

THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

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

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CHAPTER IV.

"She Will Go Mad Again!"

WHEN she had told me these things," Darzac continued, "my first care was to try to convince her that she was laboring under some hideous delusion. Wasn't Larsen dead and buried? I offered to accompany Mathilde at once to the compartment in order to prove to her that she had been the victim of a hallucination. She was bitterly opposed to the idea, crying out that neither she nor I must ever enter the compartment again. She said that she remembered Larsen's face perfectly—that it had appeared before her twice under such circumstances as would impress it indelibly upon her memory, even if she were to live for a century—once during the strange scene in the gallery and again at the moment when they came into her sickroom to place me under arrest. And then, now that she knew who Larsen was, it was not only the features of the secret service agent that she had recognized, but the dreaded countenance of the man who had pursued her for years.

"She cried out that she could swear on her life and on mine that she had seen Ballmeyer—alive in the glass, with the smooth face of Larsen.

"I explained to the superintendent that my wife had been frightened at something she fancied that she had seen while alone in our compartment, and I begged him to keep her in his office while I went myself to discover what it was that she had seen.

"And then, my friends," continued Robert Darzac, his voice beginning to tremble, "I left the superintendent's office, but I had no sooner got out of the room than I went back and slammed the door behind me. I, too, had seen Larsen. My wife had had no illusion. Larsen was there in the station upon the platform outside that door. He was there in front of the superintendent's door, standing under a gas jet. Evidently he expected us and was waiting for us. He made no effort to hide himself. On the contrary, any one would have declared that he had stationed himself there for the express purpose of being seen.

"Mathilde was staring at me, her great eyes wide open, speechless, as though she were a somnambulist. In a moment, however, she came back to herself sufficiently to ask me whether it were far from Bourg to Lyons. At the same time she begged me to give orders about our baggage and asked me to accede to her desire to rejoin her father as soon as possible. I immediately entered into her plans. Besides, now that I had seen Larsen with my own eyes, I knew well that the long honeymoon trip which we had planned must be given up, and, my dear boy," went on Darzac, turning to Rouletabille, "I became possessed with the idea that we were running the risk of some mysterious danger from which you alone could rescue us, if not already too late. Mathilde was grateful to me for the readiness with which I fell in with her wish to join her father when I told her that in a few minutes we would be on board the 9:29 train, which reaches Lyons at about 10 o'clock, and we discovered that we would overtake M. Stangerson himself at that point. I will pass over his amazement when he beheld us upon the platform of the station at Lyons, Mathilde explained to him that on account of a serious accident which had closed the line at Culoz we had decided to join him and spend a few days with him at the home of Arthur Rance and his young wife, as we had before been entreated to do by this friend."

I here interrupted M. Darzac's narrative to recall to the memory of the reader of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room" the fact that Arthur William Rance had for many years cherished a hopeless devotion for Miss Stangerson, but had at last overcome it and married a beautiful American girl who knew nothing of the mysterious adventures of the professor's daughter.

After the affair at the Glandier and while Miss Stangerson was still a patient in a private asylum near Paris, where the treatment restored her to health and reason, we heard one fine day that Rance was about to wed the niece of an old professor of geology at the Academy of Science in Philadelphia. Those who had known of his reckless passion for Mathilde and had gauged its depths by the excess with which it was displayed believed that Rance was marrying in desperation and propitiated little happiness for the union. They were living at Rochers Rouges in the old castle on the peninsula of Hercules.

Darzac continued his story; "When we had given these explanations to M. Stangerson my wife and I saw that he seemed to understand very little of what we had said, and he appeared very mournful. Her father said that something had happened since we had left him which we were concealing from him. Mathilde began to talk of the ceremony of the morning, and in that way the conversation came around to you, my young friend—and again Darzac addressed himself to Rouletabille—and I took the occasion to say to M. Stangerson that since your vacation was just beginning at

this time that we were all going to Mentone you might be pleased with an invitation that would give you the chance of spending your holiday in our society. There was, I said, plenty of room at Rochers Rouges, and I was certain that M. Arthur Rance and his bride would extend to you a cordial welcome. While I was speaking Mathilde looked gratefully at me and pressed my hand tenderly. Thus it happened that when we reached Valence I had M. Stangerson write the dispatch which you must have received. While her father rested in his compartments next to ours Mathilde opened my traveling bag and took out my revolver, saying, 'If he should attack us you must defend yourself.' Ah, what a night we passed! I longed to console her, to comfort her, but I found no words. And when once I attempted to speak she made a gesture so full of misery and desolation that I realized that I would be far kinder if I kept silence."

This was Darzac's story. We felt, Rouletabille and myself, that the narrative was so important that we both resolved on arriving at Mentone that we would write it down from memory. At the station of Mentone Garavan they found Arthur Rance, who was astonished at beholding the bride and bridegroom. But when he was told that they intended to spend a few days with him he was delighted. Arthur Rance had not, even after his marriage to Miss Edith Prescott, been able to overcome the extreme reserve with which Darzac had always treated him.

So far as Darzac was concerned, the terror which he felt was increased by news brought to us by Arthur Rance when he met us at Nice. But before this there had occurred a little incident which I cannot pass by in silence. As soon as we reached the Nice station I had jumped from the train and hurried into the telegraph office to ask whether there was any message for me. A dispatch was handed to me, and without opening it I went back to Darzac and Rouletabille.

"Read this," I said to the young reporter.

Rouletabille opened the envelope and read:

"Brignolles has not been away from Paris since April 6. This is an absolute certainty."

Rouletabille then said:

"...what does this amount to now that you have it?"

"It was at Dijon," I rejoined, vexed at the attitude of the lad, "that the idea came to me that Brignolles might be concerned in the misfortunes crowding upon us and of which warning was given by the telegrams you received. I wired a friend to make inquiries in regard to the movements of the fellow."

"Well," said Rouletabille, "you have your inquiries answered. Are you willing to admit now that Brignolles is not and has never been Larsen in disguise?"

"I never thought of any such thing as that!" I exclaimed. I suspected that Rouletabille was laughing at me.

The truth was that the idea had actually entered my mind. And this time both Darzac and Rouletabille begged my pardon and paid their respects to my despised intuitions. I mention this incident here to show to how great an extent I was haunted by the image of Larsen hiding under some new form and lurking unknown among us. Dear heaven! Larsen had so often proved his genius in this respect that I felt him quite capable of defying us now and of mingling with us perhaps even as a friend.

I was soon to change my ideas, however, and to believe that this time Ballmeyer had altered his usual tactics, and the unexpected arrival of Arthur Rance was to go far in leading me to this opinion. Instead of hiding himself, the bandit was showing himself openly with an audacity that staggered belief. After all, what had he to fear in this part of the country? He was aware that neither Darzac nor his wife would be likely to denounce him. His bold revelation of his presence seemed to have but one end in view, that of ruining the happiness of the couple who had believed that his death had opened the way for their marriage.

But now let me tell you of the news brought by Rance when he joined the three of us at Nice. He knew nothing of what had happened at Bourg, nothing of the appearance of Larsen to Mme. Darzac on the train and to her husband in the station. But, if we had retained the slightest hope that we had lost Larsen on the road to Culoz, Rance's words obliterated it. And he had come to warn us.

"After taking you to the station," said Rance to Darzac, "and the train had pulled out, your wife, Stangerson and myself thought that we would leave the carriage for a little while and take a stroll. Stangerson gave his arm to his daughter. I was at the right of M. Stangerson, who, therefore, was walking between the two of us. Suddenly we paused to let a tram car pass. A man said to me, 'I beg your pardon, sir.' The voice made me tremble. I knew that it was Larsen. He cast a long, calm look upon us. I do not know how I kept from crying aloud his miserable name. Happily Stangerson and Mme. Darzac had not seen him. I made them walk around the garden and listen to the music in the park, and then we returned to the carriage. Upon the sidewalk in front of the station there was Larsen. I cannot understand how Stangerson and Mme. Darzac could have helped but see him!"

"Are you sure that they did not see him?" interrupted Darzac.

"Yes," I feigned illness. We got into the carriage and ordered the coachman to drive as fast as he could. The man stood on the sidewalk, staring after us with his cruel eyes as we

drove away." "And you are certain that my wife did not see him?" repeated Darzac. "Certain, I assure you." "But, good God, Darzac," interposed Rouletabille, "how long do you think you can deceive your wife as to the fact that Larsen has reappeared and that she actually saw him? At the time you reached Garavan your wife sent me the telegram I am going to ask you to read." And he held out to M. Darzac the paper which bore the two words, "Save us."

Darzac read it, with whitened face. "She'll go mad again," he said.

(To be continued.)

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