

THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK

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

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CHAPTER XVIII.

Larsen is Now Among Us!

WHAT was Rance talking about—the "little ruby headed pin"? I remembered that Mme. Edith had told us that Old Bob had snatched one from her hand when she had playfully pricked him with it on the night of the drama of the square tower. But what relation could there be between this pin and the adventure of Old Bob? Rance did not wait for us to ask him, but hurried on to tell us that this little pin had disappeared at the same time as Old Bob and that he had found it in the possession of "the hangman of the sea," fastening a sheaf of bank notes which the old uncle had paid him on that fated night for his complicity and his silence in having brought him in the fisher boat to the grove of Romeo and Juliet, and Rance told us, moreover, that Tullio had withdrawn from the spot at dawn, greatly displeased at the non-appearance of his passenger. Rance concluded triumphantly:

"A man who bears a ruby pin to another man in a boat cannot be at the same moment tied up in a potato sack in the square tower."
Upon which Mrs. Rance inquired: "What gave you the idea of going to San Remo? Did you know that Tullio was to be found there?"

"I received an anonymous letter informing me of his whereabouts."
"It was I who sent it to you," said Roulettable tranquilly, and then, turning to the rest of us, he said in frigid tones:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I congratulate myself upon the prompt return of M. Arthur Rance. At the present moment there are five members of the house party of the Chateau of Hercules for whom my corporeal demonstration of the possibility of the 'body too many' may have some interest. I entreat you to give me your undivided attention."

But Arthur Rance halted him with a quick movement.

"What do you mean by that?" "I mean," declared Roulettable, "all those among whom we may hope to find Larsen."

The Lady in Black, who had up to this time not uttered a word, arose trembling to her feet.

"Do you mean," she breathed, her eyes filled with agonized apprehension, "that Larsen is here among us?"

"I am sure of it," Roulettable replied gravely.

There was an awful silence, during which none of us dared look at each other.

"I am sure of it, and there is no reason why the idea should surprise you, madame, since it has not for a moment left your own mind. As to the rest of us, it is not true, gentlemen, that the idea has occurred to each one of us at the same moment on the day when we took luncheon on the Terrace of the Bold when all our eyes were hidden by the black glasses? If I except Mrs. Rance, who is there among us that did not feel the presence of Larsen at that time?"

"That is a question which ought to be propounded to Professor Stangeron as well as to the rest of us," interposed Arthur Rance instantly, "for from the moment when we began any course of reasoning along these lines I can see no object in not having the professor, who was at the table at luncheon with us on that day, here at this time also."

"Mr. Rance!" cried the Lady in Black.

"Yes, I must repeat it, if you will pardon me," replied Edith's husband laughingly. "M. Roulettable was wrong to generalize when he said, 'All the members of the house party.'"

"Professor Stangeron is so far from us in spirit that I have no need of his presence here. Although Professor Stangeron had lived with us in the chateau, he was not one of us in regard to feeling the presence of Larsen on that day. And Larsen is here among us."

But I launched out, and forgetting that I had promised Mme. Edith to defend Old Bob, I started in to attack him for the pleasure of proving Roulettable in the wrong, and, besides, I felt Edith would not bear rancor against me for very long.

"Old Bob," I began, "was also at that luncheon on the terrace, and you take him entirely out of your calculations on account of this little ruby pin. But of what use is this little pin to prove to us that Old Bob was rowed away by Tullio, who waited for him at the office of a gallery leading from the shaft to the sea, if we cannot discover how Old Bob could, as he said, have gone by way of the shaft, which we found closed from above and on the outside?"

"Which you found closed, you mean," returned Roulettable, fixing his eyes upon me with a strange expression, which somehow embarrassed me. "I, on the contrary, found the shaft open. But I had had time to run to the shaft and find out that it had been opened."

"And to close it again?" I cried. "And why did you close it? Whom did you wish to deceive?" "You, monsieur."

He pronounced these two words with a contempt so crushing that the blood rushed to my face. I arose. Every eye was turned upon me, and as I remembered the redness with which Roulettable had treated me a little while ago before Darzac I had the horrible feeling that every eye was suspecting me—accusing me. Yes; I felt myself entirely wrapped around by the atrocious fancy in the mind of each and all that I might be Larsen.

I looked at each one in turn. "Roulettable!" I cried madly, feeling my voice almost smothered in my throat. "You do not, you cannot suspect!"

At this moment a pistol shot sounded outside, very near to the square tower. We all leaped to our feet, remembering the order given by the reporter to the three servants to fire upon any one who should attempt to go out of the square tower. Edith uttered a cry and tried to run out of the room, but Roulettable, who had not made so much as a gesture, calmed her with a word.

"If any one had drawn upon him," he said, "the three men would have fired together. That pistol shot was merely a signal—a direction for me to begin."

Turning to me, he continued: "M. Sainclair, you ought to know that I never suspect any person or anything without previously having satisfied myself upon the ground of pure reason." Larsen is here among us, and the power of pure reason is going to show him to you. So be seated again, if you please, and do not take your eyes from me, for I am going to begin on this paper the corporeal demonstration of the possibility of the 'body too many.'"

First of all, he investigated to make sure that the bolts of the door behind him were closely drawn; then, returning to the table, he took up a compass.

"I have the intention of making my demonstration," he said, "along the same lines on which the 'body too many' has produced itself. It will be thereby only the more irrefragable."

And with his compass he took upon M. Darzac's drawing the measure of the radius of the circle which represented the space occupied by the lower of the Bold, so that he was immediately afterward able to trace the same circle upon a piece of white paper which he had fastened with copper-headed nails to another drawing board.

When the circle was traced Roulettable, putting down his compass, picked up the tiny dish of red paint and asked M. Darzac whether he recognized it as the coloring matter he had used. M. Darzac replied that, to the best of his belief, it was the same paint which he had mixed for his wash drawing.

A good half of the paint had dried up in the bottom of the dish; but, according to the opinion expressed by M. Darzac, the part which remained would upon paper give nearly the same tint with which he had "washed" the drawing of the peninsula of Hercules.

"No one has touched it," said Roulettable very gravely; "and nothing has been added to it save a single tear. Besides, you will see that a tear more or less in the paint cup would detract nothing from the value of my demonstration."

Thus saying, he dipped the brush in the paint and began carefully to "wash" all the space occupied by the circle which he had previously traced.

When he had finished he looked at his watch and said:

"You may see, ladies and gentlemen, that the coating of paint which covers my circle is neither more nor less thick than that which covers the circle of M. Darzac. It is almost the same thing—the same tint."

"Undoubtedly," rejoined M. Darzac. "But what does all this signify? I was certainly in enough of an ill humor when I found the state it was in Old Bob had ruined my drawing by letting his skull roll over it."

"We are there!" spoke up Roulettable quick as a flash. And he lifted from the bureau the "oldest skull of the human race." He turned it over and showed the crimsoned jaws to Darzac.

Then he arose, holding the skull in the crook of his arm, and went into the alcove in the wall, lighted by a large window and crossed by bars, which had been a loophole for cannon in the ancient times and which M. Darzac had used as a dressing room. There he struck a match and lighted a lamp filled with spirits of wine which stood upon a little table. Upon this lamp he set a little pot which he had previously filled with water. The skull still lay in the crook of his arm.

CHAPTER XIX.

Two Robert Darzacs.

HE more he explained the less we understood. But now—what was this dread feeling, which came over us? Why did we all suddenly recollect with a single movement? Why were the eyes of M. Darzac wide with a new terror? Why did the Lady in Black—Arthur Rance—I myself—utter the same syllable, a name which expired on our lips—"Larsen?"

Where had we seen him? Where had we discovered him this time, who were gazing at Roulettable? Ah, that profile in the red shadow of the approaching twilight, that brow in the background of the alcove upon which the sunset rays stream as did the dawn on the morning of the crime. Oh, that stern jaw, bespeaking an iron will, which appeared before us, not as in the light of day, gentle though a little bitter, but evil and threatening! How like Roulettable

was to Larsen! How in that moment the son resembled his father! It was Larsen's very self!

Another transformation. At a moan from his mother Roulettable came out of his innermost frame and appeared before us as a bandit, and as he hurried toward us he was Roulettable once more. Mme. Edith, who had never seen Larsen, could not understand. She whispered to me, "What is going on?"

Roulettable was there before us, with his hot water in the casserole, a napkin and his skull. And he washed the skull. It was soon done. The paint disappeared. He made us bear witness to the fact. He stood in mute contemplation before his own drawing for ten minutes, during which he had by a sign ordered us to keep silence. Suddenly he seized the skull in his right hand and tossed it about so that it rolled over the drawing. Then he showed us the skull and bade us notice that it bore no trace of red paint. Roulettable drew out his watch again.

"The paint has dried upon the plan," he said. "It has taken a quarter of an hour to dry. Upon the 11th of April we saw at 5 o'clock in the afternoon Darzac entering the square tower and coming from out of doors. But Darzac after having entered the square tower and after having fastened behind him the bolts of his door, as he tells us, had not gone out again until we came to fetch him after 6 o'clock. As to Old Bob, we had seen him enter the square tower at 6 o'clock, and there was no paint on this skull then."

"How was this paint, which has taken only a quarter of an hour to dry upon this plan, fresh enough still—more than an hour after Darzac had left it—to stain Old Bob's skull when the servant, with a movement of anger, threw it down on the plan as he entered the round tower? There is only one explanation of this, and I defy you to find another, and that is that the Robert Darzac who entered the square tower at 5 o'clock and whom no one had seen going out again was not the same as the one who came to paint in the round tower before the arrival of Old Bob at 6 o'clock and whom we found in the room in the square tower without having seen him enter there and with whom we went out. In one word, he was not the same man as the M. Darzac here presently before us. The testimony of pure reason shows that there are two personalities appearing in the guise of Robert Darzac."

And Roulettable turned his eyes full upon the man whose name he had uttered.

Darzac, like all the rest of us, was under the spell of the luminous denunciation of the young reporter. We were all divided between a new horror and a boundless admiration. Here again we found the mark of his prodigious and logical mathematical intelligence.

Darzac cried out:

"It was thus, then, that he was able to enter the square tower under a disguise which made him without doubt any very image. It was thus that he was able to hide behind the panel I such a way that I did not see him myself when I came here to write my letters after quitting the tower of the Bold, where I left my drawing. How could Pere Bernier have opened to him?"

"Doubtless," replied Roulettable, who had taken the hand of the Lady in Black in both his own as though he wished to give her courage, "he must have believed that it was yourself."

"That, then, explains the fact that when I reached my door I had only to push it open. Pere Bernier believed that I was within."

"Exactly. That is good reasoning," declared Roulettable, "and Pere Bernier, who had opened to Darzac No. 2, had not troubled himself about No. 2 since he did not see him, any more than yourself. You certainly reached the square tower at the moment that Sainclair and myself called Bernier to the parapet to see whether he could help us in understanding the strange gesticulations of Old Bob, talking at the threshold of the Barma Grande to Mrs. Rance and Prince Galtib'h."

"But Mere Bernier!" cried M. Darzac. "She had gone into her lodge. Was she not astonished to see M. Darzac come in a second time when she had not seen him go out?"

"Let us suppose," replied the young reporter, with a sad smile, "let us suppose, M. Darzac, that Mere Bernier at that moment, the moment when you passed into your apartments—that is to say, when the second apparition of Darzac passed in—was occupied in picking up some of the potatoes spilled upon the floor, and we shall suppose the truth."

"Well, then, I can congratulate myself on the fact that I am still upon earth."

"Congratulations yourself, M. Darzac! Congratulations yourself!"

"When I remember that as soon as I entered my room I drew the bolts as I have told you that I did, that I began to work and that this wretch was hidden behind my back. Why, he might have killed me without hindrance!"

Roulettable stepped close to Darzac and fixed his eyes upon him with a look that seemed to read his soul. "Why did he not kill you, then?" he asked.

"You know very well that he was waiting for some one else," replied Darzac, turning his face sorrowfully toward the Lady in Black.

Roulettable was now so close to Darzac that their shadows on the floor looked like that of one strangely formed being. The lad put his two hands on the older man's shoulders.

"M. Darzac," he said, his voice again clear and strong, "I have a confession to make to you. When I began to understand how the 'body too many' had effected an entrance and when I had discovered that you did nothing to deceive us in regard to the hour of 5

o'clock, at which we had believed—at which every one, rather, except my self believed—that you had entered the square tower, I felt that I had the right to suspect that the murderer was not the man who at 5 o'clock entered the square tower under the form of Darzac. I thought, on the contrary, that Darzac might be the true Darzac and you might be the false one. Ah, my dear Darzac, how I have suspected you!"

"That was madness," cried Darzac. "If I did not tell you the exact hour at which I entered the square tower it was because the time was somewhat vague in my own mind and I did not attach any importance to it."

"In such a manner, M. Darzac," continued Roulettable without paying any attention to the interruptions of his interlocutor, the emotion of the Lady in Black and our attitude, more than ever filled with terror—"in such a manner as that you could have stolen away the true Darzac when he came from outside and by your own carefulness and the too faithful help of the Lady in Black could have taken his place and have been perfectly able to defy detection of your audacious enterprise. This was my imagination—only my imagination, Darzac. Don't let it disturb you. But in such a manner as this I had thought that, you being Larsen, the man who was put in the sack was Darzac. Ah, the fancies that I have had and the useless suspicions!"

"Bah!" responded Mathilde's husband gloomily. "We are all suspicious here!"

Roulettable began speaking again. "You see, Darzac, there are two manifestations of Robert Darzac. To know which was the true one and which was the one which formed a disguise for Larsen my duty, Darzac—that which the power of pure reason showed me—was to examine without fear or reproach both of these manifestations in all impartiality. Thus I begin with you—Darzac."

Darzac replied:

"It does not matter since you suspect me no longer. But you must tell me immediately who is Larsen. I insist upon it—I demand it!"

"We all demand it—and at once!" we all cried, turning upon both of them. Mathilde rushed up to her child and placed herself in front of him as if to protect him. We felt the pathos of her attitude, but the scene had endured too long, and we were beyond the limits of patience.

"If he knows who is Larsen let him speak out and make an end of this!" exclaimed Arthur Rance.

And suddenly, just as the thought crossed my mind that I had heard the same cries of anger and impatience two years before at the court of assizes, another pistol shot sounded outside the door of the square tower, and we were all so seized with consternation that our anger fell away in a moment and we found ourselves not threatening Roulettable, but entreating him to put an end as soon as possible to this intolerable situation.

As soon as the second shot was heard the countenance of Roulettable changed completely. His face seemed transformed, and his whole being appeared to vibrate with a savage energy.

Laying aside the half bantering manner which he had used toward M. Darzac and which we had all found extremely disagreeable, he gently released himself from the clasp of the Lady in Black, who still clung to him, walked toward the door, folded his arms and said:

"You see, my friends, in an affair like this it does not do to neglect any point. There were two manifestations of Robert Darzac which entered the square tower. There were two manifestations which came out, and one of these was in the sack! That is where one loses oneself. And even now I do not wish to make any mistakes. Will Darzac, here present, permit me to say that I had a hundred excuses for suspecting him?"

Then I thought to myself: "How unlikely that he did not mention his suspicions to me! I would have told him about the map of Australia."

Darzac strode across the room and planted himself in front of the young reporter and said in a tone nearly inaudible from anger:

"What excuses? I ask you what excuses?"

"You will soon understand, my friend," said the reporter, with the utmost calmness. "The first thing that I said to myself while I was examining the conditions surrounding your manifestation of Larsen was this: 'Nonsense! If he were Larsen, would not Professor Stangeron's daughter have perceived it? That is self-evident, the common sense of that thought, is it not? But when I tried to look into the mind of the lady who has become Mme. Darzac I discovered beyond a doubt, monsieur, that all the while she could not free herself from just this fear—the fear that you might be Larsen!'"

Mathilde, who had fallen half fainting into a chair, gathered strength enough to start up and to protest against the words with a frightened, despairing gesture.

As for M. Darzac, his face was a picture of hopeless anguish.

(To be continued.)

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