

Chapter One

In Which We Begin To Not Understand

It is not without some emotion that I begin here to recount the extraordinary adventures of Joseph Rouletabille. Until very recently, he was so firmly opposed to my telling his story that I had come to despair of ever publishing my accounts of some of the most bizarre criminal affairs of the last 15 years. I had thought that the public would never learn the truth about the prodigious “Mystery of the Yellow Room,” which provoked many strange and sensational press articles, and in which my friend was closely involved.

It was only when the illustrious Professor Stangerson was recently nominated for the Grand-Croix of the Légion d’Honneur, and, as a result, one of the evening newspapers printed a remarkably bold, ignorant and perfidious article about that terrible affair, that Rouletabille gave me his permission, while confiding in me that he truly wished that this case had been forgotten.

The Mystery of the Yellow Room! Does anyone still remember this criminal affair, which caused so much ink to flow over our presses 15 years ago? Public events quickly become ancient history in Paris. Have not the very name of the Marquis de Nayve, his trial, and the tragic death of little Menaldo, been all but forgotten? And yet, the public was so fascinated by every detail of that trial at that time, that a ministerial crisis went completely unnoticed.

The Mystery of the Yellow Room, which preceded the trial of the Marquis de Nayve by a few years, made an even bigger splash. The entire world spent months trying to solve this seemingly unsolvable enigma—the most baffling, or so it seemed, that had ever challenged the perspicacity of the French police or taxed the minds of our Magistrates. The solution to the problem mystified everyone who tried to unravel it. It was a dramatic puzzle that fascinated Old Europe and America alike. I feel able to say this in all candor, because there is no petty author’s vanity at stake here; I am merely a transcriber of the events that happened, and my unique access to Rouletabille has enabled me to cast them in a new light. I believe I do not know of any other similar mystery, whether it be the famous *Murders in the Rue Morgue* or the extravagant cases of the notorious Mister Sherlock Holmes, that can be compared to THE MYSTERY, the “very simple mystery” to quote Rouletabille, of the Yellow Room.

A mystery which no one could solve, Joseph Rouletabille, then merely 18, a junior reporter for a leading Parisian newspaper, succeeded in disentangling. But when, at the Court of Assize, he explained the solution to the whole affair, he did not tell the whole truth. He told only enough to ensure the acquittal of an innocent man. But now, the reasons for his reserve no longer exist, so, the time has come for my friend to speak out. You will learn everything. Without further ado, I am going to lay out before you the Mystery of the Yellow Room, as it unfolded before the eyes of the entire world on the day following the dramatic events that took place at the Chateau du Glandier.

On October 25, 1892, the following article appeared in the morning edition of the newspaper *Le Temps*:

A frightful crime was committed at the Chateau du Glandier, on the edge of the forest of Sainte Genevieve, near Epinay-sur-Orge, at the house of Professor Stangerson. During the night, while the renowned scientist was working in his laboratory, an unknown murderer tried to kill his daughter, Mademoiselle Mathilde Stangerson, who was sleeping in a room adjacent to the laboratory. The doctors have issued no prognostic regarding Mademoiselle Stangerson’s possible recovery.

The sensation caused by this news in Paris can easily be imagined. The scientific world was then already deeply interested in the work of Professor Stangerson and his daughter. Their labors—the first attempts at establishing the science of radiography—later paved the way for Monsieur and Madame Curie’s discovery of radium. Professor Stangerson was expected to present a report to the Academy of Sciences on his sensational new theory about the *Dissociation of Matter*, a theory that, some said, would overturn the established principles of conventional physics, including that of the Conservation of Energy.

On the following day, the newspapers were full of the tragedy. *Le Matin*, among others, published the following article, entitled: *A Supernatural Crime*:

These are the only details, wrote the anonymous reporter assigned to the story, that we have been able to ascertain regarding the crime committed at the Chateau du Glandier. Professor Stangerson’s state of despair, and the impossibility of obtaining any first-hand information from the victim herself, have made our inquiries and those of the police so difficult that, at present, we cannot accurately tell what actually took place inside the Yellow Room, where Mademoiselle Stangerson was found, in her night-dress, lying on the floor, gravely wounded.

We have, however, interviewed Jacques-Louis Moustier, an old servant of the Stangersons, known in the region as “Père Jacques.” He claimed to have entered the Yellow Room at the same time as the Professor. This room is adjacent to the Professor’s laboratory. Both it and the Yellow Room are in a small pavilion located at the end of the grounds, about 300 meters from the Chateau itself.

"It happened at 12:30 a.m.," the good man told us. "I was working with the Professor in the laboratory, cleaning and putting away his instruments, waiting for him to be ready to retire for the night. Mademoiselle Stangerson had worked with her father until midnight. When the clock chimed 12, she rose and kissed her father good night. She said to me, 'Good night, Père Jacques,' as she went into the Yellow Room. We heard her lock the door and shoot the bolt. I couldn't help laughing and said to the Professor: 'Mademoiselle's double-locking herself in; she must be afraid of the Holy Beast.' But the Professor was so deeply absorbed in what he was doing that he didn't even hear me. Just then, I heard an awful scream outside, which I recognized as that of the Beast. It sent chills up my spine... 'Is that thing going to keep me awake all night?' I said to myself; for I must tell you, Monsieur, that until the end of October, I sleep in an attic directly above the Yellow Room, so that Mademoiselle is not left all alone here. It is her fancy to spend the summer months in the pavilion, which she probably finds more cheerful than the Chateau. During the four years since it's been built, she's never failed to take up her lodging in the pavilion in the spring. When winter returns, she moves back into the Chateau, because there is no fireplace in the Yellow Room.

"We were alone in the pavilion, then, the Professor and I. We made no noise. He was seated at his desk. As for me, I was sitting on a chair, having finished my work. Looking at him, I said to myself: 'What a man! What intelligence! What science!' I stress the fact that we made no noise, for, because of that, the assassin certainly thought that we had left the laboratory. Suddenly, when the clock chimed half past midnight, a desperate scream came from the Yellow Room. It was Mademoiselle Stangerson's voice, crying out: 'Murder! Murder! Help!' Immediately afterwards, gunshots rang out and there was a great fracas of tables and furniture being overturned, as if in a struggle. Again, we heard the voice of Mademoiselle Stangerson calling: 'Murder! Help! Papa! Papa!'

"You can be sure that we quickly sprang up and that Professor Stangerson and I threw ourselves upon the door. But, alas, it was locked, tightly locked on the inside with both key and bolt by Mademoiselle herself, as I told you. We tried to force the door open, but it remained firm. The Professor was like a madman, and, in truth, what we heard would have been enough to cause any father to go mad. Mademoiselle was still shouting: 'Help! Help!' The Professor struck terrible blows upon the door, weeping with rage, sobbing in despair and helplessness.

"That's when I was struck by an inspiration. 'The assassin must have come in through the window!' I said. 'I'll get there myself!' and I rushed out of the pavilion running as if chased by demons.

"The problem is that the window of the Yellow Room looks out not onto the grounds, but onto the woods outside the estate. Because the outside wall abuts to the pavilion, in order to reach that window, one must first exit the property. I ran towards the main gate and, on my way, I met our caretakers, Monsieur Bernier and his wife, who had been awakened by the gunshots and the screams. In a few words, I told Bernier what happened, and instructed him to go and help the Professor at once. Meanwhile, Madame Bernier opened the gate and no more than five minutes later, she and I stood before the window of the Yellow Room.

"The Moon was shining brightly and I saw clearly that no one had touched the window. Not only were the bars that protect it intact, but the shutters were shut on the inside, just as I had closed them myself earlier that evening, as I do every night, even though Mademoiselle Stangerson, knowing that I'm tired from all the heavy work I've been doing, has begged me not to trouble myself, and leave her to do it. The shutters were just as I had left them, fastened with an iron catch on the inside. The would-be murderer, therefore, could not have passed either in or out that way—but I was unable to gain entry!

"It was an unfortunate turn of events, enough to make one scream! The door of the room was locked on the inside, the shutters on the only window were also fastened on the inside. All the while, Mademoiselle Stangerson was still begging for help!... No! Her screams had stopped. Perhaps, she is already dead, I thought. But I still heard her father, inside the pavilion, trying to break down the door.

"Madame Bernier and I hurried back to the pavilion. The door, despite the Professor and the caretaker's furious attempts to open it, was still holding firm. But it finally gave way before our combined efforts and we rushed into the Yellow Room. What a sight met our eyes! I should tell you that, behind us, the caretaker held the laboratory lamp, a powerful lamp that lit the whole room.

"I must also tell you, Monsieur, that the Yellow Room is small. Mademoiselle Stangerson had furnished it with a fairly large iron bedstead, a small table, a night stand, a dressing-table, and two chairs. By the light of the lamp, we saw everything at a glance. Mademoiselle Stangerson, in her night-dress, was lying on the floor in the greatest disarray. The tables and chairs had been overturned, the sign of a violent struggle. Mademoiselle Stangerson looked as if she had been dragged from her bed. She was covered with blood and there were terrible fingernail marks on her throat. The flesh of her neck was almost entirely torn away. From a wound on her right temple, a stream of blood had run down and made a small pool on the floor.

"When Professor Stangerson saw his daughter in that state, he threw himself on his knees at her side, uttering a cry of despair. He ascertained that she was still breathing. As for us, we searched for the wretch who had tried to kill our Mademoiselle, and I swear to you, Monsieur, that if we had found him, it would have gone badly for him!

“But how can I explain to you that he wasn’t there, that he had already escaped? It was beyond imagination! There was no one under the bed, no one hiding behind the furniture! All that we discovered was the blood-stained handprints of a man on the walls and the door; a large blood-soaked handkerchief, without any markings, an old béret, and, on the floor, a set of footprints in some kind of black soot that had been made recently by a man with large feet. How had that man gotten away? How had he vanished? Don’t forget, Monsieur, that there was no fireplace in the Yellow Room. He could not have slipped through the doorway, which was narrow, and on the threshold of which Madame Bernier stood with her lamp, while her husband and I were searching every corner of that tiny room, where it was impossible to hide! The door, which had been forced open, had been pushed back against the wall, and as we quickly ascertained, no one could have been hiding behind it. The window was still secured behind the bars, untouched, and the shutters were still bolted. There was no escape possible through there. What then? I began to believe that it was the work of the Devil himself...”

“Then, we discovered my revolver on the floor! Yes, my very own gun! That brought me back to my senses! The Devil would not have needed to steal my revolver to kill Mademoiselle Stangerson. The would-be murderer must have first gone up to my attic and taken my revolver from the drawer where I normally kept it. We then determined, by counting the cartridges left inside, that the wretch had fired two shots. Ah! I was lucky that Professor Stangerson was with me in the laboratory when this nasty business took place, and that he had seen me there with his own eyes, because otherwise, with my gun found at the scene of the crime, it might have gone badly for me. Why, I might have been arrested and locked up right away! Justice is always in a hurry to send a man to the scaffold!”

The reporter of *Le Matin* then added the following paragraphs:

We have printed here Père Jacques’ entire account of the Mystery of the Yellow Room in his own words, uncut except for some judicious editing of his string of repetitive lamentations. It is clear that Père Jacques is very devoted to Professor Stangerson and his daughter, and that he feels the need to say so repeatedly, especially since it was his gun that was found in the Yellow Room. It certainly is his right, and we see no harm in him doing so in our paper. We should have liked to ask him more questions, but we were prevented from doing so when he was summoned by Monsieur de Marquet, the Investigating Magistrate from Corbeil, who has begun his inquiry at the Chateau. It was impossible for us to gain admission at Glandier later, and the grounds themselves were cordoned off by the police, who were carefully checking all trails leading to and from the pavilion, which might help discover the identity of the would-be murderer.

We also wished to question the caretakers, Monsieur and Madame Bernier, but they were nowhere to be found. Finally, we resolved to wait for Monsieur de Marquet at the Auberge du Donjon, a roadside inn not far from the Chateau.

At 5:30 p.m., we saw him and his clerk leave Glandier. Before he was able to enter his carriage, we had the opportunity to ask him the following question:

“Monsieur, can you give us any information on this mystery, without, of course, hampering your investigation?”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” replied Monsieur de Marquet. “I can only say that it is the strangest case that I have ever investigated. The more we think we know something, the further we are from knowing anything!”

We asked Monsieur de Marquet to be kind enough to explain his last words, and this is what he said—the importance of which no one will fail to recognize:

“Unless we discover some new evidence, I fear that the mystery which surrounds the dreadful assault on Mademoiselle Stangerson may well never be solved. However, one hopes—if only for the sake of our peace of mind—that the examination of the walls and of the ceiling of the Yellow Room, which I shall conduct tomorrow with the assistance of the contractor who built the pavilion four years ago, will help us unearth such new evidence, and prove that logic always prevails. Our problem is this: we know that the perpetrator entered the Yellow Room through the door and that he hid under the bed, lying in wait for Mademoiselle Stangerson, but how did he leave? How did he escape? If we fail to discover any kind of opening or hidden doorway, or any hiding place or aperture of any sort; if the examination of the walls—even to the point of their demolition—does not reveal any secret passage useable by a human being, or any other kind of being; if the ceiling reveals no trapdoors; if the floor hides no underground passage, then I shall start believing in the Devil, just as Père Jacques said!”

And the anonymous reporter of *Le Matin* added in his article—which I selected because I thought it was the most complete of all those that had been published on the matter—that the Investigating Magistrate seemed to place a peculiar emphasis on that last sentence: *“Then I shall start believing in the Devil, just as Père Jacques said!”*

The article concluded:

We wanted to know what Père Jacques meant when he mentioned the cry of the “Holy Beast.” The landlord of the Auberge du Donjon explained that it is the particularly sinister cry sometimes uttered at night by the cat of a local inhabitant, Mère Angenoux, a saintly old woman who lives in a hut in the forest, not far from the grotto of Sainte Genevieve.

The Yellow Room, the Holy Beast, Mère Angenoux, the Devil, Sainte Genevieve, Père Jacques... All these make for an utterly baffling mystery, which the stroke of a pickaxe in a wall might solve tomorrow. Let us at least hope so, if only for our own peace of mind, to quote Monsieur de Marquet's very own words. Meanwhile, the doctors do not expect Mademoiselle Stangerson—who remains delirious and utters only one, single word repeatedly, 'Murderer!'—to make it through the night.

Finally, in its evening edition, *Le Matin* revealed that the Head of the Sûreté had sent a cable to the famous Inspector Frederic Larsan, currently in London for an affair of stolen bonds, to ask him to return at once to Paris.