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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 Roulettable, the sensational solver of mysteries, the narrative also presents several character studies of engrossing interest—Roulettable, the bewildering hero of "The Mystery of the Yellow Room," who is here confronted by the nerve racking mystery of "the body too many," Larsen, 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 Mlle. Mathilde Stangerson took place in Paris at the Church of St. Nicholas du Chardonnet on April 6, 1886, 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 Roulettable. 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 undertones 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 Larsen 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 east up to the beach hundreds of corpses, and among these they found Larsen.

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 Roulettable, who was the only one to discover that Frederic Larsen, 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 Mlle. Stangerson. But why are you constantly looking around you? Do you expect any one?"

"Yes, I expect Frederic Larsen." 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 Larsen 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 Larsen.

"Here comes Roulettable," 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 we knew like a child and prayed. His fervent devotion astonished me. 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 surter 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 radiant and most charming smile, playing on her curved lips, bidding in her eyes, filled with pensive happiness and leaving its impress on her forehead.

But what I shall always remember is 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 Roulettable 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 tried 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 solace—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

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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 physicians 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 Roulettable 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. Roulettable 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 Roulettable. But assuredly 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 Roulettable. 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 Roulettable. We were all so grieved and moreover so surprised, that we remained on the platform, looking at Mlle. 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 out 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.

Roulettable's Revelation.

ROULETTABLE 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 her 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 short-hand reports of the trial, at which Roulettable appeared at the last moment like some hero of a miracle—she 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 of which the young man had kept silence with a sort of severe pride.

To be Continued.)

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