

HOME AND FARM MAGAZINE SECTION SERIAL.

The Secret of the Night -- By Gaston Leroux

THRILLING MYSTERY STORY OF RUSSIAN INTRIGUE BY NOTED FRENCH AUTHOR.

I. Gayety and Dynamite.

"BARINIA, the young stranger has arrived."

"Where is he?"

"Oh, he is waiting at the lodge."

"I told you to show him to Natasha's sitting-room. Didn't you understand me, Ermolai?"

"Pardon, Barinia, but the young stranger, when I asked to search him, as you directed, flatly refused to let me."

"Did you explain to him that everybody is searched before being allowed to enter, that it is the order, and that even my mother herself has submitted to it?"

"I told him all that, Barinia; and I told him about madame, your mother."

"What did he say to that?"

"That he was not madame your mother. He acted angry."

"Well, let him come in without being searched."

"The Chief of Police won't like it."

"Do as I say."

Ermolai bowed and returned to the garden. The "barinia" left the veranda, where she had come for this conversation with the old servant of General Trebassoff, her husband, and returned to the dining-room in the datcha des Iles, where the gay Councillor Ivan Petrovitch was regaling his amused associates with his latest exploit at Cuba's resort. They were a noisy company, and certainly the quietest among them was not the General, who nursed on a sofa the leg which still held him captive after the recent attack, that to his old coachman and his two piebald horses had proved fatal. The story of the always-amiable Ivan Petrovitch (a lively, little, elderly man with his head bald as an egg) was about the evening before. After having, as he said, "recure la bouche"—for these gentlemen spoke French like their own language and used it among themselves to keep their servants from understanding—after having wet his whistle with a large glass of sparkling rosy French wine, he cried:

"You would have laughed, Feodor Feodorovitch. We had sung songs on the barque and then the Bohemians left with their music and we went out onto the river bank to stretch our legs and cool our faces in the freshness of the dawn, when a company of Cossacks of the Guard came along. I knew the officer in command and invited him to come along with us and drink the Emperor's health at Cuba's place. That officer, Feodor Feodorovitch, is a man who knows vintages and boasts that he has never swallowed a glass of anything so common as Crimean wine. When I named champagne he cried, 'Vive l'Empereur!' A true patriot. So we started, merry as school children. The entire company followed, then all the diners playing little whistles, and all the servants besides, single file. At Cuba's I hated to leave the companion officers of my friend at the door, so I invited them in, too. They accepted, naturally. But the subalterns were thirsty as well. I understand discipline. You know, Feodor Feodorovitch, that I am a stickler for discipline. Just because one is gay of a Spring morning, discipline should not be forgotten. I invited the officers to drink in a private room, and sent the subalterns into the main hall of the restaurant. Then the soldiers were thirsty, too, and I had drinks served to them out in the courtyard. Then, my word, there was a perplexing business, for now the horses whinnied. The brave horses, Feodor Feodorovitch, who also wished to drink the health of the Emperor. I was bothered about the discipline. Hall, court, all were full. And I could not put the horses in private rooms. Well, I made them carry out champagne in pails and then came the perplexing business I had tried so hard to avoid, a grand mixture of boots and horse-shoes that was certainly the liveliest thing I have ever seen in my life. But the horses were the most joyous, and danced as if a torch was held under their nostrils, and all of them, my word! were ready to throw their riders because the men were not of the same mind with them as to the route to follow! From our window we laughed fit to kill at such a mixture of sprawling boots and dancing hoofs. But the troopers finally got all their horses to barracks, with patience, for the Emperor's cavalry are the best riders in the world, Feodor Feodorovitch. And we certainly had a great laugh—Your health, Matrena Petrovna."

These last graceful words were addressed to Madame Trebassoff, who shrugged her shoulders at the undesired gallantry of the gay Councillor. She did not join in the conversation, excepting to calm the General, who wished to send the whole regiment to the guard-house, men and horses. And while the roistersers laughed over the adventure she said to her husband in the advisory voice of the helpful wife:

"Feodor, you must not attach importance to what that old fool Ivan tells you. He is the most imaginative man in the capital when he has had champagne."

"Ivan, you certainly have not had horses served with champagne in pails," the old boaster, Athanasios Georgevitch, protested jealously. He

was an advocate, well-known for his table-feats, who claimed the hardest drinking reputation of any man in the capital, and he regretted not to have invented that tale.

"On my word! And the best brands! I had won 4000 roubles, I left the little fete with 15 kopecks."

Matrena Petrovna was listening to Ermolai, the faithful country servant who wore always, even here in the city, his habit of fresh nankeen, his black leather belt, his large blue pantaloons and his boots glistening like ice, his country costume in his master's city home. Madame Matrena rose, after lightly stroking the hair of her step-daughter Natasha, whose eyes followed her to the door, indifferent apparently to the tender manifestations of her father's orderly, the soldier-poet, Boris Mourazoff, who had written beautiful verses on the death of the Moscow students, after having shot them, in the way of duty, on their barricades.

Ermolai conducted his mistress to the drawing-room and pointed across to a door that he had left open, which led to the sitting-room before Natasha's chamber.

"He is there," said Ermolai in a low voice.

Ermolai need have said nothing, for that matter, since Madame Matrena was aware of a stranger's presence in the sitting-room by the extraordinary attitude of an individual in a maroon frock coat bordered with false astrakhan, such as is on the coats of all the Russian police agents and makes the secret agents recognizable at first glance. This policeman was on his knees in the drawing-room watching what passed in the next room through the narrow space of light in the hinge-way of the door. In this manner, or some other, all persons who wished to approach General Trebassoff were kept under observation without their knowing it, after having been first searched at the lodge, a measure adopted since the latest attack.

Madame Matrena touched the policeman's shoulder with that heroic hand which had saved her husband's life and which still bore traces of the terrible explosion in the last attack, when she had seized the infernal machine intended for the General with her bare hand. The policeman rose and silently left the room, reached the veranda and lounged there on a sofa, pretending to be asleep, but in reality watching the garden paths.

Matrena Petrovna took his place at the hinge-vent. This was her rule; she always took the final glance at everything and everybody. She roved at all hours of the day and night round about the General, like a watch-dog, ready to bite, to throw itself before the danger, to receive the blows, to perish for its master. This had commenced at Moscow after the terrible repression, the massacre of revolutionaries under the walls of Presnia, when the surviving Nihilists left behind them a placard condemning the victorious General Trebassoff to death. Matrena Petrovna lived only for the General. She had vowed that she would not survive him. So she had double reason to guard him.

But she had lost all confidence even within the walls of her own home.

Things had happened even there that defied her caution, her instinct, her love. She had not spoken of these things save to the Chief of Police, Koupriane, who had reported them to the Emperor. And here now was the man whom the Emperor had sent, as the supreme resource, this young stranger Joseph Rouletabille, reporter.

"But he is a mere boy!" she exclaimed, without at all understanding the matter, this youthful figure, with soft, rounded cheeks, eyes clear and, at first view, extraordinarily naive, the eyes of an infant. True, at the moment Rouletabille's expression hardly suggested any superhuman profundity of thought, for, left in view of a table, spread with hors-d'oeuvres, the young man appeared solely occupied in digging out with a spoon all the caviare that remained in the jars. Matrena noted the rosy freshness of his cheeks, the absence of down on his lip and not a hint of beard, the thick hair, with the curl over the forehead. Ah, that forehead—the forehead was curious, with great overhanging cranial lumps which moved above the deep arcade of the eye-sockets while the mouth was busy—well, one would have said that Rouletabille had not eaten for a week. He was demolishing a great slice of Volgan sturgeon, contemplating at the same time with immense interest a salad of creamed cucumbers, when Matrena Petrovna appeared.

He wished to excuse himself at once and spoke with his mouth full.

"I beg your pardon, madame, but the Czar forgot to invite me to breakfast."

Madame Matrena smiled and gave him a hearty handshake as she urged him to be seated.

"You have seen his Majesty?"

"I come from him, madame. It is to Madame Trebassoff that I have the honor of speaking."

"Yes. And you are Monsieur—?"

"Joseph Rouletabille, madame. I do not add, 'At your service'—because I do not know about that yet. That is what I said just now to his Majesty."

"Then?" asked Madame Matrena, rather amused by the tone the conversation had taken and the slightly flurried air of Rouletabille.

"Why, then, I am a reporter, you

see. That is what I said at once to my editor in Paris. I am not going to take part in revolutionary affairs that do not concern my country, to which my editor replied, 'You do not have to take part. You must go to Russia to make an inquiry into the present status of the different parties. You will commence by interviewing the Emperor.' I said, 'Well, then, here goes,' and took the train."

"And you have interviewed the Emperor?"

"Oh, yes, that has not been difficult. I expected to arrive direct at St. Petersburg, but at Krasnoie-Coelo the train stopped and the grand marshal of the court came to me and asked me to follow him. It was very flattering. Twenty minutes later I was before his Majesty. He awaited me! I understood at once that this was obviously for something out of the ordinary."

"And what did he say to you?"

"He is a man of genuine majesty. He reassured me at once when I explained my scruples to him. He said there was no occasion for me to take part in the politics of the matter, but to save his most faithful servant, who was on the point of becoming the victim of the strangest family drama ever conceived."

Madame Matrena, white as a sheet, rose to her feet.

"Ah," she said simply.

But Rouletabille, whom nothing escaped, saw her hand tremble on the back of the chair.

He went on, not appearing to have noticed her emotion:

"His Majesty added these exact words: 'It is I who ask it of you; I and Madame Trebassoff. Go, monsieur, she awaits you.'"

He ceased and waited for Madame Trebassoff to speak.

She made up her mind after brief reflection.

"Have you seen Koupriane?"

"The Chief of Police? Yes. The grand-marshal accompanied me back to the station at Krasnoie-Coelo, and the Chief of Police accompanied me to St. Petersburg station. One could not have been better received."

"Monsieur Rouletabille," said Matrena, who visibly strove to regain her self-control, "I am not of Koupriane's opinion and I am not"—here she lowered her trembling voice—"of the opinion his Majesty holds. It is better for me to tell you at once, so that you may not regret intervening in an affair where there are—where there are—risks—terrible risks to run. No, this is not a family drama. The family is small, very small; the General, his daughter Natasha (by his former marriage), and myself. There could not be a family drama among us three. It is simply about my husband, monsieur, who did his duty as a soldier in defending the throne of his sovereign, my husband, whom they mean to assassinate! There is nothing else, no other situation, my dear little guest."

To hide her distress she started to carve a slice of jellied veal and carrot.

"You have not eaten, you are hungry. It is dreadful, my dear young man. See, you must dine with us, and then—you will say adieu. Yes, you will leave me all alone. I will undertake to save him all alone. Certainly, I will undertake it."

A tear fell on the slice she was carving. Rouletabille, who felt the brave woman's emotion affecting him also, braced himself to keep from showing it.

"I am able to help you a little all the same," he said. "Monsieur Koupriane has told me that there is a deep mystery. It is my vocation to get to the bottom of mysteries."

"I know what Koupriane thinks," she said, shaking her head. "But if I could bring myself to think that for a single day I would rather be dead."

The good Matrena Petrovna lifted her beautiful eyes to Rouletabille, brimming with the tears she held back.

She added quickly:

"But eat now, my dear guest; eat. My dear child, you must forget what Koupriane has said to you, when you are back in France."

"I promise you that, madame."

"It is the Emperor who has caused you this long journey. For me, I did not wish it. Has he, indeed, so much confidence in you?" she asked naively, gazing at him fixedly through her tears.

"Madame, I was just about to tell you. I have been active in some important matters that have been reported to him, and then sometimes your Emperor is allowed to see the papers. He has heard talk, too (for everybody talked of them, madame), about the Mystery of the Yellow Room and the Perfume of the Lady in Black."

Here Rouletabille watched Madame Trebassoff and was much mortified at the undoubted ignorance that showed in her frank face of either the yellow room or the black perfume.

"My young friend," said she, in a voice more and more hesitant, "you must excuse me, but it is a long time since I have had good eyes for reading."

Tears, at last ran down her cheeks. Rouletabille could not restrain himself any further. He saw in one flash all this heroic woman had suffered in her combat day by day with the death which hovered. He took her little

hands, whose fingers were overloaded with rings, tremulously into his own: "Madame, do not weep. They wish to kill your husband. Well, then, we will be two at least to defend him, I swear to you."

"Even against the Nihilists?"

"Aye, madame, against the world. I have eaten all your caviare. I am your guest. I am your friend."

As he said this he was so excited, so sincere and so droll that Madame Trebassoff could not help smiling through her tears. She made him sit down beside her.

"The Chief of Police has talked of you a great deal. He came here abruptly after the last attack and a mysterious happening that I will tell you about. He cried, 'Ah, we need Rouletabille to unravel this!' The next day he came here again. He had gone to the Court. There, everybody, it appears, was talking of you. The Emperor wished to know you. That is why steps were taken through the ambassador at Paris."

"Yes, yes. And naturally all the world has learned of it. That makes it so lively. The Nihilists warned me immediately that I would not reach Russia alive. That, finally, was what decided me on coming. I am naturally very contrary."

"And how did you get through the journey?"

"Not badly. I discovered at once in the train a young Slav assigned to kill me, and I reached an understanding with him. He was a charming youth, so it was easily arranged."

Rouletabille was eating away now at strange viands that it would have been difficult for him to name. Matrena Petrovna laid her fat little hand on his arm:

"You speak seriously?"

"Very seriously."

"A small glass of vodka?"

"No alcohol."

Madame Matrena emptied her little glass at a draught.

"And how did you discover him? How did you know him?"

"First, he wore glasses. All Nihilists wear glasses when traveling. And then I had a good claw. A minute before the departure from Paris I had a friend go into the corridor of the sleeping-car, a reporter who would do anything I said without even wanting to know why. I said, 'You call out suddenly and very loud, 'Hello, here is Rouletabille.' So he called, 'Hello, here is Rouletabille,' and all those who were in the already in the compartments came out, excepting the man with the glasses. Then I was sure about him."

Madame Trebassoff looked at Rouletabille, who turned as red as the comb of a rooster and was rather embarrassed at his fatuity.

"That deserves a rebuff, I know, madame, but from the moment the Emperor or all the Russians had desired to see me I could not admit that any mere man with glasses had not the curiosity to see what I looked like. It was not natural. As soon as the train was off I sat down by this man and told him who I thought he was. I was right. He removed his glasses and, looking me straight in the eyes, said he was glad to have a little talk with me before anything unfortunate happened. A half-hour later the entente-cordiale was signed. I gave him to understand that I was coming here simply on business as a reporter and that there was always time to check me if I should be indiscreet. At the German frontier he left me to go on, and returned tranquilly to his nitroglycerine."

"You are a marked man, also, my poor boy."

"Oh, they have not got us yet."

Matrena Petrovna coughed. That us overwhelmed her. With what calmness this boy that she had not known an hour proposed to share the dangers of a situation that excited general pity, but from which the bravest kept aloof either from prudence or dismay.

"Ah, my friend, a little of this fine smoked Hamburg beef?"

But the young man was already peering out fresh yellow beer.

"There," said he. "Now, madame, I am listening. Tell me first about the earliest attack."

"Now," said Matrena, "we must go to dinner."

Rouletabille looked at her wide-eyed.

"But, madame, what have I just been doing?"

Madame Matrena smiled. All these strangers were alike. Because they had eaten some hors-d'oeuvres, some zakouskis, they imagined their host would be satisfied. They did not know how to eat.

"We will go to the dining-room. The general is expecting you. They are at table."

"I understand I am supposed to know him."

"Yes, you have met in Paris. It is entirely natural that in passing through St. Petersburg you should make him a visit. You know him very well indeed, so well that he opens his home to you. Ah, yes, my stepdaughter also"—she flushed a little—"Natasha believes that her father knows you."

She opened the door of the drawing-room, which they had to cross in order to reach the dining-room.

(To Be Continued.)