

*Over the years, Martin Gately has assembled a series of mystery tales starring Gaston Leroux's sleuth, Joseph Rouletabille. However, the chronology of these stories can be confusing because "Rouletabille and the New World Order" (TOTS 11) takes place between parts 1 and 2 of "Rouletabille Vs. The Cat" (TOTS 10). On Page 117 of TOTS 10, Rouletabille reflects on his adventure with Hugo Danner ("Rouletabille and the New World Order"), which involved the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia held in May 1926. In the winter of 1926, ten years after the events of "Leviathan Creek" (TOTS 8), Cyrus West emerges from the rejuvenation cylinder at Glen Cliff and leaves New York on the yacht Sea Silk, with Missy-Lou. Subsequent to this, Rouletabille uncovers evidence which allows him to deduce what James Worth (son of Adam Worth, a possible inspiration for the character of Moriarty) was planning to do in the Pacific (see Page 75 of TOTS 11). And that is what this new story is about...*

### **Martin Gately: Rouletabille on Mysterious Island**

*July 2, 1927*

The first thing that the detective was aware of was a searing pain on the right hand side of his head, about two inches above his ear. He put his hand to it. Even the gentle touch of his finger tips on the wound was excruciating. He realized almost straightaway that the injury had been bandaged. Well, that was something. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. He lay on the sandy section of a small rock-strewn beach, roughly twenty or so feet from the gently lapping waves. And he had absolutely no idea how he had come to be there.

The most delicious smell emanated from almost directly behind him. He turned over to find that he had almost rolled onto a little campfire. Half a dozen silver fish, each about four inches long and impaled on bent sticks, were barbecuing over the blaze. A mysterious benefactor had prepared a meal for him.

Suddenly ravenous, he picked a fish from its improvised spit and greedily consumed it—scales, bones and all. It tasted marvelous, similar to whitebait. But the species was unknown to him. Yet, so many things were perhaps unknown to him. He knew his name—Joseph Rouletabille, and that he had been a journalist and a detective... also a spy and a soldier. He remembered something about a yellow room and the scent of a woman... That had been important. But it all seemed so long ago and far away.

The intense pain had formed a barrier in his mind, not merely disrupting his memories but also the routine pathways of cognitive thought. This much he knew: his mind had been an extraordinary one—swift and unerring, a computational machine that never fully rested. Now the linkages and chains of reasoning were snapped, useless. He... could... not... think... properly. It was maddening. He did his best to comfort himself. He had been awake for only moments. Perhaps, as the injury healed, his brain would return to normal.

He stayed by the fire until he had eaten all of the fish. He was unsure whether this was breakfast or dinner. The sun hung low in the sky and he could not tell for the moment if it was rising or setting. While he was considering this, and who might've lit the fire, he found, half-buried in the sand, a military-style water canteen. He took a few swigs of the water inside, then put it over his shoulder and began walking along the beach.

Within ten minutes, he had rounded a headland and the beach had almost completely disappeared; now there were just black volcanic rocks. He looked inland. There was a stubby peak that could almost be the shattered remnant of a volcano. He estimated that it was less than a mile away. He resolved to explore a little more of the coast and then head into the interior of the island—he supposed it to be an island, but until he had circled it, he could not rule out the possibility that it was a peninsula.

Up ahead, something was perched on the pyroclastic rocks—as if washed onto them during a tempest. As he got closer, he could see that it was the wreck of a boat, or more properly a yacht. The masts, rigging and sails had all been lost. The hull had been punctured by some of the more jagged pieces

of basalt, and these rocks now held the wreck precariously like a clawed hand. The cabin was splintered as per the proverbial matchwood.

Rouletabille could only guess—was this the vessel that had brought him here? He moved closer and closer, seeking some clue. Finally, he climbed the great stones and approached the stern of the smashed craft. Hanging loosely was a wooden plaque bearing the name of the ship. He said it aloud several times. His tongue playing with the words, holding them in his mouth like he would with medicine he was not quite ready to swallow. *Sea Silk... Sea Silk... Sea Silk...* It was dimly recollected. But that was all. It was no key to his memory. He had seen it before. Seen it somewhere. The ship had been intact—but just how long ago was that? It felt like months.

“You’ve probably figured the whole thing out,” the bearded man had said, as he lay there in the bed in the cabin.

And then, the visual and auditory recollection was gone. Impossible to retrieve. In its place was something else. A useless piece of information: sea silk is a rare fabric obtained from the pen shell—it is made from the fibers the mollusk uses to attach itself to the sea bed. He wished he could somehow trade that fact for something more relevant and helpful. But human memory cannot be bartered with at the best of times.

Rouletabille did not even seriously consider going aboard the wreck. It looked far too dangerous. He could imagine the deck giving way beneath him and toppling down onto the rocks. Or perhaps the grip of the rocks on the hull was not so firm as it seemed, and the whole thing would slide into the sea with him aboard. No, the answer did not lie in the wreck. His every instinct was that it was a doorway to death. He headed instead for the volcano, if, indeed, volcano it was.

So, he walked on, and soon realized that the pseudo-whitebait had been breakfast—the sun was rising. The morning was hot. He turned his mind to attempting to deduce his general location in the world. The vegetation was pretty sparse, just a few scrubby palms and hardy sedges. As he ascended the crumbling grey pumice slopes of the volcano, he was afforded a much better view of the island. It was small—perhaps a few hectares larger than a typical deer park—and largely barren. At one point, he thought he heard the bleating cry of wild goats in the middle-distance, but he never did see any, nor even saw any goat tracks.

He considered it most likely that he was somewhere in the South Pacific. There were volcanic islands in that part of the ocean. He knew that he was French, and it was not difficult to surmise that he was likely to be in a French Protectorate area, perhaps Boragora or Tagataya. Again, he had a fragmentary memory and another useless one. He had once been at a social function in Paris where he had been introduced to a criminal who had survived an attempted execution by guillotine and gone on to become a magistrate on an island in the Pacific.

It was getting even hotter; he was now perspiring freely; a wide-brimmed hat would’ve been advantageous. He paused to take a few glugs from his canteen. He also drank in the great sapphire vista of the ocean with one hand shading his eyes. And now, for the first time, he saw it.

There was a ship at anchor, perhaps only eight hundred meters from the northeastern shore. A large merchant vessel, some kind of cargo ship with two great cranes fitted to the stern. He was saved! It was a miracle that another ship had arrived here at the same time he had. Did he have the strength to swim out to it, or if it would be better to attempt to signal it from the shore.

He was about to turn around and start heading back down the slope when something stopped him. Not a memory, but something more akin to an instinct. There was danger for him down in that cargo ship, and a far greater one even than there had been aboard the rock-stranded wreck.

Now he was confronted by the gaping, uneven maw of the volcano. Fortunately, it seemed that it was inactive. While there was the aroma of sulphur, there were no more noxious fumes and no heat. The sun was high and shone like a searchlight into the depths of the thing. Far, far below was the suggestion of greenish blue water. There was a water-filled grotto within the volcano. More significantly, an intermittent throbbing sound emanated from the depths. There was something mechanical down there, an engine of some sort. The grotto was inhabited!

Better yet, his subconscious did not furnish him with any dire warnings about what might be in it. Quite the contrary. His anticipation was that it was a place of sanctuary and peace. Rouletabille looked gingerly over the edge of the volcano in the forlorn hope that there might be a way down other than a suicidal leap into the grotto's emerald waters. Without the climbing ability of a spider, it looked to be impossible.

He sighed and accepted defeat. He would simply have to head back down the peak and find another way in. There might be a cave or an undersea tunnel which could unite him with the grotto dwellers. He shot a last look back at the abyss and was astonished to see, now that the sun had reached its zenith, that a steel gantry was visible, perhaps five meters below the lip of the crater. He could not account for its presence or purpose other than it was obviously the work of the grotto-dwellers.

It was another hour before the detective had fully resolved and summoned up the courage to attempt to jump down to the gantry. He had spent a lot of that time squinting into the darkness beyond the steel walkway and he thought he could see a set of metal steps leading downwards. He stepped back a few paces and then launched himself over the edge. As his feet left the ground, he feared that the arc of his fall would not carry him as far as the gantry. Yet somehow it did, and the stairway railing whacked hard against one of his calves while the deck rose swiftly to meet his face. He was just able to bring up his arms, as one would for a break-fall in Baritsu or Judo, and this saved him from nasty facial injuries. Nevertheless, his palms and forearms were bruised. But it was a small price to pay for the progress he had made. He was convinced that he would soon be reunited with friends and allies.

He could see that there were electric floodlights far below in the water and on two craft. One was a long grey submersible with a horn-like ram on the bows, the other was tiny—some sort of metal sphere with trailing cables attached to it. Somewhat winded, Rouletabille stood up and only then began to understand how precariously the gantry and stairway beyond were attached to the inner wall of the volcano. His jump down had only served to loosen them further. The whole of the steelwork seemed to have been exposed to incredible temperatures, and some of it looked partially melted.

He started to pick his way down the stairs with great care, and with each step, they seemed more rickety. Down and down he continued. When he was perhaps seventy-five meters from the surface of the water, there was a sound like a gunshot, and his first guess was that he had been spotted by some enemy or guard and was being sniped at. But no, the noise was one of the supporting bolts from the stairway wrenching itself from the wall.

He instantly abandoned the idea of carefully traversing the stairs and began to run just as swiftly as he could. The more he ran, the looser and more disconnected the stairs seemed to become. The framework juddered and oscillated; the rhythm of the soles of his shoes on the steps was a hastening staccato drumbeat.

He dared not look back, but it was now obvious that the long section of stairs that he had already traveled was peeling away from the interior wall of the volcano. The steel was beginning to screech like a fearful woman.

Rouletabille decided to take his chances, vault the railing and jump into the green water below. He put his legs firmly together and pointed his feet so that he would make a smooth entry into the water. He just hoped he was executing his feet-first dive properly. The even greater danger seemed to be that the tangled mess of metal would land on top of him. But then, his ending would be so quick, that it seemed scarcely anything to worry about.

He maintained the diving posture for what seemed like an age as he dropped through the air. On the edge of his peripheral vision, the steel stairway tumbled away. The stairs hit the water first, propelling upwards a wide irregular fountain of the green-hued liquid. Then, it was Rouletabille's turn to slice into the grotto's watery depths.

The impact carried him a long way down. He held his breath and clamped his mouth shut. After another couple of seconds, he dared to open his eyes. It felt like he was still going downwards. All he could see was the all-enveloping milky jade froth, a churning mass of bubbles. He wondered if he was caught in some sort of tide or suction. As he tried to swim, he realized just how much his sodden clothes restricted him. Then, he cursed himself for a fool. He had become disoriented in the opaque water after

the moment of landing. He was not being pulled down by suction, but rather rising in an inverted position. The movement of the bubbles around him now gave this away, as did the luminescence from the floodlights on the deck of the submersible. He righted himself in the water and began to kick upwards. Then he un-looped the canteen from his shoulder and discarded his heavy jacket. The ascent now seemed easier.

When his head came out of the water, he was surprised to see how close he was to the submarine. There was even a man on the craft with a boat pole trying to assist him, trying to help him from the water. So, the grotto dwellers were friendly. He had obviously made the right decision in attempting to come down here. Then the Frenchman's stomach turned to lead and ice. The man was no longer silhouetted by the lights. He was wearing a black and white uniform and sporting a black peaked cap with white trim. This was the uniform of the Catharus Society!

Rouletabille remembered about the Catharus Society and its plan to massively reduce the population of the world by means of a massive hemorrhagic fever pandemic. A plan he had just managed to avert with the assistance of the extraordinary super-human, Hugo Danner, and the courageous Captain Anthony Rogers (who had had no choice but to join the ranks of this villainous organization).<sup>1</sup>

His ability to recall was returning swiftly, just not swiftly enough. He was probably here to thwart another scheme by the Society or the unnamed rogue offshoot of the same organization that was commanded by James Worth, formerly a respected Philadelphia businessman.

He closed his fingers tightly over the end of the boat pole, and was then gently towed towards a rope and chain ladder, which would allow him to climb up onto the deck. He could've quite happily lain on the deck all afternoon recovering from the shock of his fall from the steel walkway. Yet, now he was starting to form the definite realization that he had secret allies here within the grotto, and he should make every effort to reunite with them so that they could achieve their mutual aims. The man with the boat pole suddenly shouted back to a figure on the submersible's conning tower.

"Tell the commander we've found another one."

Rouletabille was taken down a hatchway into the interior of the craft. The airlocks and so forth were not entirely unfamiliar to him. He had once been an unwilling guest on a U-boat. That had been during the Great War, off the coast of New Jersey. Kapitan Mors had been the commander.<sup>2</sup> But that craft was a paltry thing compared to this. This submersible was luxuriously appointed with gleaming brass at every turn and fixtures and fittings of coral and ivory. The walkways underfoot were of a material unknown to him—some kind of resin? He noticed that the raised lower bulkhead sections of the airlocks at floor level were highly polished as if by the passage of feet over many, many decades.

The guard ushered the detective into a grand state room where, incredibly, an organ had been installed. Somehow, it did not truly suit the room. It seemed new and garish compared to the other décor in the chamber. Then Rouletabille saw that two people were tied with ropes to two of the chairs. One was a handsome man of about thirty with black hair and full black beard, and the other was a dark-skinned woman of around forty. This woman possessed an extraordinarily beautiful face, albeit a haughty one. Yes, these were his allies. Although his imperfect memory would have it that it was months since he had last seen them. The detective's guard tied him to a third chair and then left the trio alone.

"Rouletabille! My God, how did you follow us down here in your wounded condition?" asked Cyrus West. "You should've stayed on the beach."

"I went along the pathway that led to the volcano and there is... or rather was a steel stairway down. I should say that I still have partial amnesia, from this head injury, but I know now that you are Captain Cyrus West—sometimes known as Harding. And that the lady is Missy-Lou Pleasant."

"Careful what else you say," ordered Missy-Lou. "The saying that walls have ears is not mere idiom aboard this ship."

"I'll remind you of the more salient points that it is safe to repeat," said West. "Following your experience in Philadelphia last year, you ultimately deduced that James Worth and his allies, an engineer

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<sup>1</sup> See *Rouletabille and the New World Order* in *Tales of the Shadowmen 11*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Leviathan Creek* in *Tales of the Shadowmen 8*.

called Hassett and a German scientist named Grierson, were trying to salvage Captain Nemo's ship *Nautilus* from the submarine grotto here on Lincoln Island. With the help of my lawyer, Crosby, you were able to trace Missy-Lou and myself to my property in the bayous of Louisiana. Traveling there to enlist my help, we eventually set sail for the South Pacific in my yacht. Unfortunately, during a storm... wait, someone's coming..."

Three men entered the room and the remaining mental barriers that had shrouded Rouletabille's mind melted away like an ice cube dropped on the ground during a summer party. Two of the newcomers wore variants on the officer's uniform of the Catharus Society, but instead of the Thrush emblem of that organization, they instead sported patches and epaulettes with a kraken or squid-like design.

One of the men in uniform was James Worth—the man who had bragged to Rouletabille that his father, Adam Worth, had been the real Captain Nemo, and that Prince Dakkar—regarded by many as Nemo's real identity—had been a fiction created by West to allow him to steal and patent Adam Worth's brilliant inventions.

The other man, he had only seen in police photographs, never in person. He as one of the most vile perpetrators in the annals of criminology: the infamous Ian Hassett. He had commenced his dreadful career by murdering his brother, and then his father. He had been deliberately entombed alive by the world's premier consulting detective within an old Roman lead mine adjacent to the Great Rutland Cavern in Derbyshire. But he had succeeded, eventually, in escaping this fate. He was arrested for murdering a street woman in London, but found insane.

And that, perhaps, explained the presence of the third man, Dr. Grierson. He was one of the French detective's oldest surviving enemies—a German master spy who frequently posed as a psychiatrist or asylum head. Once, long ago, Rouletabille had fallen into his hands in London, and was subject to the most appalling torture—agonizing intramuscular injections of camphor and electro-convulsive therapy. He had been lucky to escape with his life on that occasion.

James Worth fixed Rouletabille with his grey eyes and laughed derisively.

"Well, well, the little French journalist Rouletabille, and playing way out of his league as usual," said Worth.

The sadistic Grierson moved closer, grabbed the detective by the hair and examined his face closely.

"It is Rouletabille," he said, "or at least it looks like him, but he has scarcely aged since I last saw him more than fifteen years ago. He is still little more than a boy."

"Merely proof of his long and close association with West. He's been allowed access to what West's intimates call the *old E.V. fluid*—the *Elixir Vitae* of legend."

"Why are we wasting time on them?" asked Hassett, his voice sickening cold and detached. "We are fully occupied with cutting away the entire ocean door. Kill the men now, but keep the woman alive. I may wish to use her later as a plaything."

With a practiced accuracy, Missy-Lou spat in Hassett's face from almost three yards away. Mortified, he moved to strike her, but was restrained by Worth.

"You can't touch her," he said. "I need her in one piece most of all. Get back to supervising the divers on the cutting team."

"So, all these days here and you never did figure out how to open the undersea door into the grotto. You had to blowtorch your way in," said West. "You made a hole big enough for a diver or a Maracot bathysphere to get in, but now you need to get the *Nautilus* out."

"Yes," replied Worth, "but we both know that that portal is ancient in origin. It wasn't put there by Nemo, but rather by the advanced civilization that occupied this area ages ago."

"If you say so," said West, smiling secretly.

"Actually, there is something I want to show you, West. Something I can't really explain."

"Something aboard the *Nautilus* that you do not understand?" mocked Rouletabille. "How can that be when your father was Captain Nemo, and you know all of his secrets from reading that journal?"

"I invented the journal merely as a means of manipulating you, Rouletabille. But I know many things about this 'mysterious island' that you do not. For instance, the journey by balloon from Richmond to the

South Pacific was no accident. And, of course, it did not take place in a Confederate observation balloon, but rather in a powered dirigible of my father's own design," said Worth.

"Is that truly what he told you?" said West. "It's nonsense."

"Was his father ever really here, Cyrus?" asked Rouletabille.

"Yes, but he sure as hell wasn't Nemo. In more pleasant circumstances, I'll tell you the story."

"I doubt if you'll ever be in pleasant circumstances for the remainder of your very short life," said Grierson, before adding, "I'll get the men to bring in the girl's body."

A few minutes later, two guards carried in a partially shattered transparent cylinder, set it down on the deck, and then left. Inside the tube was the body of a young blonde woman of about twenty-five. The remnants of an azure fluid—something like bluish, translucent mercury—still sloshed around in the bottom of the cylinder, just about half an inch worth. The girl had been dressed in a skin tight, futuristic looking golden fabric, but this had obviously been cut away by Grierson. And following that, a rib spreader had been applied. It was possible to see where the psychotic doctor had rooted around in her chest cavity with his scalpel.

"We had to smash the tube to get it open," said Worth. "There are a couple of others with men in them. This one was marked—*Mercurian Female—Rulu*."

"And yet, I have examined her organs and she is definitely human," said Grierson. "What's more, she has dental fillings and bridgework of the exact type used in the United States. She has inoculation marks and an appendectomy scar. She is definitely of Earth. So what game was being played out on this island, West? What was really happening here?"

"You'll never know," replied West.

"Mr. Worth, would you do me the favor of shooting Monsieur Rouletabille in the head with your sidearm?" asked Grierson.

"Why not? He knows the least of any of us about the island and Nemo, so he is of little use," said Worth, tugging his automatic from its holster.

West paled. He had not fully anticipated the ruthlessness of Grierson.

"Very well," said West. "I'll give you the full answer, but it may stretch your credulity. Nemo had a machine which could erase a person's personality—essentially evicting it like an unwanted lodger—and install a new, better personality in its place. This woman was a prostitute, a thief and a murderess. But by the time she had been processed by Nemo's machine, she had no recollection of her old life. She was effectively a completely different person. She really did believe herself to be a woman from another planet."

"That's preposterous. What possible purpose could it serve?" asked Grierson.

"Nemo had a vision not totally dissimilar from that of the Catharus Society—although it didn't involve murder on an industrial scale. He wanted to remove the underclass from society and turn its people into hunter-gatherer tribes residing in very isolated locations. On this island, he succeeded in turning modern-day men into primitives, using his machine—he called them the *Volcano People*. They were pirates, criminals, the dregs of the Earth. But the conditioning was perfect; their original personalities never re-emerged. His biological experiments would've provided the megafauna upon which they could've subsisted. But that was not enough. He also wanted to create a group of ultimately beneficent overlords—the technological hierarchy so beloved of Mr. Worth here. So Nemo created another group who believed themselves to be aliens. And with access to Nemo's advanced inventions, that was exactly what they appeared to be. Their first job was to menace the primitives, but in the end, they would've become their moral guides and law-givers, had the experiment not been terminated by Nemo's death."

"I believe him," said Worth. "My father was a scientific wizard, not the criminal mastermind—the *Napoleon of Crime*—that some have painted. And it is from him that the concept of a ruling class with superior technology originates."

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK