

The Mystery of The Yellow Room

By GASTON LEROUX

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I quietly made my way through the crowd and left the court almost at the same time as Roulettable. He greeted me heartily and looked happy.

"I'll not ask you, my dear fellow," I said, smiling, "what you've been doing in America, because I've no doubt you'll say you can't tell me until after half past 6."

"No, my dear Sainclair, I'll tell you right now why I went to America. I went in search of the name of the other half of the murderer."

"The name of the other half?" "Exactly! When we last left the Glandier I knew there were two halves to the murderer and the name of only one of them. I went to America for the name of the other half."

I was too puzzled to answer. Just then we entered the witness room, and Roulettable was immediately surrounded. He showed himself very friendly to all except Arthur Rance, to whom he exhibited a marked coldness of manner. Frederic Larsan came in also. Roulettable went up and shook him heartily by the hand. His manner toward the detective showed that he had got the better of the policeman. Larsan smiled and asked him what he had been doing in America. Roulettable began by telling him some anecdotes of his voyage. They then turned aside together, apparently with the object of speaking confidentially.

On the stroke of half past 6 Joseph Roulettable was again brought in. It is impossible for me to picture the tense excitement which appeared on every face as he made his way to the bar. Darzac rose to his feet, frightfully pale.

The president, addressing Roulettable, said gravely:

"I will not ask you to take the oath, because you have not been regularly summoned, but I trust there is no need to urge upon you the gravity of the statement you are about to make."

Roulettable looked the president quite calmly and steadily in the face and replied:

"Yes, monsieur."

"At your last appearance here," said the president, "we had arrived at the point where you were to tell us how the murderer escaped and also his name. Now, M. Roulettable, we wait your explanation."

"Very well, monsieur," began my friend amidst a profound silence. "I had explained how it was impossible for the murderer to get away without being seen. And yet he was there with us in the court."

"And you did not see him? At least that is what the prosecution declares."

"No! We all of us saw him, M. le President," cried Roulettable.

"Then why was he not arrested?" "Because no one besides myself knew that he was the murderer. It would have spoiled my plans to have had him arrested, and I had then no proof other than my own reasoning. I was convinced we had the murderer before us and that we were actually looking at him. I have now brought what I consider the indisputable proof."

"Speak out, monsieur. Tell us the murderer's name."

"You will find it on the list of names present in the court on the night of the tragedy," replied Roulettable.

The people present in the courtroom began showing impatience. Some of them even called for the name and were silenced by the usher.

"The list includes Daddy Jacques, Bernier, the concierge, and Mr. Arthur Rance," said the president. "Do you accuse any of these?"

"No, monsieur."

"Then I do not understand what you are driving at. There was no other person at the end of the court."

"Yes, monsieur, there was, not at the end, but above the court, who was leaning out of the window."

"Do you mean Frederic Larsan?" exclaimed the president.

"Yes, Frederic Larsan!" replied Roulettable in a ringing tone. "Frederic Larsan is the murderer!"

The courtroom became immediately filled with loud and indignant protests. So astonished was he that the president did not attempt to quiet it. The quick silence which followed was broken by the distinctly whispered words from the lips of Robert Darzac:

"It's impossible! He's mad!"

"You dare to accuse Frederic Larsan, monsieur?" asked the president. "If you are not mad, what are your proofs?"

"Proofs, monsieur? Do you want proofs? Well, here is one," cried Roulettable shrilly. "Let Frederic Larsan be called!"

"Usher, call Frederic Larsan."

The usher hurried to the side door, opened it and disappeared. The door remained open, while all eyes turned expectantly toward it. The clerk appeared and, stepping forward, said:

"M. President, Frederic Larsan is not here. He left at about 4 o'clock and has not been seen since."

"That is my proof!" cried Roulettable triumphantly.

"Explain yourself," demanded the president.

"My proof is Larsan's flight," said the young reporter. "He will not return

back. You will see no more of Frederic Larsan."

"Unless you are playing with the court, monsieur, why did you not accuse him when he was present? He would then have answered you."

"He could give no other answer than the one he has now given by his flight."

"We cannot believe that Larsan has fled. There was no reason for his doing so. Did he know you'd make this charge?"

"He did. I told him I would."

"Do you mean to say that knowing Larsan was the murderer you gave him the opportunity to escape?"

"Yes, M. President, I did," replied Roulettable proudly. "I am not a policeman; I am a journalist, and my business is not to arrest people. My business is in the service of truth and is not that of an executioner. If you are just, monsieur, you will see that I am right. You can now understand why I refrained until this hour to divulge the name. I gave Larsan time to catch the 4:17 train for Paris, where he would know where to hide himself and leave no traces. You will not find Frederic Larsan," declared Roulettable, fixing his eyes on M. Robert Darzac. "He is too cunning. He is a man who has always escaped you and whom you have long searched for in vain. If he did not succeed in outwitting me he can yet easily outwit any police. This man, who four years ago introduced himself to the police and became celebrated as Frederic Larsan, is notorious under another name—a name well known to crime. Frederic Larsan, M. President, is Ballmeyer."

"Ballmeyer?" cried the president.

"Ballmeyer!" exclaimed Robert Darzac, springing to his feet. "Ballmeyer! It was true, then?"

"Ah, M. Darzac, you don't think I am mad now?" cried Roulettable.

"Ballmeyer! Ballmeyer! No other word could be heard in the courtroom. The president adjourned the hearing."

Those of my readers who may not have heard of Ballmeyer will wonder at the excitement the name caused. And yet the doings of this remarkable criminal form the subject matter of the most dramatic narratives of the newspapers and criminal records of the past twenty years. It had been reported that he was dead and thus had eluded the police as he had eluded them throughout the whole of his career.

Ballmeyer was the best specimen of the high class "gentleman swindler." He was an adept at sleight of hand tricks, and no bolder or more ruthless crook ever lived. He was received in the best society and was a member of some of the most exclusive clubs. On many of his deprecatory expeditions he had not hesitated to use the knife and the mutton bone. No difficulty stopped him, and no "operation" was too dangerous. He had been caught, but escaped on the very morning of his trial by throwing pepper into the eyes of the guards who were conducting him to court.

He left France later to "work" America. The police there succeeded in once capturing him, but the extraordinary man escaped the next day. It would need a volume to recount the adventures of this master criminal. And yet this was the man Roulettable had allowed to get away! Knowing all about him and who he was, he afforded the criminal an opportunity for another laugh at the society he had defied! I could not help admiring the bold stroke of the young journalist, because I felt certain his motive had been to protect both Mlle. Stangerson and rid Darzac of an enemy at the same time.

The crowd had barely recovered from the effect of the astonishing revelation when the hearing was resumed. The question in everybody's mind was, Admitting that Larsan was the murderer, how did he get out of the yellow room?"

Roulettable was immediately called to the bar and his examination continued.

"You have told us," said the president, "that it was impossible to escape from the end of the court. Since Larsan was leaning out of his window, he had left the court. How did he do that?"

"He escaped by a most unusual way. He climbed the wall, sprang on to the terrace and while we were engaged with the keeper's body reached the gallery by the window. He then had little else to do than to open the window, get in and call out to us, as if he had just come from his own room. To a man of Ballmeyer's strength all that was mere child's play. And here, monsieur, is the proof of what I say."

Roulettable drew from his pocket a small packet, from which he produced a strong iron peg.

"This, monsieur," he said, "is a spike which perfectly fits a hole still to be seen in the cornice supporting the terrace. Larsan, who thought and prepared for everything in case of any emergency, had fixed this spike into the cornice. All he had to do to make his escape good was to plant one foot on a stone which is placed at the corner of the chateau, another on this support, one hand on the cornice of the keeper's door and the other on the

terrace, and Larsan was clear of the ground. The rest was easy. His acting after dinner as if he had been drugged was made believe. He was not drugged. But he did drug me. Of course he had to make it appear as if he also had been drugged so that no suspicion should fall on him for my condition. Had I not been thus overpowered Larsan would never have entered Mlle. Stangerson's chamber that night and the attack on her would not have taken place."

A groan came from Darzac, who appeared to be unable to control his suffering.

"You can understand," added Roulettable, "that Larsan would feel himself hampered from the fact that my room was so close to his and from a suspicion that I would be on the watch that night. Naturally he could not for a moment believe that I suspected him. But I might see him leaving his room when he was about to go to Mlle. Stangerson. He waited till I was asleep and my friend Sainclair was busy trying to rouse me. Ten minutes after that mademoiselle was calling out 'Murder!'"

"How did you come to suspect Larsan?" asked the president.

"My pure reason pointed to him. That was why I watched him. But I did not foresee the drugging. He is very cunning. Yes, my pure reason pointed to him, but I required tangible proof so that my eyes could see him as my pure reason saw him. The day following the incident of the inexplicable gallery I felt myself losing control of it. I had allowed myself to be diverted by fallacious evidence, but I recovered and again took hold of the right end. I satisfied myself that the murderer could not have left the gallery, either naturally or supernaturally. I narrowed the field of consideration to that small circle, so to speak. The murderer could not be outside that circle. Now, who were in it? There was, first, the murderer. Then there were Daddy Jacques, M. Stangerson, Frederic Larsan and myself—five persons in all, counting in the murderer. And yet in the gallery there were but four. Now, since it had been demonstrated to me that the fifth could not have escaped, it was evident that one of the four present in the gallery must be a double—he must be himself and the murderer also. Why had I not seen this before? Simply because the phenomenon of the double personality had not occurred before in this inquiry."

"Now, who of the four persons in the gallery was both that person and the assassin? I went over in my mind what I had seen. I had seen at one and the same time M. Stangerson and the murderer, Daddy Jacques and the murderer, myself and the murderer, so that the murderer, then, could not be either M. Stangerson, Daddy Jacques or myself. Had I seen Frederic Larsan and the murderer at the same time? No. Two seconds had passed, during which I lost sight of the murderer, for, as I have noted in my papers, he arrived two seconds before M. Stangerson, Daddy Jacques and myself at the meeting point of the two galleries. That would have given Larsan time to go through the 'off turning' gallery, snatch off his false beard, return and hurry with us as if, like us, in pursuit of the murderer. I was sure now I had got hold of the right end in my reasoning. With Frederic Larsan was now always associated in my mind the personality of the unknown of whom I was in pursuit—the murderer, in other words."

"That revelation staggered me. I tried to regain my balance by going over the evidences previously traced, but which had diverted my mind and led me away from Frederic Larsan. What were these evidences?"

"First—I had seen the unknown in Mlle. Stangerson's chamber. On going to Frederic Larsan's room I had found Larsan sound asleep."

"Second.—The ladder."

"Third.—I had placed Frederic Larsan at the end of the 'off turning' gallery and had told him that I would rush into Mlle. Stangerson's room to try to capture the murderer. Then I returned to Mlle. Stangerson's chamber, where I had seen the unknown."

"The first evidence did not disturb me much. It is likely that when I descended from my ladder, after having seen the unknown in Mlle. Stangerson's chamber, Larsan had already finished what he was doing there. Then, while I was re-entering the chateau, Larsan went back to his own room and undressing himself, went to sleep."

"Nor did the second evidence trouble me. If Larsan were the murderer he could have no use for a ladder, but the ladder might have been placed there to give an appearance to the murderer's entrance from without the chateau, especially as Larsan had accused Darzac and Darzac was not in the chateau that night. Further, the ladder might have been placed there to facilitate Larsan's flight in case of absolute necessity."

"But the third evidence puzzled me altogether. Having placed Larsan at the end of the 'off turning' gallery, I could not explain how he had taken advantage of the moment when I had gone to the left wing of the chateau to

and M. Stangerson and Daddy Jacques

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to return to Mlle. Stangerson's room. It was a very dangerous thing to do. He risked being captured, and he knew it. And he was very nearly captured. He had not had time to regain his post, as he had certainly hoped to do. He had, then, a very strong reason for returning to his room. As for myself, when I sent Daddy Jacques to the end of the 'right' gallery I naturally thought that Larsan was still at his post. Daddy Jacques in going to his post had not looked when he passed to see whether Larsan was at his post or not.

"What, then, was the urgent reason which had compelled Larsan to go to the room a second time? I guessed it to be some evidence of his presence there. He had left something very important in that room. What was it? And had he recovered it? I begged Mlle. Bernier, who was accustomed to lead the room, to look, and she found a pair of eyeglasses—this pair, M. President!"

And Roulettable drew the eyeglasses, of which we know, from his pocket.

"When I saw these eyeglasses," he continued, "I was utterly nonplused. I had never seen Larsan wear eyeglasses. What did they mean? Suddenly I exclaimed to myself, 'I wonder if he is long sighted?' I had never seen Larsan write. He might then be long sighted. The police would certainly know and also know if the glasses were his. Such evidence would be damning. That explained Larsan's return. I know now that Larsan or Ballmeyer is long sighted and that these glasses belonged to him."

"I now made one mistake. I was not satisfied with the evidence I had obtained. I wished to see the man's face. Had I refrained from this the second terrible attack would not have occurred."

"But," asked the president, "why should Larsan go to Mlle. Stangerson's room at all? Why should he twice attempt to murder her?"

"Because he loves her, M. President."

"That is certainly a reason, but—"

"It is the only reason. He was madly in love, and because of that and other things he was capable of committing any crime."

"Did Mlle. Stangerson know this?"

"Yes, monsieur, but she was ignorant of the fact that the man who was pursuing her was Frederic Larsan; otherwise, of course, he would not have been allowed to be at the chateau. I noticed when he was in her room after the incident in the gallery that he kept himself in the shadow and that he kept his head bent down. He was looking for the lost eyeglasses. Mlle. Stangerson knew Larsan under another name."

"M. Darzac," asked the president, "did Mlle. Stangerson in any way confide in you on this matter? How is it that she has never spoken about it to any one? If you are innocent, she would have wished to spare you the pain of being accused."

"Mlle. Stangerson told me nothing," replied M. Darzac.

"Does what this young man says appear probable to you?" the president asked.

"Mlle. Stangerson has told me nothing," he replied stolidly.

"How do you explain that on the night of the murder of the keeper," the president asked, turning to Roulettable, "the murderer brought back the papers stolen from M. Stangerson? How do you explain how the murderer gained entrance into Mlle. Stangerson's locked room?"

"The last question is easily answered. A man like Larsan or Ballmeyer could have had made duplicate keys. As to the documents, I think Larsan had not intended to steal them at first. Closely watching mademoiselle with the purpose of preventing her marriage with M. Robert Darzac, he one day followed her and monsieur into the department store. There he got possession of the reticule which she lost or left behind. In that reticule was a key with a brass head. He did not know there was any value attached to the key till the advertisement in the newspapers revealed it. He then wrote to mademoiselle, as the advertisement requested. No doubt he asked for a meeting, making known to her that he was also the person who had for some time pursued her with his

eyes. He received no answer. He went to the postoffice and ascertained that his letter was no longer there. He had already taken complete stock of M. Darzac, and, having decided to go to any lengths to gain Mlle. Stangerson, he had planned that, whatever might happen, M. Darzac, his hated rival, should be the man to be suspected.

"I do not think that Larsan had any thought of murdering Mlle. Stangerson; but, whatever he might do, he made sure that M. Darzac should suffer for it. He was very nearly of the same height as M. Darzac and had almost the same sized feet. It would not be difficult to take an impression of M. Darzac's footprints and have similar boots made for himself. Such tricks were mere child's play for Larsan or Ballmeyer."

"Receiving no reply to his letter, he determined, since Mlle. Stangerson would not come to him, that he would go to her. His plan had long been formed. He had made himself master of the plans of the chateau and the pavilion, so that one afternoon while M. and Mlle. Stangerson were out for a walk and while Daddy Jacques was away he entered the latter by the vestibule window. He was alone and, being in no hurry, he began examining the furniture. One of the pieces, resembling a safe, had a very small keyhole. That interested him! He had with him the little key with the brass head and, associating one with the

other, he tried the key in the hole. The door opened. He saw nothing but papers. They must be very valuable to which he knew to be of some importance. Perhaps a thought of the small object occurred to him as a method of helping him in his desire to see Mlle. Stangerson. He quickly a parcel of the papers and took them to the lavatory in the vestibule. During the time of his first examination of the pavilion and the effect of the order of the keeper Larsan had had to find out what those papers contained. He could do nothing with them, and they were rather annoying. That night he took them to the chateau. Perhaps by that time by returning the papers he obtained some gratification from M. Stangerson. But whatever may be his reasons he took the papers and so rid himself of an annoyance."

Roulettable coughed. "I am content to see that he was caught. He had arrived at a point where he had to keep back his knowledge of Larsan's true motive. The explanation he had given had evidently been unsatisfactory. Roulettable was mad enough to note the bad impression he had made, for, turning to the president, he said, 'And now we come to the explanation of the mystery of the yellow room!'"

(Continued next week)

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