

# **The Hollow Needle**

By

Maurice Leblanc

[Web-Books.Com](http://Web-Books.Com)

# The Hollow Needle

<b>1. The Shot .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Isidore Beautrelet, Sixth-Form Schoolboy .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3. The Corpse.....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>4. Face To Face.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>5. On The Track .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>6. An Historic Secret.....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>7. The Treatise Of The Needle .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>8. From Caesar To Lupin.....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>9. Open, Sesame! .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>10. The Treasures Of The Kings Of France .....</b>	<b>154</b>

# 1. The Shot

Raymonde listened. The noise was repeated twice over, clearly enough to be distinguished from the medley of vague sounds that formed the great silence of the night and yet too faintly to enable her to tell whether it was near or far, within the walls of the big country- house, or outside, among the murky recesses of the park.

She rose softly. Her window was half open: she flung it back wide. The moonlight lay over a peaceful landscape of lawns and thickets, against which the straggling ruins of the old abbey stood out in tragic outlines, truncated columns, mutilated arches, fragments of porches and shreds of flying buttresses. A light breeze hovered over the face of things, gliding noiselessly through the bare motionless branches of the trees, but shaking the tiny budding leaves of the shrubs.

And, suddenly, she heard the same sound again. It was on the left and on the floor below her, in the living rooms, therefore, that occupied the left wing of the house. Brave and plucky though she was, the girl felt afraid. She slipped on her dressing gown and took the matches.

"Raymonde--Raymonde!"

A voice as low as a breath was calling to her from the next room, the door of which had not been closed. She was feeling her way there, when Suzanne, her cousin, came out of the room and fell into her arms:

"Raymonde--is that you? Did you hear--?"

"Yes. So you're not asleep?"

"I suppose the dog woke me--some time ago. But he's not barking now. What time is it?"

"About four."

"Listen! Surely, some one's walking in the drawing room!"

"There's no danger, your father is down there, Suzanne."

"But there is danger for him. His room is next to the boudoir."

"M. Daval is there too--"

"At the other end of the house. He could never hear."

They hesitated, not knowing what course to decide upon. Should they call out? Cry for help? They dared not; they were frightened of the sound of their own voices. But Suzanne, who had gone to the window, suppressed a scream:

"Look!--A man!--Near the fountain!"

A man was walking away at a rapid pace. He carried under his arm a fairly large load, the nature of which they were unable to distinguish: it knocked against his leg and impeded his progress. They saw him pass near the old chapel and turn toward a little door in the wall. The door must have been open, for the man disappeared suddenly from view and they failed to hear the usual grating of the hinges.

"He came from the drawing room," whispered Suzanne.

"No, the stairs and the hall would have brought him out more to the left--Unless--"

The same idea struck them both. They leant out. Below them, a ladder stood against the front of the house, resting on the first floor. A glimmer lit up the stone balcony. And another man, who was also carrying something, bestrode the baluster, slid down the ladder and ran away by the same road as the first.

Suzanne, scared to the verge of swooning, fell on her knees, stammering:

"Let us call out--let us call for help--"

"Who would come? Your father--and if there are more of them left-- and they throw themselves upon him--?"

"Then--then--we might call the servants--Your bell rings on their floor."

"Yes--yes--perhaps, that's better. If only they come in time!"

Raymonde felt for the electric push near her bed and pressed it with her finger. They heard the bell ring upstairs and had an impression that its shrill sound must also reach any one below.

They waited. The silence became terrifying and the very breeze no longer shook the leaves of the shrubs.

"I'm frightened--frightened," said Suzanne.

And, suddenly, from the profound darkness below them, came the sound of a struggle, a crash of furniture overturned, words, exclamations and then, horrible and ominous, a hoarse groan, the gurgle of a man who is being murdered--

Raymonde leapt toward the door. Suzanne clung desperately to her arm:

"No--no--don't leave me--I'm frightened--"

Raymonde pushed her aside and darted down the corridor, followed by Suzanne, who staggered from wall to wall, screaming as she went. Raymonde reached the staircase, flew down the stairs, flung herself upon the door of the big drawing room and stopped short, rooted to the threshold, while Suzanne sank in a heap by her side. Facing them, at three steps' distance, stood a man, with a lantern in his hand. He turned it upon the two girls, blinding them with the light, stared long at their pale faces, and then, without hurrying, with the calmest movements in the world, took his cap, picked up a scrap of paper and two bits of straw, removed some footmarks from the carpet, went to the balcony, turned to the girls, made them a deep bow and disappeared.

Suzanne was the first to run to the little boudoir which separated the big drawing-room from her father's bedroom. But, at the entrance, a hideous sight appalled her. By the slanting rays of the moon, she saw two apparently lifeless bodies lying close to each other on the floor. She leaned over one of them:

"Father!--Father!--Is it you? What has happened to you?" she cried, distractedly.

After a moment, the Comte de Gesvres moved. In a broken voice, he said:

"Don't be afraid--I am not wounded--Daval?--Is he alive?--The knife?--The knife?--"

Two men-servants now arrived with candles. Raymonde flung herself down before the other body and recognized Jean Daval, the count's private secretary. A little stream of blood trickled from his neck. His face already wore the pallor of death.

Then she rose, returned to the drawing room, took a gun that hung in a trophy of arms on the wall and went out on the balcony. Not more than fifty or sixty seconds had elapsed since the man had set his foot on the top rung of the ladder. He could not, therefore, be very far away, the more so as he had taken the precaution to remove the ladder, in order to prevent the inmates of the house from using it. And soon she saw him skirting the remains of the old cloister. She put the gun to her shoulder, calmly took aim and fired. The man fell.

"That's done it! That's done it!" said one of the servants. "We've got this one. I'll run down."

"No, Victor, he's getting up.... You had better go down by the staircase and make straight for the little door in the wall. That's the only way he can escape."

Victor hurried off, but, before he reached the park, the man fell down again. Raymonde called the other servant:

"Albert, do you see him down there? Near the main cloister?--"

"Yes, he's crawling in the grass. He's done for--"

"Watch him from here."

"There's no way of escape for him. On the right of the ruins is the open lawn--"

"And, Victor, do you guard the door, on the left," she said, taking up her gun.

"But, surely, you are not going down, miss?"

"Yes, yes," she said, with a resolute accent and abrupt movements; "let me be--I have a cartridge left--If he stirs--"

She went out. A moment later, Albert saw her going toward the ruins. He called to her from the window:

"He's dragged himself behind the cloister. I can't see him. Be careful, miss--"

Raymonde went round the old cloisters, to cut off the man's retreat, and Albert soon lost sight of her. After a few minutes, as he did not see her return, he became uneasy and, keeping his eye on the ruins, instead of going down by the stairs he made an effort to reach the ladder. When he had succeeded, he scrambled down and ran straight to the cloisters near which he had seen the man last. Thirty paces farther, he found Raymonde, who was searching with Victor.

"Well?" he asked.

"There's no laying one's hands on him," replied Victor.

"The little door?"

"I've been there; here's the key."

"Still--he must--"

"Oh, we've got him safe enough, the scoundrel--He'll be ours in ten minutes."

The farmer and his son, awakened by the shot, now came from the farm buildings, which were at some distance on the right, but within the circuit of the walls. They had met no one.

"Of course not," said Albert. "The ruffian can't have left the ruins--We'll dig him out of some hole or other."

They organized a methodical search, beating every bush, pulling aside the heavy masses of ivy rolled round the shafts of the columns. They made sure that the chapel was

properly locked and that none of the panes were broken. They went round the cloisters and examined every nook and corner. The search was fruitless.

There was but one discovery: at the place where the man had fallen under Raymonde's gun, they picked up a chauffeur's cap, in very soft buff leather; besides that, nothing.

The gendarmerie of Ouville-la-Riviere were informed at six o'clock in the morning and at once proceeded to the spot, after sending an express to the authorities at Dieppe with a note describing the circumstances of the crime, the imminent capture of the chief criminal and "the discovery of his headgear and of the dagger with which the crime had been committed."

At ten o'clock, two hired conveyances came down the gentle slope that led to the house. One of them, an old-fashioned calash, contained the deputy public prosecutor and the examining magistrate, accompanied by his clerk. In the other, a humble fly, were seated two reporters, representing the Journal de Rouen and a great Paris paper.

The old chateau came into view--once the abbey residence of the priors of Ambrumesy, mutilated under the Revolution, both restored by the Comte de Gesvres, who had now owned it for some twenty years. It consists of a main building, surmounted by a pinnacled clock-tower, and two wings, each of which is surrounded by a flight of steps with a stone balustrade. Looking across the walls of the park and beyond the upland supported by the high Norman cliffs, you catch a glimpse of the blue line of the Channel between the villages of Sainte-Marguerite and Varengeville.

Here the Comte de Gesvres lived with his daughter Suzanne, a delicate, fair-haired, pretty creature, and his niece Raymonde de Saint-Veran, whom he had taken to live with him two years before, when the simultaneous death of her father and mother left Raymonde an orphan. Life at the chateau was peaceful and regular. A few neighbors paid an occasional visit. In the summer, the count took the two girls almost every day to Dieppe. He was a tall man, with a handsome, serious face and hair that was turning gray. He was very rich, managed his fortune himself and looked after his extensive estates with the assistance of his secretary, Jean Daval.

Immediately upon his arrival, the examining magistrate took down the first observations of Sergeant Quevillon of the gendarmes. The capture of the criminal, imminent though it might be, had not yet been effected, but every outlet of the park was held. Escape was impossible.

The little company next crossed the chapter-hall and the refectory, both of which are on the ground floor, and went up to the first story. They at once remarked the perfect order that prevailed in the drawing room. Not a piece of furniture, not an ornament but appeared to occupy its usual place; nor was there any gap among the ornaments or furniture. On the right and left walls hung magnificent Flemish tapestries with figures. On the panels of the wall facing the windows were four fine canvases, in contemporary frames, representing mythological scenes. These were the famous pictures by Rubens

which had been left to the Comte de Gesvres, together with the Flemish tapestries, by his maternal uncle, the Marques de Bobadilla, a Spanish grandee.

M. Filleul remarked:

"If the motive of the crime was theft, this drawing room, at any rate, was not the object of it."

"You can't tell!" said the deputy, who spoke little, but who, when he did, invariably opposed the magistrate's views.

"Why, my dear sir, the first thought of a burglar would be to carry off those pictures and tapestries, which are universally renowned."

"Perhaps there was no time."

"We shall see."

At that moment, the Comte de Gesvres entered, accompanied by the doctor. The count, who did not seem to feel the effects of the attack to which he had been subjected, welcomed the two officials. Then he opened the door of the boudoir.

This room, which no one had been allowed to enter since the discovery of the crime, differed from the drawing room inasmuch as it presented a scene of the greatest disorder. Two chairs were overturned, one of the tables smashed to pieces and several objects--a traveling-clock, a portfolio, a box of stationery--lay on the floor. And there was blood on some of the scattered pieces of note-paper.

The doctor turned back the sheet that covered the corpse. Jean Daval, dressed in his usual velvet suit, with a pair of nailed boots on his feet, lay stretched on his back, with one arm folded beneath him. His collar and tie had been removed and his shirt opened, revealing a large wound in the chest.

"Death must have been instantaneous," declared the doctor. "One blow of the knife was enough."

"It was, no doubt, the knife which I saw on the drawing-room mantelpiece, next to a leather cap?" said the examining magistrate.

"Yes," said the Comte de Gesvres, "the knife was picked up here. It comes from the same trophy in the drawing room from which my niece, Mlle. de Saint-Veran, snatched the gun. As for the chauffeur's cap, that evidently belongs to the murderer."

M. Filleul examined certain further details in the room, put a few questions to the doctor and then asked M. de Gesvres to tell him what he had seen and heard. The count worded his story as follows:

"Jean Daval woke me up. I had been sleeping badly, for that matter, with gleams of consciousness in which I seemed to hear noises, when, suddenly opening my eyes, I saw Daval standing at the foot of my bed, with his candle in his hand and fully dressed--as he is now, for he often worked late into the night. He seemed greatly excited and said, in a low voice: 'There's some one in the drawing room.' I heard a noise myself. I got up and softly pushed the door leading to this boudoir. At the same moment, the door over there, which opens into the big drawing room, was thrown back and a man appeared who leaped at me and stunned me with a blow on the temple. I am telling you this without any details, Monsieur le Juge d'Instruction, for the simple reason that I remember only the principal facts, and that these facts followed upon one another with extraordinary swiftness."

"And after that?--"

"After that, I don't know--I fainted. When I came to, Daval lay stretched by my side, mortally wounded."

"At first sight, do you suspect no one?"

"No one."

"You have no enemy?"

"I know of none."

"Nor M. Daval either?"

"Daval! An enemy? He was the best creature that ever lived. M. Daval was my secretary for twenty years and, I may say, my confidant; and I have never seen him surrounded with anything but love and friendship."

"Still, there has been a burglary and there has been a murder: there must be a motive for all that."

"The motive? Why, it was robbery pure and simple."

"Robbery? Have you been robbed of something, then?"

"No, nothing."

"In that case--?"

"In that case, if they have stolen nothing and if nothing is missing, they at least took something away."

"What?"

"I don't know. But my daughter and my niece will tell you, with absolute certainty, that they saw two men in succession cross the park and that those two men were carrying fairly heavy loads."

"The young ladies--"

"The young ladies may have been dreaming, you think? I should be tempted to believe it, for I have been exhausting myself in inquiries and suppositions ever since this morning. However, it is easy enough to question them."

The two cousins were sent for to the big drawing room. Suzanne, still quite pale and trembling, could hardly speak. Raymonde, who was more energetic, more of a man, better looking, too, with the golden glint in her brown eyes, described the events of the night and the part which she had played in them.

"So I may take it, mademoiselle, that your evidence is positive?"

"Absolutely. The men who went across the park were carrying things away with them."

"And the third man?"

"He went from here empty-handed."

"Could you describe him to us?"

"He kept on dazzling us with the light of his lantern. All that I could say is that he is tall and heavily built."

"Is that how he appeared to you, mademoiselle?" asked the magistrate, turning to Suzanne de Gesvres.

"Yes--or, rather, no," said Suzanne, reflecting. "I thought he was about the middle height and slender."

M. Filleul smiled; he was accustomed to differences of opinion and sight in witnesses to one and the same fact:

"So we have to do, on the one hand, with a man, the one in the drawing room, who is, at the same time, tall and short, stout and thin, and, on the other, with two men, those in the park, who are accused of removing from that drawing room objects--which are still here!"

M. Filleul was a magistrate of the ironic school, as he himself would say. He was also a very ambitious magistrate and one who did not object to an audience nor to an occasion to display his tactful resource in public, as was shown by the increasing number of persons who now crowded into the room. The journalists had been joined by the farmer

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

