

TO MY FRIENDS ACROSS THE CHANNEL

By Gaston Leroux, c. 1920

WHY SHOULD I HIDE IT? Far from it, I am proud to say that what may be called my literary work—and, in particular, my adventure novels—has been considerably influenced by British novelists. First, and above all, Charles Dickens; and, second, Arthur Conan Doyle, at the height of his popularity about twenty years ago, when he was first introduced to French readers.

I deliberately name these two writers, so far removed from each other, as the opening and closing chapters of my apprenticeship as a novelist. But I must not also fail to mention what I owe to Rudyard Kipling, to H. G. Wells and to many others, for the field is illustrious and vast. From the outset, however, I have navigated my way between *The Pickwick Papers* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*... never forgetting Edgar Allan Poe, who, from his lofty perch in the Milky Way where he has taken up his post, presides over my humble attempts. Dickens gave me a taste for picturesque detail and humour, without which even the best-constructed adventure novel would be nothing more than a cold plot mechanic. Crime fiction cannot be reduced to a mere puzzle; it needs life to take it beyond a logical conundrum... and the more extraordinary the adventure, the more exact it must be in its playful depiction of everyday life. If you're not prepared to leave the realm of the conceptual, leave the writer's pen alone and stick with chalk and a blackboard. Dickens's *Pickwick*, that colossal little bourgeois, inspired me to create my monstrous bandit Chéri-Bibi, a decent man at heart, yet a victim of the most unexpected adventures—unable to walk out on the street without killing someone! Put a good heart inside a killing machine like that and see how much it can suffer! Comedy! Humour! And, for good measure, mystery! If that doesn't satisfy the reader, then, let's be honest, nothing will.

My Rouletabille, a fledgling eighteen-year-old reporter who solves the most difficult criminal cases and never lets go of the *right thread of reasoning*, even in the darkest of investigations, is, of course, modelled after Sherlock Holmes, himself a descendant of Poe's Dupin. When the newspaper *L'Illustration* asked me to write my first novel, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, I set myself the goal, in terms of the mystery itself, of outdoing Conan Doyle and being more exhaustive than Poe. My point of departure, I decided, would be a similar riddle: a murder committed in a hermetically sealed room; once opened, the killer has vanished, even though his tracks remain...

In truth, Poe and Conan Doyle both cheated: the room wasn't really hermetically sealed. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, a chimney allowed a monkey to come and go, while in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, the hole for a bell cord allowed the killer snake to slither into the room. I, however, was adamant not to take shortcuts! *The room would be as sealed as a safe*: no hidden exits or secret compartments! I would forbid my murderer from making his escape by breaking through a wall, a door, a window, the floorboards or even the ceiling. The door would be locked and bolted on the inside, the windows barred. Everything would stay just as it was: the victim, the traces of the crime and the criminal... yet the murderer would be nowhere to be seen! How could he have got out? Rouletabille would reveal it all later in the courtroom, and right to the murderer's face. Yet nobody, not a single reader, would figure it out beforehand. Rouletabille would be the only one to keep hold of the *right thread of reasoning*! Working in a domain where, as an author, I have basked in the warming rays of English literature, how could I fail to pay a supreme tribute to Kipling, whose first story I read got under my skin in a way I can't describe? It was *The Finest Story in the World*! Oh! that man who could remember having rowed on galleys, who might have seen Cleopatra, and who found proof of his memories within and around himself! That day, the germ of an idea was planted in my mind from which sprang one of my first novels: *The Man with the Black Feather*, the story of a brave rubber stamp merchant who, while visiting the Conciergerie in Paris, suddenly receives proof that he had previously lived, in the eighteenth century, as that most illustrious of bandits: Cartouche! That's the kind of thing that can transform a man's life, a revelation like that!

Wells, with *The War of the Worlds*, *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* kindled in me a feeling just waiting to be expressed... and which did, in fact, find expression in another of my novels: *Balao*, a great ape, almost human, who, following an operation on his tongue, can speak and becomes subject to the *law of men*... but with what twists and turns! Brave Balao! While his adventures—which all unfold under the same moonlit sky beneath which Kipling's 'man's cub', Mowgli, makes his way through the jungle—were being serialised in *Le Matin*, I would receive anguished telegrams from my female readers imploring me not to kill him! If I owe part of my humour to Dickens, it is largely to Kipling and to Wells that I owe the touches of poetry and lyricism that I've brought to my adventure novels. For adventure novels are what we make of them! It is strange that people insist on drawing a strict dividing line between them and the psychological novel...