

THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

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

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CHAPTER VII

A Keen Rogue and a Quaint Crank.

AN hour later we were all at our posts, passing along the parapets in the moonlight, keeping close watch. Mme. Edith, who said that she could not sleep, came out and talked to Rouletabille at his postern. He called me, placed me in charge of his postern and of Mrs. Rance and made his rounds. The fair Edith was in the most charming humor.

"It's the funniest thing I ever heard of," she exclaimed. "How I wish I knew your Larsen! I'm sure I should adore him."

I shuddered at the words she uttered so lightly. Ah, if the unhappy girl had only realized what was to come!

I spent two delightful hours with Mme. Edith, during the greater part of which I related to her some facts regarding the history of Larsen-Ballmeyer, some of which had been sufficient to make it doubtful whether he still lived at the time that he appeared to play so unexpected a part in "The Mystery of the Yellow Room." As this man's powers will now be seen to extend to heights which some may believe inaccessible, I judge it to be my duty to prepare the mind of the reader to admit in the end that I am only the transcriber of an affair the like of which never has been known before and that I have invented nothing. I will refer those who believe in actual records to the stenographic reports of the trial at Versailles. And it must not be forgotten that before destiny had brought Larsen-Ballmeyer and Joseph Rouletabille into contact the elegantly mannered bandit had given considerable trouble to the authorities. We have only to open the files of the Gazette des Tribunaux and to read the account of the day when Larsen was condemned by the court of assizes to ten years at hard labor to be assured on this score. Then one will refrain from smiling because Joseph Rouletabille placed a drawbridge between Larsen-Ballmeyer and Mathilde Darzac.

Ballmeyer did not become a criminal because driven to evil doing by poverty and misery. The son of a rich broker in the Rue Molay, he might have chosen any vocation, but his preferred calling was to lay hands upon the money of other people. He decided to become a swindler, just as another lad might have decided to become an engineer. His debut was a stroke of genius. Ballmeyer stole a letter addressed to his father containing a large sum of money. He took the train for Lyons and wrote his parent as follows:

"Monseigneur—I am an old soldier, retired and with a medal of honor. My son, a postoffice clerk, has stolen in the mails a letter addressed to you and containing money to pay a gambling debt. I have called the members of the family together in a few days we shall be able to raise the sum necessary to repay you. You are a father. Have pity upon a father. Do not bring me down in sorrow and shame to my grave."

M. Ballmeyer willingly granted the petition. He is still waiting for his first remittance, or, rather, he has ceased to expect it, for the law apprehended him ten years ago of the identity of the culprit.

While he was doing military duty Ballmeyer stole his companion's box and accused the captain. He committed a theft of 40,000 francs from the Maison Furet and immediately afterward denounced M. Furet as having stolen it himself.

Ballmeyer appropriated a draft for 5,000 livres sterling from the messenger of Messrs. Furet Bros., who were notebrokers in the Rue Poissonniere and who allowed him desk room in their offices.

He went to the Rue Poissonniere, into the house of M. Furet and, imitating the voice of M. Edouard Furet, asked over the telephone of M. Cohen, a banker, whether he would be willing to discount the draft. M. Cohen replied in the affirmative, and ten minutes later Ballmeyer, after having cut the telephone wire to prevent further communication and possible explanations, sent for the money by a companion named Rigaud.

Ballmeyer kept the lion's share for himself. Then he rushed to the court to denounce Rigaud and, as I have said, M. Furet himself.

A dramatic scene took place when accuser and accused were confronted with each other in the cabinet of M. Esquierre, the judge.

"You know, my dear Furet," said Ballmeyer to the amazed broker, "you must tell the justice the truth. You need not fear serious consequences. Why not confess? You needed 40,000 francs to pay a little debt incurred at the race track, and you intended to pay back the sum. It was you who telephoned?"

"I?" stammered M. Edouard Furet, almost breathless with rage and astonishment.

"You may as well confess," said Ballmeyer. "No one could mistake your voice."

The bold thief was detected within eight days and was caught, and the police furnished such a report upon him that M. Cruppi, then attorney general, now minister of commerce, presented to M. Furet the most humili-

ble excuses of the department of justice. Rigaud was also tried and condemned to twenty years at hard labor. One might go on relating this kind of stories about Ballmeyer indefinitely. Known at various times as the count de Morteville, Comte de Bonneville, etc., he frequented the summer resorts and watering places—Blarritz, Aix-les-Bains, Luchon, losing in play at the club as much as 10,000 francs in one evening. In his regiment he had made a conquest—happily platonic—of the colonel's daughter. Do you know the type now?

Well, it was with this man that Joseph Rouletabille was going to fight. I thought that morning that I had sufficiently informed Mme. Edith in regard to the personality of the bandit. The night passed without any event. When the day dawned I saluted it with a deep sigh of relief. Rouletabille was already in the midst of the workmen, laboring actively in repairing the breaches of the tower. The work was done so expeditiously and so promptly that the strong Chateau of Hercules was soon sealed as hermetically close as it was possible for a building to be. Seated on a big boulder in the bright sunlight, Rouletabille began to draw upon his notebook the plan which I have submitted to the reader, and he said:

"You see, these people believe that I am fortifying the place to defend myself. Well, that is merely a small part of the truth, for I am fortifying the place because reason bids me do so in order that Larsen cannot get in."

When I heard a knock at my door about 11 o'clock in the morning and the voice of Mere Bernier told me



"HERE IT IS, IT IS OLD BOB'S SKULL. LOOK AT IT!"

that Rouletabille wanted me to get up I threw my window wide open and looked out in delight.

Never had nature appeared to me more sweet. The serene air, the beautiful shore, the balmy sea, the purple mountains, all this picture to which my northern senses were so little accustomed, evoked in my mind the thought of some tender, caressing human being. As these thoughts passed through my mind I noticed a man who was washing the sea. I could not understand what had excited his wrath in this tranquil spot, but he evidently felt that he had some serious cause for vexation, for he never ceased his blows.

At this point I was interrupted by the voice of Rouletabille, who told me that breakfast was nearly ready. Rouletabille appeared in the garb of a plasterer, his clothing showing fresh mortar. I asked him whether he had seen the man who was beating the water, and he told me that it was Tullio who was frightening the fishes to drive them into his nets. It was for this reason, I realized, that Tullio had obtained the nickname of the "hangman of the sea."

Rouletabille went on to tell me that he had asked Tullio that morning about the stranger whom he had rowed about in his boat the night before. Tullio had replied that he had no knowledge whatever of whom the man might be; that he was a crazy sort of fellow whom he had taken in as a passenger at Mentone.

I dressed myself quickly and joined Rouletabille, who told me that we were to have a new guest at luncheon in the person of Old Bob.

Old Bob made his appearance. And let me say it; let me say it here—it was not this apparition which could have turned our thoughts toward anything dark or gloomy. I have rarely seen anything more droll than Old Bob walking in the blinding sun of the springtime in the midst, with a tall hat of black beaver, his black trousers, his black spectacles, his white hair and his rosy cheeks. Yes, yes, we sat there and laughed in the Tower of Charles the Bold. And Old Bob laughed with us, for Old Bob was as gay as a child.

What was this old savant doing at the Castle of Hercules? Why did he quit his work and precious collection in Philadelphia?

At the time of his infatuation for the daughter of M. Stangeron, Arthur Rance was regarded by American scientists as the rising anthropologist. His subsequent marriage to Edith Prescott revived his enthusiasm for research, which she shared. When they visited the region of Rochers Rouges the leading scientists of France were moving the government to promote

their work, which was yielding great results. Discoveries in the private grounds of M. Abbo, owner of the restaurant of the Grotto of Barua Grande, proved that primeval man had lived there before the glacial epoch, 200,000 years ago.

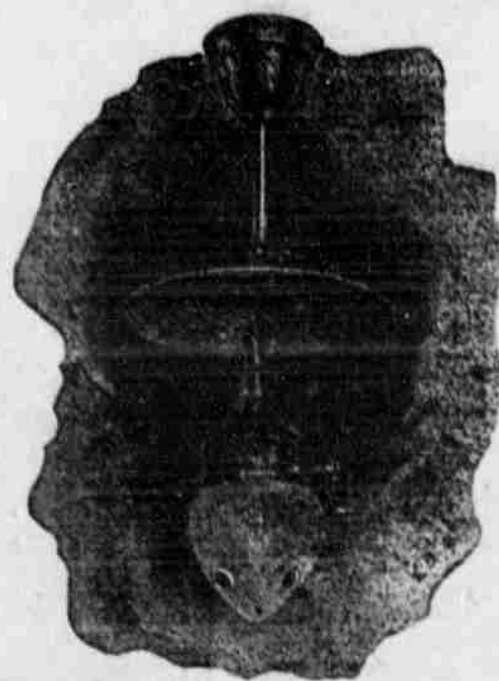
The Rances eagerly entered into these antiquarian researches. Mrs. Rance, being of a romantic turn, took a violent fancy to the ruined castle and persuaded her husband to buy it. While it was being made habitable Rance telegraphed and wrote to her uncle, Old Bob, who was then bone digging in Patagonia. These messages never reached him, for Old Bob, who had previously promised to join his nephew and niece after they had been married for awhile, had already taken the steamer for Europe. Evidently report had already brought to him the story of the treasures of the Rochers Rouges. A few days after the cable had been dispatched he landed at Marseilles and arrived at Mentone, where he became the companion of Arthur Rance and his wife in the Chateau of Hercules, which his very presence seemed to fill with life and gaiety.

The gaiety of Old Bob appeared to us a little theatrical, but that feeling arose without doubt from the effects of our apprehensions of the evening before. The Old Bob had the soul of a child. He was as much of a coquette as an old woman.

Mrs. Rance presented him to us, and he uttered a few polite phrases, after which he opened his wide mouth in a great hearty laugh. He was jubilant, and we were soon to learn the reason why. He had brought back from his visit to the Museum of Paris the certainty that the skeleton of the Barua

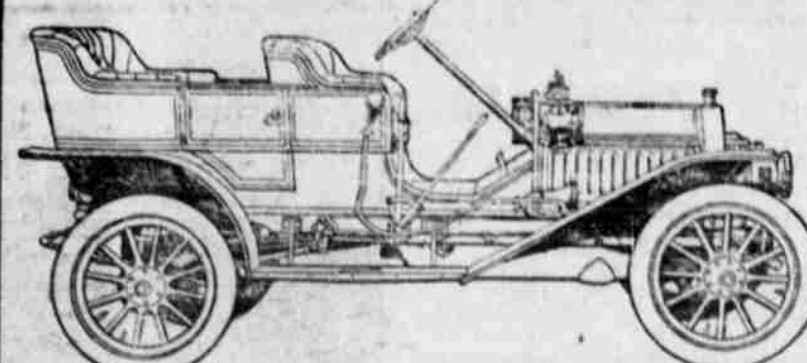
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