

# **The Yellow Claw**

**By**

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## The Lady Of The Civet Furs

Henry Leroux wrote busily on. The light of the table-lamp, softened and enriched by its mosaic shade, gave an appearance of added opulence to the already handsome appointments of the room. The little table-clock ticked merrily from half-past eleven to a quarter to twelve.

Into the cozy, bookish atmosphere of the novelist's study penetrated the muffled chime of Big Ben; it chimed the three-quarters. But, with his mind centered upon his work, Leroux wrote on ceaselessly.

An odd figure of a man was this popular novelist, with patchy and untidy hair which lessened the otherwise striking contour of his brow. A neglected and unpicturesque figure, in a baggy, neutral-colored dressing-gown; a figure more fitted to a garret than to this spacious, luxurious workroom, with the soft light playing upon rank after rank of rare and costly editions, deepening the tones in the Persian carpet, making red morocco more red, purifying the vellum and regilding the gold of the choice bindings, caressing lovingly the busts and statuettes surmounting the book-shelves, and twinkling upon the scantily-covered crown of Henry Leroux. The door bell rang.

Leroux, heedless of external matters, pursued his work. But the door bell rang again and continued to ring.

"Soames! Soames!" Leroux raised his voice irascibly, continuing to write the while. "Where the devil are you! Can't you hear the door bell?"

Soames did not reveal himself; and to the ringing of the bell was added the unmistakable rattling of a letter-box.

"Soames!" Leroux put down his pen and stood up. "Damn it! he's out! I have no memory!"

He retied the girdle of his dressing-gown, which had become unfastened, and opened the study door. Opposite, across the entrance lobby, was the outer door; and in the light from the lobby lamp he perceived two laughing eyes peering in under the upraised flap of the letter-box. The ringing ceased.

"Are you VERY angry with me for interrupting you?" cried a girl's voice.

"My dear Miss Cumberly!" said Leroux without irritation; "on the contrary--er--I am delighted to see you--or rather to hear you. There is nobody at home, you know." . . .

"I DO know," replied the girl firmly, "and I know something else, also. Father assures me that you simply STARVE yourself when Mrs. Leroux is away! So I have brought down an omelette!"

"Omelette!" muttered Leroux, advancing toward the door; "you have-- er--brought an omelette! I understand--yes; you have brought an omelette? Er--that is very good of you."

He hesitated when about to open the outer door, raising his hands to his dishevelled hair and unshaven chin. The flap of the letter-box dropped; and the girl outside could be heard stifling her laughter.

"You must think me--er--very rude," began Leroux; "I mean--not to open the door. But" . . .

"I quite understand," concluded the voice of the unseen one. "You are a most untidy object! And I shall tell Mira DIRECTLY she returns that she has no right to leave you alone like this! Now I am going to hurry back upstairs; so you may appear safely. Don't let the omelette get cold. Good night!"

"No, certainly I shall not!" cried Leroux. "So good of you--I--er-- do like omelette. . . . Good night!"

Calmly he returned to his writing-table, where, in the pursuit of the elusive character whose exploits he was chronicling and who had brought him fame and wealth, he forgot in the same moment Helen Cumberly and the omelette.

The table-clock ticked merrily on; SCRATCH--SCRATCH--SPLUTTER-- SCRATCH--went Henry Leroux's pen; for this up-to-date litterateur, essayist by inclination, creator of "Martin Zeda, Criminal Scientist" by popular clamor, was yet old-fashioned enough, and sufficient of an enthusiast, to pen his work, while lesser men dictated.

So, amidst that classic company, smiling or frowning upon him from the oaken shelves, where Petronius Arbitrator, exquisite, rubbed shoulders with Balzac, plebeian; where Omar Khayyam leaned confidentially toward Philostratus; where Mark Twain, standing squarely beside Thomas Carlyle, glared across the room at George Meredith, Henry Leroux pursued the amazing career of "Martin Zeda."

It wanted but five minutes to the hour of midnight, when again the door bell clamored in the silence.

Leroux wrote steadily on. The bell continued to ring, and, furthermore, the ringer could be heard beating upon the outer door.

"Soames!" cried Leroux irritably, "Soames! Why the hell don't you go to the door!"

Leroux stood up, dashing his pen upon the table.

"I shall have to sack that damned man!" he cried; "he takes too many liberties--stopping out until this hour of the night!"

He pulled open the study door, crossed the hallway, and opened the door beyond.

In, out of the darkness--for the stair lights had been extinguished--staggered a woman; a woman whose pale face exhibited, despite the ravages of sorrow or illness, signs of quite unusual beauty. Her eyes were wide opened, and terror-stricken, the pupils contracted almost to vanishing point. She wore a magnificent cloak of civet fur wrapped tightly

about her, and, as Leroux opened the door, she tottered past him into the lobby, glancing back over her shoulder.

With his upraised hands plunged pathetically into the mop of his hair, Leroux turned and stared at the intruder. She groped as if a darkness had descended, clutched at the sides of the study doorway, and then, unsteadily, entered--and sank down upon the big chesterfield in utter exhaustion.

Leroux, rubbing his chin, perplexedly, walked in after her. He scarcely had his foot upon the study carpet, ere the woman started up, tremulously, and shot out from the enveloping furs a bare arm and a pointing, quivering finger.

"Close the door!" she cried hoarsely--"close the door! . . . He has . . . followed me!" . . .

The disturbed novelist, as a man in a dream, turned, retraced his steps, and closed the outer door of the flat. Then, rubbing his chin more vigorously than ever and only desisting from this exercise to fumble in his dishevelled hair, he walked back into the study, whose Athenean calm had thus mysteriously been violated.

Two minutes to midnight; the most respectable flat in respectable Westminster; a lonely and very abstracted novelist--and a pale-faced, beautiful woman, enveloped in costly furs, sitting staring with fearful eyes straight before her. This was such a scene as his sense of the proprieties and of the probabilities could never have permitted Henry Leroux to create.

His visitor kept moistening her dry lips and swallowing, emotionally.

Standing at a discreet distance from her:--

"Madam," began Leroux, nervously.

She waved her hand, enjoining him to silence, and at the same time intimating that she would explain herself directly speech became possible. Whilst she sought to recover her composure, Leroux, gradually forcing himself out of the dreamlike state, studied her with a sort of anxious curiosity.

It now became apparent to him that his visitor was no more than twenty-five or twenty-six years of age, but illness or trouble, or both together, had seared and marred her beauty. Amid the auburn masses of her hair, gleamed streaks, not of gray, but of purest white. The low brow was faintly wrinkled, and the big--unnaturally big--eyes were purple shaded; whilst two heavy lines traced their way from the corner of the nostrils to the corner of the mouth--of the drooping mouth with the bloodless lips.

Her pallor became more strange and interesting the longer he studied it; for, underlying the skin was a yellow tinge which he found inexplicable, but which he linked in his mind with the contracted pupils of her eyes, seeking vainly for a common cause.

He had a hazy impression that his visitor, beneath her furs, was most inadequately clothed; and seeking confirmation of this, his gaze strayed downward to where one little slipped foot peeped out from the civet furs.

Leroux suppressed a gasp. He had caught a glimpse of a bare ankle!

He crossed to his writing-table, and seated himself, glancing sideways at this living mystery. Suddenly she began, in a voice tremulous and scarcely audible:--

"Mr. Leroux, at a great--at a very great personal risk, I have come to-night. What I have to ask of you--to entreat of you, will . . . will" . . .

Two bare arms emerged from the fur, and she began clutching at her throat and bosom as though choking--dying.

Leroux leapt up and would have run to her; but forcing a ghastly smile, she waved him away again.

"It is all right," she muttered, swallowing noisily. But frightful spasms of pain convulsed her, contorting her pale face.

"Some brandy--!" cried Leroux, anxiously.

"If you please," whispered the visitor.

She dropped her arms and fell back upon the chesterfield, insensible.

## Midnight And Mr. King

Leroux clutched at the corner of the writing-table to steady himself and stood there looking at the deathly face. Under the most favorable circumstances, he was no man of action, although in common with the rest of his kind he prided himself upon the possession of that presence of mind which he lacked. It was a situation which could not have alarmed "Martin Zeda," but it alarmed, immeasurably, nay, struck inert with horror, Martin Zeda's creator.

Then, in upon Leroux's mental turmoil, a sensible idea intruded itself.

"Dr. Cumberly!" he muttered. "I hope to God he is in!"

Without touching the recumbent form upon the chesterfield, without seeking to learn, without daring to learn, if she lived or had died, Leroux, the tempo of his life changed to a breathless gallop, rushed out of the study, across the entrance hall, and, throwing wide the flat door, leapt up the stair to the flat above--that of his old friend, Dr. Cumberly.

The patter of the slippers feet grew faint upon the stair; then, as Leroux reached the landing above, became inaudible altogether.

In Leroux's study, the table-clock ticked merrily on, seeming to hasten its ticking as the hand crept around closer and closer to midnight. The mosaic shade of the lamp mingled reds and blues and greens upon the white ceiling above and poured golden light upon the pages of manuscript strewn about beneath it. This was a typical work-room of a literary man having the ear of the public-- typical in every respect, save for the fur-clad figure outstretched upon the settee.

And now the peeping light indiscreetly penetrated to the hem of a silken garment revealed by some disarrangement of the civet fur. To the eye of an experienced observer, had such an observer been present in Henry Leroux's study, this billow of silk and lace behind the sheltering fur must have proclaimed itself the edge of a night-robe, just as the ankle beneath had proclaimed itself to Henry Leroux's shocked susceptibilities to be innocent of stocking.

Thirty seconds were wanted to complete the cycle of the day, when one of the listless hands thrown across the back of the chesterfield opened and closed spasmodically. The fur at the bosom of the midnight visitor began rapidly to rise and fall.

Then, with a choking cry, the woman struggled upright; her hair, hastily dressed, burst free of its bindings and poured in gleaming cascade down about her shoulders.

Clutching with one hand at her cloak in order to keep it wrapped about her, and holding the other blindly before her, she rose, and with that same odd, groping movement, began to approach the writing-table. The pupils of her eyes were mere pin-points flow; she shuddered convulsively, and her skin was dewed with perspiration. Her breath came in agonized gasps.

"God!--I . . . am dying . . . and I cannot--tell him!" she breathed.



Feverishly, weakly, she took up a pen, and upon a quarto page, already half filled with Leroux's small, neat, illegible writing, began to scrawl a message, bending down, one hand upon the table, and with her whole body shaking.

Some three or four wavering lines she had written, when intimately, for the flat of Henry Leroux in Palace Mansions lay within sight of the clock-face--Big Ben began to chime midnight.

The writer started back and dropped a great blot of ink upon the paper; then, realizing the cause of the disturbance, forced herself to continue her task.

The chime being completed: ONE! boomed the clock; TWO! . . . THREE! . . . FOUR! . .

.

The light in the entrance-hall went out!

FIVE! boomed Big Ben;--SIX! . . . SEVEN! . . .

A hand, of old ivory hue, a long, yellow, clawish hand, with part of a sinewy forearm, crept in from the black lobby through the study doorway and touched the electric switch!

EIGHT! . . .

The study was plunged in darkness!

Uttering a sob--a cry of agony and horror that came from her very soul--the woman stood upright and turned to face toward the door, clutching the sheet of paper in one rigid hand.

Through the leaded panes of the window above the writing-table swept a silvern beam of moonlight. It poured, searchingly, upon the fur-clad figure swaying by the table; cutting through the darkness of the room like some huge scimitar, to end in a pallid pool about the woman's shadow on the center of the Persian carpet.

Coincident with her sobbing cry--NINE! boomed Big Ben; TEN! . . .

Two hands--with outstretched, crooked, clutching fingers--leapt from the darkness into the light of the moonbeam.

"God! Oh, God!" came a frenzied, rasping shriek--"MR. KING!"

Straight at the bare throat leapt the yellow hands; a gurgling cry rose--fell--and died away.

Gently, noiselessly, the lady of the civet fur sank upon the carpet by the table; as she fell, a dim black figure bent over her. The tearing of paper told of the note being snatched from her frozen grip; but never for a moment did the face or the form of her assailant encroach upon the moonbeam.

Batlike, this second and terrible visitant avoided the light.

The deed had occupied so brief a time that but one note of the great bell had accompanied it.

TWELVE! rang out the final stroke from the clock-tower. A low, eerie whistle, minor, rising in three irregular notes and falling in weird, unusual cadence to silence again, came from somewhere outside the room.

Then darkness--stillness--with the moon a witness of one more ghastly crime.

Presently, confused and intermingled voices from above proclaimed the return of Leroux with the doctor. They were talking in an excited key, the voice of Leroux, especially, sounding almost hysterical. They created such a disturbance that they attracted the attention of Mr. John Exel, M. P., occupant of the flat below, who at that very moment had returned from the House and was about to insert the key in the lock of his door. He looked up the stairway, but, all being in darkness, was unable to detect anything. Therefore he called out:--

"Is that you, Leroux? Is anything the matter?"

"Matter, Exel!" cried Leroux; "there's a devil of a business! For mercy's sake, come up!"

His curiosity greatly excited, Mr. Exel mounted the stairs, entering the lobby of Leroux's flat immediately behind the owner and Dr. Cumberlandy--who, like Leroux, was arrayed in a dressing-gown; for he had been in bed when summoned by his friend.

"You are all in the dark, here," muttered Dr. Cumberlandy, fumbling for the switch.

"Some one has turned the light out!" whispered Leroux, nervously; "I left it on."

Dr. Cumberlandy pressed the switch, turning up the lobby light as Exel entered from the landing. Then Leroux, entering the study first of the three, switched on the light there, also.

One glance he threw about the room, then started back like a man physically stricken.

"Cumberlandy!" he gasped, "Cumberlandy"--and he pointed to the furry heap by the writing-table.

"You said she lay on the chesterfield," muttered Cumberlandy.

"I left her there." . . .

Dr. Cumberlandy crossed the room and dropped upon his knees. He turned the white face toward the light, gently parted the civet fur, and pressed his ear to the silken covering of the breast. He started slightly and looked into the glazing eyes.

Replacing the fur which he had disarranged, the physician stood up and fixed a keen gaze upon the face of Henry Leroux. The latter swallowed noisily, moistening his parched lips.

"Is she" . . . he muttered; "is she" . . .

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