and turned toward the fire to warm his hands again. "Oh, yes," he answered; "I am going to tell you. We have come to look for the perfume of the Lady in Black."

This phrase gave me so much to think about that I scarcely slept at all that night. Early in the morning I was awakened by a changed Rouletabille. His face was distorted with grief as he handed me a telegram which had come to him at the Bourg, having been forwarded from Paris in accordance with the orders that he had left.

Here is the dispatch: Come immediately without losing a minute. We have given up our trip to the orient and will join M. Stangerson at Mentone at the home of the Hancos at Rochers Rouges. Let this message remain a secret between us. It is not necessary to frighten any one. You may pretend that you are on your vacation or make any other excuse that you like, but come. Telegram me general delivery, Mentone. Quickly, quickly! I am waiting for you. Yours in despair, DARZAC.

"Well," I cried, leaping out of bed. "It doesn't surprise me!" "You never believed that he was dead?" demanded Rouletabille in a tone filled with emotion. "I never felt quite sure of it," I answered. "It was too useful for him to pass for dead to permit him to hesitate at the sacrifice of a few papers, however important those were which were found upon the victim of the Dordogne disaster. But what is the matter with you, my boy? You look as though you were going to faint. Are you ill?"

Rouletabille had let himself into a chair. It was in a voice which trembled like that of an old man that he

confided to me that even while the marriage ceremony of our friends was going on he had become possessed with a strong conviction that Larzan was not dead. But after the ceremony was at an end he had felt more secure. It seemed to him that Larzan would never have permitted Mathilde Stangerson to speak the vows that gave her to Robert Darzac if he were really alive. Larzan would only have had to show his face to stop the marriage.

Wiping the perspiration from his forehead, Rouletabille remarked: "Sainclair, can you ever forget Larzan's eyes? Do you remember, 'The presbytery has not lost its charm or the garden its brightness?'"

I pressed the boy's hand. It was burning hot. I tried to calm him, but he paid no attention to anything I said.

"And it was after the wedding—just a few hours after the wedding—that he chose to appear!" he cried. "There isn't anything else to think, is there, Sainclair?"

"Oh, M. Darzac is not a child to be frightened at bogies. But we must hope—we must hope, mustn't we, Sainclair, that he is mistaken? Oh, it isn't possible that such a fearful thing can be true. Oh, Sainclair, it would be too terrible!"

I had never seen Rouletabille so deeply agitated, even at the time of the most terrible events at the Glandier. He arose from his chair and walked up and down the room, casting aside any object which came to his way and repeating over and over: "No, no! It's too terrible, too terrible!"

"But, my dear boy, you frighten me. What is there you know that you have not told me?"

"I am going to tell you. The situation is horrible. Why didn't that villain die?"

"And, after all, how do you know that he is not dead?"

"Look here, Sainclair—don't talk—be quiet, please. You see, if he is alive I wish to God that I were dead!"

"If he is alive you must live to defend that poor woman."

"Ah, that is true! You have said the only thing that makes me want to live. To defend her! I will not think of myself again."

And Rouletabille smiled, a smile which almost frightened me. I threw my arm around him and begged him to tell me why he was so terrified, why he spoke of his own death and why he smiled so strangely.

Rouletabille looked down and steadily into my eyes. Then he said: "You shall know all, Sainclair. You shall know as much as I do, and when you do you will be as unhappy as I am, for you are kind and you are fond of me."

Then he straightened back his shoulders as though he had already cast off a burden and pointed in the direction of the railway.

"We shall leave here in an hour," he said. "There is no direct train from Eu to Paris in the winter. We shall not reach Paris until 7 o'clock. But that will give us plenty of time to pack our trunks and take the train that leaves the Lyons station at 9 o'clock for Marseilles and Mentone."

He did not ask my opinion on the course which he had laid out. He was taking me to Mentone, just as he had brought me to Trepot. He was well aware that in the present crisis I could refuse him nothing.

I thought of the perfume of the Lady in Black, but I kept silence. He had said he would tell me all. He led me out to the jetty. The wind was still blowing a gale. Rouletabille closed his eyes as if in a dream. "It was here," he said, "that I last saw her."

He looked down at the stone bench beside which we were standing.

In another half hour we were at Eu. We alighted, and the horse and carriage stood motionless upon the street. The driver had gone into a saloon. We entered the cool shades of a high Gothic church which faced upon the square. The young reporter gazed sorrowfully at the square battlements of the city hall, which extended toward us the hostile lance of its soiled and weather beaten flag; at the Cafe de Paris, at the silent houses, at the shops and the library. Was it there that the boy had bought those first new books for which the Lady in Black had paid?

"Nothing has changed." He drew me into a little street and stopped again in front of a tiny temple of the Jesuit style. After having published open a little low door Rouletabille bade me enter, and we found ourselves inside a beautiful mortuary chapel.

"The college chapel," whispered Rouletabille. There was no person in the chapel. We crossed the room hastily. On the left wall Rouletabille tapped very gently a kind of drum, which gave out a queer, muffled sound.

"We are in luck," he said. "We are inside the college, and the concierge has not seen me. He would remember me."

"What harm would that have done?" "Just at that moment a man with bare head and a bunch of keys at his side passed through the room, and Rouletabille drew me into the shadow.

(To be continued.)

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Notice to Contractors.

Sealed bids will be received by the city council of the city of Medford, Oregon, up to and including January 4th, 1910, for the excavating and laying of all water mains to be constructed during the year 1910, bids to be filed with the city recorder not later than 4 o'clock p. m. on January 4th, 1910, and to be accompanied by a certified check equal to ten per cent of the amount bid for. By order of the city council December 21st, 1909. ROBT. W. TELFER, City Recorder. Dated this 22nd day of December, 1909.