

## THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

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

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### CHAPTER IX.

#### The Creepy Luncheon and Invisible Guest.

THE day almost from the rising of the sun was intolerably hot, and the hours on guard were almost overpowering. At 10 o'clock I came down from my room and went to the postern and entered the room which we had styled "the hall of council" to relieve Rouletabille of his guard. Darzac appeared, announcing that he had something important to communicate. He said that he intended to quit the Fort of Hercules at once, taking his wife with him. This declaration left Rouletabille and myself dumb with surprise. Mme. Edith had had a nervous attack. We understood the reason at once, for there was no doubt in the mind of either Rouletabille or myself that Mrs. Rance's jealousy of Mme. Darzac was increasing every hour and that each act of courtesy performed by the husband toward the former object of his admiration was positively insupportable to his wife.

Rouletabille implored Darzac to endure the situation. He assured him that he agreed with his feeling that the stay of himself and Mme. Darzac must be made brief, but that the security of both depended on their remaining in their present quarters for the time being. If they were to go away Larsan would know on the moment how to overtake them and when they expected him, the least. Here they were forewarned, they were upon their guard, for they knew. Elsewhere they would be at the mercy of every person that surrounded them, for they would not have the Fort of Hercules to defend them. Certainly this situation could not endure very long, but Rouletabille asked M. Darzac to wait eight days longer, not a single one more.

Darzac left us, shaking his head doubtfully. He was angrier than we had ever seen him. Rouletabille remarked:

"Mme. Darzac will not leave us, and M. Darzac will stay if she does." And he started off on his rounds.

A few moments later I caught sight of Mme. Edith. She smiled at me coquettishly, but her gaze seemed a little forced as she jested at my "new trade." I answered her that she was uncharitable in her jests because she knew that all the trouble we were taking might be the means at any moment of saving the sweetest of women from untold misery.

She cried with a sharp laugh: "Oh, surely! 'The Lady in Black' She has you all under her spell."

"Perhaps there is a little truth in that speech," I returned.

"My husband is crazy about her!"

And she turned upon me that same curious look which had disturbed me before.

"And therefore," she continued, "I take very great pleasure in the conversation of Prince Gallitch, who is more romantic than all the rest of you put together."

I asked her who was this Prince Gallitch of whom I had heard so much. She told me that he was coming to luncheon, and she gave me a few particulars in regard to him from which I learned that Prince Gallitch was one of the richest landholders in his own part of Russia.

He was called a hermit, a miser and a poet. He had inherited from his father a high position at court. He was a chamberlain to his majesty, and on account of the immense services rendered by the parent the emperor was supposed to regard the son with a great deal of affection.

I cannot tell why, but I felt a singular antipathy for the prince without ever having set eyes on him.

His relations with the Rances were those of friendly neighborliness. Having purchased two years before the magnificent property whose hanging gardens, bowery terraces and beautiful balconies had made it known as "Gardens of Babylon," he had had the opportunity to be of assistance to Edith when she had begun to make the outer court of the Chateau of Hercules into an exotic garden. He had presented her with certain tropical plants. M. Rance sometimes invited the prince to dinner, and always after one of these functions the prince would send to his hostess a wonderful palm tree from Nineveh or a cactus fabled to have belonged to Semiramis. Edith said that she was interested in the young Russian because he dedicated such beautiful verses to her. After he had repeated them in Russian he would translate them into English, and he had even composed them in English for her, and for her alone. Verses—the verses of a real poet—dedicated to Mme. Edith! The prince kept no carriage nor motorcar. He used the street cars and often did his own marketing, attended by his servant, Ivan, who carried a basket for the provisions. Strangely enough, this aversion did not seem in the least distant to Mme. Edith, who appeared to consider it a mark of originality. And she finished by saying: "No one has ever set foot within its doors. He has never even invited us to come and see his gardens. Isn't it

beautifully fascinating?"

Mme. Edith turned away, and I finished my guard duty.

The first stroke of the luncheon bell sounded. I hurried to my room to make a hasty toilet, but I paused in the vestibule, amazed to hear the sound of music. Who, under the present circumstances, cared or dared to play a piano in the Fort of Hercules? And, hark! Some one was singing. It was a voice at once soft and sonorous singing a strange song which sounded now plaintive, now threatening.

I opened the door and found myself face to face with a young man who was standing. I heard the footsteps of Mme. Rance behind me, and the next moment she was introducing me to Prince Gallitch.

The prince was of the type that one reads of in romances—"a handsome, sensitive young man." His clear-cut and rather stern profile might have given a somewhat severe expression to his face if his eyes, as mild and clear as those of a child and with an expression of perfect candor, had not told an altogether different story.

I could find nothing to say to this beautiful youth who chanted foreign poems. Mme. Edith took my arm and led me away to walk in the perfumed gardens of the outer court while we waited for the second bell for luncheon.

At noon we seated ourselves at the table. Those of us at the table, all wearing smoked glasses on account of the sun's glare, were M. Stangerson, Mathilde, Old Bob, Darzac, Arthur Rance, Edith, Rouletabille, Prince Gallitch and myself. Rouletabille had placed himself in such a position that he could observe everything along the entire length of the fort. The servants were at their posts. Pere Jacques was at

"Well, what do you say to that, M. Rouletabille?" demanded the prince.

"I shall not go to St. Petersburg," declared Rouletabille.

"They will regret your decision at the court," said the prince. "I am certain of that, and allow me to say, young man, that you are missing a wonderful opportunity."

Rouletabille opened his lips as though to answer, but closed them again. Gallitch went on:

"You would have found an adventure worthy of your skill. One may hope for everything when one has been strong enough to unmask a Larsan!"

The word fell into the midst of us like a bombshell, and as if by a common impulse, we took refuge behind our smoked glasses. The silence which followed was horrible. Larsan! Why should this name which we ourselves had so often pronounced within the last forty-eight hours and which represented a danger with which we were commencing to almost feel familiar

cause indefinable terror to creep through our bodies? The unbroken silence on every hand contributed to increase an indescribable state of hypnosis. Where had Old Bob's gaiety vanished? And why did all the others sit so silent and so motionless behind their dark glasses? As at once I turned my head and looked behind me. Then I understood, more by instinct than anything else, that I was the object of a common psychical attraction. Some one was looking at me. Two eyes were fixed upon me—weighing upon me.

I could not see the eyes, and I did not know from where the glance fixed upon me came, but it was there. I knew it—and it was his glance. But there was no one behind me, nor at



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the entrance gate, Matron at the postern of the garden and the Berniers in the square tower before the door of the apartments occupied by the Darzacs.

Prince Gallitch was the first to make a remark. He spoke politely to Rouletabille, mentioning the fame which the young reporter had won. This appeared to embarrass him, and he made a confused reply. The prince went on to explain that he was particularly interested in the exploits of my friend for the reason that as a subject of the czar he knew that Rouletabille would shortly be sent to Russia. But the reporter replied that nothing had yet been decided, whereupon the prince astonished us by drawing from his pocket a journal of his own country announcing the fact that Rouletabille was soon to be in St. Petersburg.

There was occurring in that city, the prince read, a series of events so inexplicable in governmental circles that the superintendent of police had decided to ask the Epoch to lend him the young reporter. Rouletabille replied dryly that he had never in the course of his short life done detective work and that the superintendent of police at St. Petersburg was an idiot.

Mme. Edith arose from her chair, speaking ecstatically of the beauty of nature. But, in her opinion, she declared, there was nothing more beautiful anywhere near than the Gardens of Babylon. She added mischievously, "They seem so much more beautiful because one may only see them from a distance!"

The prince said nothing. Mme. Edith looked vexed and a moment later said suddenly:

"I'm not going to deceive you any longer, prince. I have seen your gardens."

"Indeed!" inquired Gallitch. "I'll tell you all about it."

And she related, while the prince listened with an air of cold imperturbability, the story of her visit to the Gardens of Babylon.

She had come upon them inadvertently from the rear in climbing over a hillock which separated the gardens from the mountains. She had wandered from enchantment to enchantment, but without being in the least astonished.

The prince had scarcely time to reply before Walter, Old Bob's servant, brought a dispatch to Rouletabille. The latter asked permission to open it and read aloud:

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This dispatch was signed by the editor in chief of the Epoch.

the right, nor the left, nor in front, except the people who were seated at the table, motionless, behind their dark glasses. And then—then I knew that Larsan's eyes were glaring at me from behind a pair of those glasses—ah, the dark glasses—the dark glasses behind which were hidden Larsan's eyes!

And then, all at once, the sensation passed. The eyes doubtless were turned away from me. I drew a long breath. Another sigh echoed my own. Was it from the breast of Rouletabille—was it the Lady in Black, who perhaps, had at the same time as myself endured the weight of those piercing eyes?

Old Bob spoke: "Prince, I do not believe that your last spinal bone goes any further back than the middle of the quaternary period."

And all the black spectacles turned in his direction.

Rouletabille arose and made a sign to me. I hastened to the council room, where he was waiting for me.

"Well, did you feel it too?" I felt smothered. I could scarcely articulate.

"He was there—at that table—unless we are going mad."

There was a pause, and then I resumed more calmly:

"You know, Rouletabille, that it is quite possible that we are going mad. This phantasm of Larsan will lead us all in a madhouse yet! We have been shut up here only two days, and see the state we are in!"

All in a moment he seemed to grow perfectly calm.

"Let us reason it out. Do not look for Larsan in that place where he reveals himself. Seek for him every-where else except where he hides himself."

He seated himself, placed his pipe on the table, buried his face in his hands and said:

"Now I have no eyes. Tell me, Sinclair—who is within these walls?" "There is, first of all, you and I." "Very well."

"Neither of us," I continued, "is Larsan."

"Why?"

"Why?" I echoed.

"Yes, why. Tell me. You must give a reason why you believe so. I acknowledge that I am not Larsan. I am sure of that, for I am Rouletabille; but, face to face with Rouletabille, tell me why you cannot be Larsan—neither you, nor Stangerson, nor M. Darzac, nor Arthur Rance, nor Old Bob, nor Prince Gallitch. But we must know some good reason why each of these

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cannot be Larsan. Only when that is accomplished shall I be able to breathe freely behind these stone walls!"

"How about the servants?" I asked. "I am absolutely certain that none of them was absent from the Fort of Hercules when Larsan appeared to Mme. Darzac and to M. Darzac at the railway station at Bourg."

"Own up, Rouletabille," I cried, "that you don't trouble yourself about them because none of their eyes were behind the black spectacles."

"Be quiet, please. You make me more nervous than my mother."

This phrase, uttered in vexation, struck me strangely. He resumed meditatively:

"First, Sinclair is not Larsan because Sinclair was at Trepot with me while Larsan was at Bourg."

"Second, Professor Stangerson is not Larsan because he was on his way from Dijon to Lyons while Larsan was at Bourg. As a fact, reaching Lyons one minute before him, M. and Mme. Darzac saw him alight from the train."

"But all the others, if it is necessary to prove that they were not at Bourg at that moment, might be Larsan, for all of them might have been at Bourg."

"First, M. Darzac was there. Arthur Rance was away from home during the two days which preceded the arrival of the professor and of Darzac. He arrived at Mentone just in time to receive them (Mme. Edith herself informed me in reply to a few careless questions of mine that her husband had been absent those two days on business. Old Bob made his journey to Paris. Prince Gallitch was not seen at the grottoes nor outside the Gardens of Babylon."

"First, let us take Darzac." "Rouletabille," I cried, "that is sacrilege! It is stupid!"

"I know it! But why?" "Because," I exclaimed, almost beside myself, "Larsan is a genius, we are aware; he might be able to deceive a detective, a journalist, a reporter, and even a Rouletabille; he might even deceive a friend under some circumstances, I admit. But he could never deceive a daughter so far that she would take him for her father. That ought to reassure you as to M. Stangerson. Nor would he deceive a woman to the point of taking him for her betrothed. And, my friend, Mathilde Stangerson knew M. Darzac and threw herself into his arms at the railway station."

"And she knew Larsan, too," added Rouletabille coldly.

"I prefer rather to bestow, for the position, a personality on Larsan which I have never

expected to fasten upon him in order to base my argument against the possibility a little more solidly. If Robert Darzac were Larsan, Larsan would not have appeared on several occasions to Mathilde Stangerson, for it is the apparition of Larsan that has created a gulf between Mathilde Stangerson and Robert Darzac."

"Fahaw!" I cried. "Of what use are such vain reasonings when one has only to open his eyes?"

"Upon whom?" he asked bitterly. "Prince Gallitch—the prince from the Black Lands."

"Prince Gallitch is a nihilist, and I am not troubled over him in the least degree. Bernier's wife told me she knows one of three old women whom Mme. Edith saw in his grounds. I have made an investigation. She is the mother of one of the three men hanged at Kazan for the attempted assassination of the emperor. I have seen the photograph of the poor wretches. The other two old women are the other two mothers."

"And Old Bob?" I asked. "No, dear boy, no!" scoffed Rouletabille, almost angrily. "Not he either. You have noticed that he wears a wig, I suppose. Well, I assure you that when my father wears a wig it will fit him."

(To be continued.)

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