

Martin Gately: *Rouletabille and the New World Order*

Philadelphia, May 1926

1. Slow Train Missing

It was less than ten minutes since Rouletabille had left the P.R.T Trolley Station and he had already spotted the man to whom he needed to speak. The crowds at the Sesqui-Centennial Exposition celebrating 150 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence were thinner than he had anticipated. The sudden, sharp torrents of rain were scaring people away, and that was a terrible pity since there was so much to see in the exposition grounds.

He needed a picture of the giant illuminated reproduction of the Liberty Bell for his newspaper, but right now he didn't want to lose sight of James Worth. The man he had come to see was dressed as Robin Hood—Lincoln Green outfit, pheasant-feather cap, tights, quiver and longbow. He was with a gaggle of individuals who were masquerading as Robin's 'Merrie Men' and to a man, they were soaked to the skin following the last downpour. They huddled together under the canopy of the Exposition Administration Building and grinned widely at the press photographers who were snapping them.

The next group to parade into view was an orderly line of Plymouth Pilgrims; at least their wide-brimmed hats had given them some protection from the rain. Seeing then that James Worth was no longer required by the press cameramen, the Frenchman moved forward to introduce himself.

"Mr. Worth? I am Joseph Rouletabille," he said, extending his hand.

"I am most pleased to meet you, sir," said Worth. "Come let's head up towards my office. I really need to get out of these wet things anyway. All I can say is, I volunteered to play Robin Hood in the history pageant a good while before the long range weather forecast came in."

Worth ushered Rouletabille into the entrance hall of the administration building, where he was immediately struck by a beautifully executed mural showing the history of the United States. Every significant event from Penn's treaty with the Indians, through Washington crossing the Delaware to the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk was lovingly depicted. Above the mural the following words were written in gold: "*For I dipt in to the future, far as human eye could see; Saw the vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.*"

"I don't recognize that quotation," admitted Rouletabille.

"Ah, then you don't know your Tennyson," said Worth. "It is a line from that poet's greatest work—Locksley Hall. And this administration building borrows its name from the title of the poem; you are now in Locksley Hall."

They took the elevator up to the fifth floor and passed the desks of dozens of clerks and press aides before finally reaching Worth's overly palatial office. The American invited Rouletabille to help himself from the cylindrical walnut cocktail cabinet while he disappeared into a private washroom to disrobe, towel himself dry and change into his suit. Obviously, prohibition was little enforced amongst the higher echelons of society. Rouletabille swiftly rustled up a matching pair of Rickety Scotch cocktails, using a generous amount of warming Talisker and probably a few too many drops of grapefruit bitters. After a gap of a few minutes, Worth emerged and gratefully sipped at the drink.

"That's one hell of a concoction, young man," said Worth, smacking his lips. "But let's get down to business. I am one of the organizers of this exposition; it's been many years in the planning and, because of the weather, we're losing money hand-over-fist."

"You need an Indian witch Doctor to improve the weather, not a detective," said Rouletabille.

"Don't think I haven't considered it," said Worth, "but that is not why you are here. In an effort to promote the exposition, I laid on a series of special free trains to transport people who might not

otherwise have been able to afford to come. Last Thursday, one of these trains disappeared with everyone on it. There is simply no sign of the train at all—it's like it vanished off the face of the Earth.”

“Hardly, a unique problem, Mr. Worth. It puts me in mind of the case of the ‘Lost Special’ in which the great detective Sherlock Holmes was peripherally involved. If memory serves, the train was concealed on the disused railroad leading to a mine. I assume that this train too was lost in a mining area?”

“Yes, in fact, in the heart of anthracite mining territory, up in Luzerne County. But this train won't be concealed down a disused mineshaft or some such, since every single mine in that vicinity is open for business and busy as a bee hive. No, someone wants to stop people from coming to the exposition by generating bad publicity. Doubtless they expected the story to break by now, but I can tell you that every newspaper publisher on the eastern seaboard is a personal friend of mine. The lid is on this story tight, just not forever. I want you to go to Luzerne and find that train. Your reputation as a solver of impossible crimes precedes you. Surely this is right up your alley?” said Worth.

“I don't know, Mr. Worth. The lack of uniqueness in this case is not attractive. Holmes and at least one of his successors have been involved in very similar puzzles. While I have every sympathy with the families of those who have disappeared in such circumstances, this is likely to be a case where manpower will be key to solving the crime and finding the locomotive. It is a matter for the official police, not a lone detective, even one with skills such as mine,” said Rouletabille.

“Well, that certainly disappoints me. I won't insult you by offering you vast amounts of money. But I believe I do have something that could entice you to commit yourself. I know that you are greatly interested in the events that took place on the so-called ‘Mysterious Island’ some decades ago and that Cyrus West and General Herbert Brown were personally known to you...”

“They were, indeed. God rest their souls,” said Rouletabille.

Worth moved to the area behind his desk and slid to one side a wooden panel revealing the portrait of a belligerent looking man with heavy side whiskers.

“This is my father, Adam Worth. He was an associate of Cyrus West, and like him he was a Civil War *bounty jumper*—a man who enlisted in the army under false names in order to claim a bounty and then deserted, only to re-enlist under another false name. I'm not proud of my father. In fact, he was something of a villain. But he never painted himself to be a hero in later life, like West and Brown. The Mysterious Island castaways were not what they pretended to be. And the tales of their adventures on Lincoln Island were a pack self-serving lies. I know this because my father was on Lincoln Island with them—although his name was expunged from all the stories,” said Worth.

Worth then tugged open his desk drawer and pulled out a worn and water damaged leather bound journal.

“This book is my father's record of what really happened on Lincoln Island and if you find the missing train for me, I'll happily let you read it,” said Worth.

Rouletabille considered carefully, while reining in the surge of anger inside him. He could not believe for one moment that Cyrus West had been a dishonest man. In the case of his old friend Herbert Brown, it seemed even more unlikely. He was consumed with the desire to grab the book from Worth's hand and commence to read it now. He suppressed the urge and lit his pipe instead.

“Very well. I shall take on this case, in order to have access to that journal. You have succeeded in piquing my curiosity in a most extreme fashion,” said Rouletabille.

“I am very pleased to hear that,” said Worth. “Now I realize that this information has probably come as a shock to you. But there is really no need for you and me to fall out. Instead, why don't you show me how to make that cocktail? It really is delicious.”

And so, after a few more drinks, Rouletabille came to find himself liking James Worth irrespective of the man's rather manipulative nature. He was, admittedly, a little superficial, but there was a high gloss of charm and a personal magnetism about him that was difficult to ignore. He had diverse business interests in pharmaceuticals, agriculture, armaments and tool manufacture. His knowledge of the history of the United States had the pedantic completeness of the self-educated man, and he made no reference to having attended university. Plainly, he was one of the richest and most influential men in Philadelphia.

“Tell me, Mr. Worth, why did you play the part of Robin Hood in the History Pageant; and more importantly, why was Robin Hood including in a pageant of American history at all?” asked Rouletabille.

“Robin Hood is more than merely my favorite character, he is an early embodiment of the spirit of rebellion, just like Ned Ludd or the Scarecrow of Romney Marsh. In that rebelliousness lies the genesis of the United States, just as much or perhaps even more than in the desire of the Pilgrim Fathers for religious freedom,” said Worth.

“Ned Ludd?” queried the detective.

“Perhaps you’re not familiar with him. His followers, the Luddites, destroyed machinery in an attempt to halt the creeping mechanization that has ultimately soiled this world and profaned the glorious rural idyll of the past,” said Worth.

“You are a most unusual man, Mr. Worth. I don’t think I’ve ever heard an American complain that there is too much mechanization.”

“To be honest, my friend, I don’t even like guns, let alone machines. I prefer a good longbow in my hand for hunting, especially when I’m stalking deer. Let’s go down to the shooting gallery in the basement and I’ll show you how good a shot I am.”

They took the elevator down into the sub-basement area, which opened up into an expansive area about the size of a football field. There was a trestle table sagging under the weight of various weapons, including crossbows and a full-sized six-foot longbow. Fifty yards away various targets had been set up and one of them was a metal suit of armor. Worth deftly picked up the bow and nocked an arrow to the string, pulled back effortlessly, aimed just for a moment, and let fly the arrow. There was a muffled clang, as if a bullet had struck an old galvanized bucket at extreme range and the suit of armor was impaled by the arrow. Now, as if prove that this was no fluke, Worth shot three more, and the plate mail started to resemble Saint Sebastian at his martyrdom.

“You give it a shot,” said Worth.

And so, with some hesitation the Frenchman picked up the bow and clumsily got the arrow into place. The draw weight of the bow seemed immense to Rouletabille’s unaccustomed muscles. He drew back and drew back until his shoulder burned. It felt like at least 150 lbs of pull was required. His arm started to shake, so he released the string. The arrow flashed past the target: a miss, but perhaps not so wide as Rouletabille had been expecting.

“Not bad for a beginner,” said Worth. “Now, I don’t want to keep you here too late since you need to be at Vermissa Junction in Luzerne tomorrow. But if we just practice for a couple of hours, I think you’ll be surprised how much your aim improves.”

It seemed that Rouletabille had again encountered a man that one simply could not say no to. He sighed inwardly and reached for another arrow, rather desperately wishing that he had brought the makings of another Ricketty Scotch cocktail down here with him.

The following morning, Rouletabille was in the restaurant car of the all-stopping slow train to Scranton. He’d finished up his late breakfast of bacon and eggs and was now savoring some strong black coffee. He’d already laid out a large scale map of the county on his table and weighted down the corners with the salt and pepper shakers and a bottle of Hunt’s tomato ketchup. Perhaps some inspiration would strike him soon. He could not imagine that anything would be possible other than simply narrowing down the territory to be searched as much as possible, disembarking to gather a posse with the local sheriff’s office and roving endlessly, perhaps fruitlessly, over the terrain.

The detective took to staring out of the window, desperate for some sort of inspiration. The steady rhythm and movement of the train had the opposite effect on him to what he was accustomed. It did not lull or relax him; instead it set his nerves on edge and generated a feeling as if a ball of ice were slowly forming in his stomach. Lunchtime came and went, and he chewed without real appetite on sandwiches filled with blue-veined Chester County cheese.

The arrival of one particular man in the restaurant car burned off the mist of his despondency. The man was very tall, at least six and a half feet tall and built more powerfully than a circus strongman. He wore a tailored blue woolen suit with a white shirt and red tie, as well as sporting large wire framed

spectacles which served to give him a scholarly, almost owlish appearance. Rouletabille wondered if he might be a fellow reporter. Yet, perhaps the most striking thing about this giant was the streak of white hair that ran through his otherwise jet black tonsure from the center of his forehead hairline all the way to the nape of his neck. Rouletabille could not account for the sudden rush of goosebumps that originated somewhere near his shoulders and descended quickly to his forearms. He had seen this man before. He recognized not so much his face as his unique physiognomy and lithe, pantherish movement. Could he be mistaken? No, the more he looked, the more certain he was.

Rouletabille got up from his table and approached the bar, where the newcomer was ordering a glass of lemonade.

“Pardon me, sir,” said Rouletabille. “I believe you are a veteran of the French Army. I too served under Captain Crouan during the Great War. I remember all too well the day that you carried an immense canvas bundle of rations and ammunition through no-man’s land to relieve our position. You leapt in great bounds across the wire and the mud. It was almost as if you had the power of flight. Afterwards, they tried to tell us that it was all an illusion; some form of mass hysteria. But my eyes do not play tricks, not then or now. I remember you. You are Private Danner.”

At first, Rouletabille thought that the man might deny it. But instead his weathered face cracked into a sardonic smile.

“Speak softly, my old comrade-in-arms and call me Mark Rainham—that’s the name I’m currently travelling under,” said Danner. “You will have to refresh my memory on your monicker. I’m afraid I cannot recall the names of all the soldiers I served with,” said the Adonis-like warrior.

“You never knew my name. I was just one of many you helped that day. I am Joseph Rouletabille.”

“Perhaps I did not know you then, but I know you now. The detective who solved the *Mystery of the Yellow Room* needs no introduction. Yet, you are far younger than I would have supposed,” said Danner.

“I am here to investigate another mystery—the disappearance of Exposition Loco 481 bound for Philadelphia. Though I have little confidence that this is a puzzle that I can solve.”

“Good Lord!” said Danner. “This surely cannot be a coincidence. I have been hired to travel on trains during the Exposition to guard against any nefarious attack such as may have befallen the missing train.”

“And who has given you this commission?” asked the detective.

“Why, the organizer of the Philadelphia Exposition, James Worth,” said Danner.

“It is curious that he did not inform me of your involvement. He did not seem the sort of man to allow something to slip his mind,” said Rouletabille.

The two men sat together for half an hour or so, trying to imagine in what circumstances a locomotive could disappear from its prescribed route. The discussion went swiftly in circles. With no long tunnel on this track, the only thing that might account for the disappearance was the train being diverted onto a mining company track—the exact same thing that had happened to the ‘Lost Special;’ in effect, it was a non-mystery. Sherlock Holmes, according to the article in *The Times* which Rouletabille half-recalled, had not even bothered to leave his Baker Street rooms in order to solve the conundrum. The problem with a train was that it left traces of its passing, but to deduce how it was done would not necessarily result in the discovery of the missing train. In country such as this, with mines, slag heaps, industrial waste lagoons and foundries, a thousand men might look for a locomotive for weeks and never find it. And what if the locomotive was now hidden in plain sight? Repainted, disguised... The problem was maddening in its complexity. Where were the passengers? Had none of them escaped? What dreadful fate had befallen them?

As if in answer, a sudden whine emanated from the axles and couplings and the slow train to Scranton heaved to the left. Crockery and silverware slid to the floor, women squealed, then regained their composure with a giggle. Rouletabille looked around. There were certainly plenty of beautiful young women in the carriage.

“We took those points far too quickly,” judged Rouletabille.

“Then it’s begun,” said Danner.

Rouletabille consulted his map for the last time and pondered the situation. Worth had been wrong to think that only trains heading for the Exposition would be targeted. The slow train for Scranton was quite plainly no longer bound for its original destination.

Danner downed the dregs of his third lemonade.

“No reason to alarm the other passengers,” he said.

“No. But we need to get to the engine cab,” said Rouletabille.

The two men got up without a further word and worked their way through the two first-class cars towards the luggage cars, where they could most likely converse without being overheard.

“So, we’ve been diverted off the main railroad onto a private track that runs North East of Wyoming Valley. This is very isolated anthracite mining country. We need to find out if the engineer and fireman are in on this, and if not, get them to stop the train or reverse it,” said Danner.

“They didn’t slow down for the points change. And they haven’t stopped. We better go look and see,” said the Frenchman.

Rouletabille opened the door onto the coupling platform. Smuts and cinders from the smoke stack swirled around him, but his view of the engine was blocked by the tender car. The detective ascended the ladder at the back of the car and readied himself to crawl over the coal down and into the cab. His suit was going to get ruined. As Rouletabille reached the top of the ladder, he saw that there was a man in a strange military uniform in the cab aiming a rifle at him. His brain barely had time to compute that the weapon strongly resembled the pneumatic carbines used by the crew of the legendary submarine, *The Nautilus*, when with a spitting hiss a projectile was launched at him. The bullet, or dart, clipped the fabric of the suit at the shoulder. Then Rouletabille was aware of a powerful pair of hands pulling him back to safety.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you go first,” said Danner, with a smile. “Stay here, pal, I’ll deal with this.”

Danner leapt on top of the tender car and stood on the heap of coal, seemingly oblivious to the danger in which he was putting himself. He was a sitting duck target for the marksman in the cab. He was struck several times by bullets, which did little more than blast away the fabric of his suit and leave angry dark welts on his skin.

In fact, there were two oddly uniformed soldiers in the cab; aside from the one blazing away at Danner, there was one keeping the driver and fireman covered. Danner strode confidently across the coal, knowing that his steel-hard skin meant that he was virtually invulnerable to bullets. During battles in the Great War, there were times when he had been constantly raked by heavy machine gun fire, but had suffered little more than bruising. Then his hawk-like eyes noticed that the marksman was swapping the steel grey ammo magazine of his rifle for a light powder blue one which he had removed from a satchel at his shoulder. Shooting from the hip, the man fired at Danner again, just a split second before the veteran planned to jump down into the cab and smash open the skulls of the two soldiers.

Danner reeled back in the most agonizing pain that he had ever experienced in his entire life. The impact knocked him backwards and he found himself lying on the coupling platform, having fallen from the top of the tender. Danner could barely keep himself from screaming; the agony did not diminish one iota. Rouletabille rushed to his assistance and, immediately, saw the source of the problem. Sticking into Danner’s skin was something like a tightly wound glowing glass corkscrew. He placed his fingers around it and tried to wrench it from his old comrade’s flesh. Now it was Rouletabille’s turn to suppress a scream. The glass corkscrew was white-hot and the Frenchman could smell his skin burning like meat on a griddle. He let go and blew on his scorched fingers.

“Lay still, my friend,” soothed Rouletabille, although he suspected that the almost super-human warrior could no longer hear him. His eyes had rolled far back in his head and he was jerking like an epileptic.

A few moments later, Danner was quite still, unconscious and breathing shallowly. The detective theorized that he would need something like a pair of pliers to get the dreadful projectile out of his comrade’s skin. There might be such an implement in the toolbox in the cab, but how on earth was he supposed to reach it?

As usual, the powerful engine that was Rouletabille's deductive powers worked away unbidden. The presence of the soldiers with a weapon that could immobilize a man as apparently unkillable as Danner suggested that his presence had been expected, and catered for.

Now the train began to slow, and Rouletabille looked up at the stark, blasted countryside of this anthracite mining area. It seemed as bleak and lonely as another planet. Incongruously, a painted sign with a cheerful motif and bold black letters seemed to welcome them to their final destination. The sign said simply *CATHARUS MINE*, and depicted on it was a rather deft and delicately drawn picture of a bird with a mottled breast.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK...