

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 Russia by the Czar to save the life of General Trebassoff (Feodor Feodorovitch), who has been condemned to death by the Nihilists. He is received by the General's ever-faithful and ever-watchful wife, Madame Trebassoff (Matrena Petrovna). He meets Natacha, the General's daughter by a previous marriage.

The General is at his villa, surrounded by a few faithful friends. Rouletabille learns of the first two attempts against the life of the General from Madame Trebassoff.

**R**OULETABILLE said to himself as Matrena talked, "I never have seen men so gay, and yet they know perfectly they are apt to be blown up all together any moment." That he had tears in his eyes, Rouletabille said to himself as Matrena talked, "I never have seen men so gay, and yet they know perfectly they are apt to be blown up all together any moment."

General Trebassoff, who had steadily watched Rouletabille, who, for that matter, had been kept in eye by everyone there, said:

"Eh, eh, monster le journaliste, you find us very gay?"

"I find you very brave," said Rouletabille quietly.

"How is that?" said Feodor Feodorovitch, smiling.

"You must pardon me for thinking of the things that you seem to have forgotten entirely."

He indicated the general's wounded leg.

"The chances of war! the chances of war!" said the general. "A leg here, an arm there. But, as you see, I am still here. They will end by growing tired and leaving me in peace. Your health, my friend!"

"Your health, general!"

"You understand," continued Feodor Feodorovitch, "there is no occasion to excite ourselves. It is our business to defend the empire at the peril of our lives. We find that quite natural, and there is no occasion to think of it. I have had terrors enough in other directions, not to speak of the terrors of love, that are more ferocious than you can yet imagine. Look at what they did to my poor friend the Chief of the Surete, Bolchikoff. He was commendable certainly. There was a brave man. Of an evening, when his work was over, he always left the bureau of the prefecture and went to join his wife and children in their apartment in the rue des Loups. Not a soldier! No guard! The others had every chance. One evening a score of revolutionaries, after having driven away the terrorized servants, mounted to his apartments. He was dining with his family. They knocked and he opened the door. He saw who they were, and tried to speak. They gave him no time. Before his wife and children, mad with terror and on their knees before the revolutionaries, they read him his death-sentence. A fine end that to a dinner!"

As he listened Rouletabille paled and he kept his eyes on the door as if he expected to see it open of itself, giving access to ferocious Nihilists of whom one, with a paper in his hand, would read the sentence of death to Feodor Feodorovitch. Rouletabille's stomach was not yet seasoned to such stories. He almost regretted momentarily, having taken the terrible responsibility of dismissing the police. After what Koupraine had confided to him of things that had happened in this house, he had not hesitated to risk everything on that audacious decision, but all the same, all the same—these stories of Nihilists who appear at the end of a meal, death-sentence in hand, they haunted him, they upset him. Certainly it had been a piece of foolhardiness to dismiss the police.

"Well," he asked, conquering his misgivings and resuming, as always, his confidence in himself, "then, what did they do then, after reading the sentence?"

"The Chief of the Surete knew he had no time to spare. He did not ask for it. The revolutionaries ordered him to bid his family farewell. He raised his wife, his children, clasped them, bade them be of good courage, then said he was ready. They took him into the street. They stood him against a wall. His wife and children watched from a window. A volley sounded. They descended to secure the body, pierced with twenty-five bullets."

"That was exactly the number of wounds that were made on the body of little Jacques Zloriksky," came in the even tones of Natacha.

"Oh, you, you always find an excuse," grumbled the general. "Poor Bolchikoff did his duty, as I did mine."

"Yes, papa, you acted like a soldier. That is what the revolutionaries ought not to forget. But have no fear for us, papa; because if they kill you we will all die with you."

"And gayly, too," declared Athanase Georgevitch. "They should come this evening. We are in form!"

Upon which Athanase filled the glasses again.

"None the less, permit me to say," ventured the timber-merchant, Thaddeus Tehnitchikof, timidly, "permit me

to say that this Bolchikoff was very imprudent."

"Yes, indeed, very gravely imprudent," agreed Rouletabille. "When a man has had twenty-five good bullets shot into the body of a child, he ought certainly to keep his home well guarded if he wishes to dine in peace."

He stammered a little toward the end of this, because it occurred to him that it was a little inconsistent to express such opinions, seeing what he had done with the guard over the General.

"Ah," cried Athanase Georgevitch, in a stage-struck voice. "Ah, it was not imprudence! It was contempt of death! Yes, it was contempt of death that killed him! Even as the contempt of death keeps us, at this moment, in perfect health. To you, ladies and gentlemen! Do you know anything lovelier, grander, in the world than contempt of death? Gaze on Feodor Feodorovitch and answer me. Superb! My word, superb! To you all! The revolutionaries who are not of the police are of the same mind regarding our heroes. They may curse the technicians who execute the terrible orders given them by those higher up, but those who are not of the police (there are some, I believe)—these surely recognize that men like the Chief of the Surete, our dead friend, are brave."

"Certainly," endorsed the General. "Counting all things, they need more heroism for a promenade in a salon than a soldier on a battlefield."

"I have met some of these men," continued Athanase in exalted vein. "I have found in all their homes the same—imprudence, as our young French friend calls it. A few days after the assassination of the Chief of Police in Moscow I was received by his successor in the same place where the assassination had occurred. He did not take the slightest precaution with me, whom he did not know at all, nor with men of the middle class who came to present their petitions, in spite of the fact that it was under precisely identical conditions that his predecessor had been slain. Before I left I looked over to where on the floor there had so recently occurred such agony. They had placed a rug there and on the rug a table, and on that table there was a book. Guess what book? 'Women's Stockings,' by Willy! And—and then—Your health, Matrena Petrovna. What's the odds?"

"You yourselves, my friends," declared the General, "prove your great courage by coming to share the hour's that remain of my life with me."

"Not at all, not at all! It is war."

"Yes, it is war."

"Oh, there's no occasion to pat us on the shoulder, Athanase," insisted Thaddeus modestly. "What risk do we run? We are well guarded."

"We are protected by the finger of God," declared Athanase, "because the police—well, I haven't any confidence in the police."

Michael Korsakoff, who had been for

a turn in the garden, entered during the remark.

"Be happy, then, Athanase Georgevitch," said he, "for there are now no police around the villa."

"Where are they?" inquired the timber-merchant uneasily.

"An order came from Koupraine to remove them," explained Matrena Petrovna, who exerted herself to appear calm.

"And are they not replaced?" asked Michael.

"No. It is incomprehensible. There must have been some confusion in the orders given." And Matrena reddened, for she loathed a lie and it was in tribulation of spirit that she used this fable under Rouletabille's directions.

"Oh, well, all the better," said the General. "It will give me pleasure to see my home rid of a while of such people."

Athanase was naturally of the same mind as the General, and when Thaddeus and Ivan Petrovitch and the orderlies offered to pass the night at the villa and take the place of the absent police, Feodor Feodorovitch caught a gesture from Rouletabille which disapproved the idea of this new guard.

"No, no," cried the General emphatically. "You leave at the usual time. I want now to get back into the ordinary run of things, my word! To live as everyone else does. We shall be all right. Koupraine and I have arranged the matter. Koupraine is less sure of his men, after all, than I am of my servants. You understand me. I do not need to explain further. You will go home to bed—and we will all sleep. Those are the orders. Besides, you must remember that the guard-post is only a step from here, at the corner of the road, and we have only to give a signal to bring them all here. But—more secret agents or special police—no, no! Good-night. All of us to bed now!"

They did not insist further. When Feodor had said, "Those are the orders," there was room for nothing more, not even in the way of polite insistence.

But before going to their beds all went into the veranda, where liqueurs were served by the brave Ermolat, as always. Matrena pushed the wheelchair of the General there, and he kept repeating, "No, no. No more such people. No more police. They only bring trouble!"

"Feodor! Feodor!" sighed Matrena whose anxiety deepened in spite of all she could do, "they watched over your dear life!"

"Life is dear to me only because of you, Matrena Petrovna."

"And not at all because of me, papa?" said Natacha.

"Oh, Natacha!"

He took both her hands in his. It was an affecting glimpse of family intimacy.

From time to time, while Ermolat

poured the liqueurs, Feodor struck his hand on the coverings over his leg.

"It gets better," said he. "It gets better."

Then melancholy showed in his rugged face, and he watched night deepen over the isles, the golden night of St. Petersburg. It was not quite yet the time of year for what they call golden nights there, the "white nights," nights which never deepen to darkness, but they were already beautiful in their soft clarity, caressed, here by the Gulf of Finland, almost at the same time by the last and the first rays of the sun, by twilight and dawn.

From the height of the veranda one of the most beautiful bits of the isles lay in view, and the hour was so lovely that its charm thrilled these people, of whom several, as Thaddeus, were still close to nature. It was he, first, who called to Natacha:

"Natacha! Natacha! Sing us your 'Soir des Iles.'"

Natacha's voice floated out upon the peace of the islands under the dim arched sky, light and clear as a night rose, and the guzla of Boris accompanied it. Natacha sang:

This is the night of the Isles—at the north of the world.  
The sky presses in its stainless arms the bosom of earth,  
Night kisses the rose that dawn gave to the twilight.  
And the night air is sweet and fresh across the shivering gulf,  
Like the breath of young girls from the world still farther north.  
Beneath the two lighted horizons, sinking and rising at once,  
The sun rolls rebounding from the gods at the north of the world.  
In this moment, beloved, when in the clear shadows of this rose-stained evening I am here alone with you,  
Respond, respond with a heart less timid to the holy, accustomed cry of "Good evening."

Ah, how Boris Nikolaevitch and Michael Korsakoff watched her as she sang! Truly, no one ever can guess the anger or the love that broods in a Slavic heart under a soldier's tunic, whether the soldier wisely plays at the guzla, as the correct Boris, or merely lounkes, twirling his mustache with his manicured and perfumed fingers, like Michael, the indifferent.

Natacha ceased singing, but all seemed to be listening to her still—the convivial group on the terrace appeared to be held in charmed attention, and the porcelain statuettes of men on the lawn, according to the mode of the Isles, seemed to lift on their short legs the better to hear pass the sighing harmony of Natacha in the rose nights at the north of the world.

Meanwhile Matrena wandered through the house from cellar to attic, watching over her husband like a dog on guard, ready to bite, to throw itself in the way of danger, to receive blows, to die, for its master—and hunting for Rouletabille, who had disappeared again.

(To Be Continued.)



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