

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

The Secret of the Night By Gaston Leroux

THRILLING MYSTERY STORY OF RUSSIAN INTRIGUE BY NOTED FRENCH AUTHOR.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Young Joseph Rouletabille, ostensibly a reporter for a Parisian newspaper, but in fact a detective of renown, is called to the villa by the Count...

extended, ears erect, watched like beasts, like beasts on the scent.

Yes, yes, there had been a slight noise in the lock. A key turned, softly, softly, in the lock and then—silence; and then another little noise, a grinding sound, a slight grating of wire, above, then on the bolt; upon the bolt which shone in the subdued glow of the nightlamp.

Then the door was pushed slowly, so slowly, it opened.

Through the opening the shadow of an arm stretched, an arm which held in its fingers something which shone. Rouletabille felt Matrena ready to bound. He encircled her, he pressed her in his arms, he restrained her in silence, and he had a horrible fear of hearing her suddenly shout, while the arm stretched out, almost touched the pillow on the bed where the general continued to sleep a sleep of peace such as he had not known for a long time.

VII

Arsenate of Soda.

The mysterious hand held a phial and poured the entire contents into the poison. Then the hand withdrew as it had come, slowly, prudently, slyly, and the key turned in the lock and the bolt slipped back into place.

Like a wolf, Rouletabille, warning Matrena for a last time not to budge, gained the landing-place, bounded towards the stairs, slid down the banister right to the veranda, crossed the drawing-room like a flash and reached the little sitting-room without having jostled a single piece of furniture. He noticed nothing, saw nothing. All around was undisturbed and silent.

The first light of dawn filtered through the blinds. He was able to make out that the only closed door was the one to Natacha's chamber. He stopped before that door, his heart beating, and listened. But no sound came to his ear. He had glided so lightly over the carpet that he was sure he had not been heard. Perhaps that door would open. He waited. In vain. It seemed to him there was nothing alive in that house except his heart. He was stifled with horror that he glimpsed, that he almost touched, although that door remained closed. He felt along the wall in order to reach the window, pulled aside the curtain. Window and blinds of the little room giving on the Neva were closed. The bar of iron inside was in its place. Then he went to the passage, mounted and descended the narrow servants' stairway, looked all about, in all the rooms, feeling everywhere with silent hands, assuring himself that the lock had been tampered with. On his return to the veranda, as he raised his head, he saw at the top of the main staircase a figure wan as death, a spectral apparition amid the shadows of the passing night, who leaned toward him. It was Matrena Petrovna. She came down, silent as a phantom, and he no longer recognized her voice when she demanded of him, "Where? I require that you tell me. Where?"

"I have looked everywhere," he said, so low that Matrena had to come nearer to understand his whisper. "Everything is shut tight. And there is no one about."

Matrena looked at Rouletabille with all the power of her eyes, as though she would discover his inmost thoughts, but his clear glance did not waver, and she saw there was nothing he wished to hide. Then Matrena pointed her finger at Natacha's chamber.

"You have not gone in there?" she inquired.

He replied, "It is not necessary to enter there."

"I will enter there, myself, nevertheless," said she, and she set her teeth.

He barred her way with his arms spread out.

"If you hold the life of someone dear," said he, "don't go a step farther."

"But the person is in that chamber. The person is there. It is there you will find out!" And she waved him aside with a gesture, as though she were sleepwalking.

To recall her to the reality of what he had said to her and to make her understand what he desired, he had to grip her wrist in the vise of his nervous hand.

"The person is not there, perhaps," he said, shaking his head. "Understand me now?"

But she did not understand him. She said: "Since the person is nowhere else, the person must be there."

But Rouletabille continued obstinately: "No, no. Perhaps he is gone."

"Gone! And everything locked on the inside!"

"That is not a reason," he replied.

But she could not follow his thoughts any further. She wished absolutely to make her way into Natacha's chamber. The obsession of that was upon her.

"If you enter there," said he, "and if (as is most probable) you don't find what you seek there, all is lost! And as to me, I give up the whole thing."

She sank in a heap onto a chair.

"Don't despair," he murmured. "We don't know for sure yet."

She shook her poor old head dejectedly.

"We know that only she is here, since no one has been able to enter and since no one has been able to leave."

That, in truth, filled her brain, prevented her from discerning in any corner of her mind the thought of Rouletabille. Then the impossible dialogue resumed.

"I repeat that we do not know that the person has gone," repeated the reporter, and demanded her keys.

"Foolish," she said. "What do you want them for?"

"To search outside as we have searched inside."

"Why, everything is locked on the inside."

"Madame, once more, that is no reason that the person may not be outside."

He consumed five minutes opening the door of the veranda, so many were his pre-

cautions. She watched him impatiently.

He whispered to her: "I am going out, but don't you lose sight of the little sitting-room. At the least movement call me; fire a revolver if you need to."

He slipped into the garden with the same precautions for silence. From the corner that she kept to, through the doors left open, Matrena could follow all the movements of the reporter and watch Natacha's chamber at the same time. The attitude of Rouletabille continued to confuse her beyond all expression. She watched what he did as if she thought him besotted. The door on guard out in the roadway also watched the young man through the bars of the gate in consternation, as though he thought him a fool. Along the paths of beaten earth or cement which offered no chance for footprints Rouletabille hurried silently. Around him he noted that the grass of the lawn had not been trodden. And then he paid no more attention to his steps. He seemed to study attentively the toy color in the east, breathing the delicacy of dawning morning in the Isles, amid the silence of the earth, which still slumbered.

Rare-headed, face thrown back, hands behind his back, eyes raised and fixed, he made a few steps, then suddenly stopped as if he had been given an electric shock. As soon as he seemed to have recovered from that shock he turned around and went a few steps back to another path, into which he advanced, straight ahead. His face high, with the same fixed look that he had had up to the time he so suddenly stopped, as if something or someone advised or warned him not to go further. He continually worked back toward the house, and thus he traveled all the paths that led from the villa, but in all these excursions he took pains not to place himself in the field of vision from Natacha's window, a restricted field because of its location just around an abutment of the building. To ascertain about this window he crept on all fours up to the garden edge that ran along the foot of the wall and had sufficient proof that no one had jumped out that way. Then he went to rejoin Matrena in the veranda.

"No one has come into the garden this morning," said he, "and no one has gone out of the villa into the garden. Now I am going to look outside the grounds. Wait here; I'll be back in five minutes."

He went away, knocked discreetly on the window of the lodge and waited some seconds. Ermolai came out and opened the gate for him. Matrena moved to the threshold of the little sitting-room and watched Natacha's door with horror. She felt her legs give under her and she could not stand up under the diabolic thought of such a crime. Ah, that arm, that arm! reaching out, making its way, with a little shining phial in its hand. Pains of Christ! What could there be in the damnable books over which Natacha and her companion pored that could make such abominable crimes possible? Ah, Natacha, Natacha! It was from her that she would have desired the answer, straining her almost to stifling on her rough bosom and strangling her with her own strong hand that she might not hear the response. Ah, Natacha, Natacha, whom she had loved so much! She sank to the floor, crept across the carpet to the door and lay there.

stretched like a beast, and buried her head in her arms while she wept over her daughter. Natacha, Natacha, whom she had cherished as her own child, and who did not hear her. Ah, what use that the little fellow had gone to search outside when the whole truth lay behind this door? Thinking of him, she was embarrassed lest he should find her in that animalistic posture, and she rose to her knees and worked her way over to the window that looked out upon the Neva. The angle of the slanting blinds let her see well enough what passed outside, and what she saw made her spring to her feet. Below her the reporter was going through the same incomprehensible maneuvers that she had seen him do in the garden. Three pathways led to the little road that ran along the wall of the villa by the bank of the Neva. The young man, still with his hands behind his back and with his face up, took them one after the other. In the first he stopped at the first step. He didn't take more than two steps in the second. In the third, which cut obliquely toward the right and seemed to run to the bank nearest Krestowsky Ostrow, she saw him advance slowly at first, then more quickly among the small trees and hedges. Once only he stopped and looked closely at the trunk of a tree, against which he seemed to pick out something invisible, and then continued to the bank. There he sat down on a stone and appeared to reflect, and then suddenly he cast off his jacket and trousers, picked out a certain place on the bank across from him, finished undressing and plunged into the stream. She saw at once that he swam like a porpoise, keeping beneath and showing his head from time to time, breathing, then diving below the surface again. He reached Krestowsky Ostrow in a clump of reeds. Then he disappeared. Below him, surrounded by trees, could be seen the red tiles of the villa which sheltered Boris and Michael. From the villa a person could see the window of the sitting-room in General's Trebasoff's residence, but not what might occur along the bank of the river just below its walls. An ivotchick drove along the distant route of Krestowsky, conveying in his carriage a company of young officers and young women who had been feasting and who sang as they rode; then deep silence ensued. Matrena's eyes searched for Rouletabille, but could not find him. How long was he going to stay hidden like that? She pressed her face against the chill window. What was she waiting for? She waited perhaps for someone to make a move on this side, for the door near her to open and the traitorous figure of The Other to appear.

A hand touched her carefully. She turned. Rouletabille was there, his face all scarred by red scratches, without collar or necktie, having hastily resumed his clothes. He appeared furious as he surprised her in his disarray. She let him lead her as though she were a child. He drew her to his room and closed the door.

(To Be Continued.)

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