

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. One of Rouletabille's first actions is to discover the secret police guarding the villa. Rouletabille hears of the third attempt on the General's life, by means of a clockwork bomb set in a vase of flowers on his table. It was frustrated by Madame Trebassoff, who was slightly injured by the explosion. The detective learns that Natacha is in love with Boris but also is very friendly towards Michael. He learns the secret of the night—the terrible nightmares that are experienced by the aged General. Natacha is suspected of complicity in the plots against the life of the General, but Rouletabille stoutly affirms his belief in her innocence. Though a great warning tells Rouletabille that his ward, the General, will be dead in 48 hours, the detective suggests a promenade by the sea, unattended.

"WHAT! You are going to leave us?" she cried instantly, breathless. "No, no. I do not wish it. I am willing to do without the police, but I am not willing to do without you. Everything might happen in your absence. Everything! Everything!" she repeated with singular energy. "Because, for me, I cannot feel sure as I should, perhaps. Ah, you make me say these things. Such things! But do not go. Do not be afraid; I am not going to leave you, Madame."

"Ah, you are good! You are kind, kind! Carachol! (Very well!)"

"I will not leave you. But I must not be at luncheon. If anyone asks where I am, say that I have my business to look after and have gone to interview political personages in the city."

"There's only one political personage in Russia," replied Madame Petrovna bluntly; "that is the Tsar."

"Very well; say I have gone to interview the Tsar."

"But no one will believe that. And where will you be?"

"I do not know myself. But I will be about the house."

"Very well, very well, dear little domovoi."

She left him, not knowing what she thought about it all, nor what she should think—her head was all in a muddle.

In the course of the morning Athanasios Georgevitch and Thaddeus Technichnikoff arrived. The general was already in the veranda. Michael and Boris arrived shortly after and inquired in their turn how he had passed the night without the police. When they were told that Feodor was going for a promenade that afternoon they applauded his decision. "Bravo! A promenade is a stielka (to the head of the island) at the hour when all St. Petersburg is driving there. That is fine. We will all be there." The general made them stay for luncheon. Natacha appeared for the meal, in rather melancholy mood. A little before luncheon she held a double conversation in the garden with Michael and Boris. No one ever could have known what these three young people had said if some stenographic notes in Rouletabille's memorandum-book did not give us a notion: the reporter had overheard, by accident surely, since all self-respecting reporters are quite incapable of eavesdropping.

The memorandum notes: Natacha went into the garden with a book, which she gave to Boris, who pressed her hand lingeringly to his lips. "Here is your book; I return it to you. I don't want any more of them, the ideas surge so in my brain. It makes my head ache. It is true, you are right, I don't love novelties. I can satisfy myself with Pouchkine perfectly. The rest are all one to me. Did you pass a good night?"

Boris (good-looking young man about thirty years old, blonde, a little effeminate, wistful. A curious appearance in the military household of so vigorous a general). "Natacha, there is not an hour that I can call truly good if I spend it away from you, dear Natacha."

"I ask you seriously if you have passed a good night?"

She touched his hand a moment and looked into his eyes, but he shook his head.

"What did you do last night after you reached home?" she demanded insistently. "Did you stay up?"

"I obeyed you; I only sat a half hour by the window looking over here at the villa, and then I went to bed."

"Yes, it is necessary you should get your rest. I wish it for you as for everyone else. This feverish life is impossible. Matrena Petrovna is getting us all ill, and we shall be prostrated."

"Yesterday," said Boris, "I looked at the villa for a half hour from my window. Dear, dear villa, dear night when I can feel you breathing, living near me. As if you had been against

my heart. I could have wept because I could hear Michael snoring in his chamber. He seemed happy. At last, I heard nothing more, there was nothing more to hear but the double chorus of frogs in the pools of the island. Our pools, Natacha, are like the enchanted lakes of the Caucasus which are silent by day and sing at evening; there are innumerable throngs of frogs which sing on the same chord, some of them on a major and some on a minor. The chorus speaks from pool to pool, lamenting and moaning across the fields and gardens and re-echoing like aeolian harps placed opposite one another."

"Do aeolian harps make so much noise, Boris?"

"You laugh? I don't find you yourself half the time. It is Michael who has changed you, and I am out of it. (Here they spoke in Russian.) I shall not be easy until I am your husband. I can't understand your manner with Michael at all."

(Here more Russian words which I do not understand.)

"Speak French; here is the garden."

"I do not like the way you are managing our lives. Why do you delay our marriage? Why?"

(Russian words from Natacha. Gesture of desperation from Boris.)

"How long? You say a long time? But that says nothing—a long time. How long? A year? Two years? Ten years? Tell me, or I will kill myself at your feet. No, no; speak or I will kill Michael. On my word! Like a dog!"

"I swear to you, by the dear head of your mother, Boris, that the date of our marriage does not depend on Michael."

(Some words in Russian. Boris, a little consoled, holds her hand lingeringly to his lips.)

Conversation between Michael and Natacha in the garden:

"Well? Have you told him?"

"I ended at last by making him understand that there is not any hope. It is necessary to have patience. I have to have it myself."

"He is stupid and provoking."

"Stupid, no. Provoking, yes, if you wish. But you, also are provoking."

"Natacha! Natacha!"

(Here more Russian.) As Natacha started to leave, Michael placed his hand on her shoulder, stopped her and said, looking her direct in the eyes:

"There will be a letter from Anouchka this evening, by a messenger at five o'clock." He made each syllable explicit. "Very important and requiring an immediate reply."

These notes of Rouletabille's are not followed by any commentary.

After luncheon the gentlemen played poker until half-past four, which is the "chief" hour for the promenade to the head of the island. Rouletabille had directed Matrena to start exactly at a quarter of five. He appeared in the meantime, announcing that he had just interviewed the Mayor of St. Petersburg, which made Athanasios laugh, who could not understand that anyone would come clear from Paris to talk with men like that. Natacha came from her chamber to join them for the promenade. Her father told her she looked too worried.

They left the villa. Rouletabille noted that the dyornicks were before the gate and that the schwitzar was at his post, from which he could detect everyone who might enter or leave the villa. Matrena pushed the golfing-chair herself. The General was radiant. He had Natacha at his right and at his left Athanasios and Thaddeus. The two orderlies followed, talking with Rouletabille, who had monopolized them. The conversation turned on the devotion of Matrena Petrovna, which

they placed above the finest heroic traits in the women of antiquity, and also on Natacha's love for her father. Rouletabille made them talk.

Boris Mourazoff explained that this exceptional love was accounted for by the fact that Natacha's own mother, the General's first wife, died in giving birth to their daughter, and accordingly Feodor Feodorovitch had been both father and mother to his daughter. He had raised her with the most touching care, not permitting anyone else, when she was sick, to have the care of passing the nights by her bedside.

Natacha was 7 years old when Feodor Feodorovitch was appointed Governor of Orel. In the country near Orel, during the Summer, the General and his daughter lived on neighboring terms near the family of old Petroff, one of the richest fur merchants in Russia. Old Petroff had a daughter, Matrena, who was magnificent to see, like a beautiful field flower. She was always in excellent humor, never spoke ill of anyone in the neighborhood, and not only had the fine manners of a city dame, but a great simple heart, which she lavished on the little Natacha.

The child returned the affection of the beautiful Matrena, and it was on seeing them always happy to find themselves together that Trebassoff dreamed of re-establishing his fireside. The nuptials were quickly arranged, and the child, when she learned that her good Matrena was to wed her papa, danced with joy. Then misfortune came only a few weeks before the ceremony. Old Petroff, who speculated on the exchange for a long time without anyone knowing about it, was ruined from top to bottom. Matrena came one evening to apprise Feodor Feodorovitch of this sad news and return his pledge to him. For all response Feodor placed Natacha in Matrena's arms. "Embrace your mother," he said to the child, and to Matrena, "From today I consider you my wife, Matrena Petrovna. You should obey me in all things. Take that reply to your father and tell him my purse is at his disposition."

The General was already, at that time, even before he had inherited the Cherenaleff, immensely rich. He had lands behind Nijni as vast as a province, and it would have been difficult to count the number of moujiks who worked for him on his property. Old Petroff gave his daughter and did not wish to accept anything in exchange. Feodor wished to settle a large allowance on his wife; his father opposed that, and Matrena sided with him in the matter against her husband, because of Natacha. "It belongs to the little one," she insisted. "I accept the position of her mother, but on the condition that she shall never lose a kopeck of her inheritance."

"So that," concluded Boris, "if the General died tomorrow she would be poorer than Job."

"Then the General is Matrena's sole resource," reflected Rouletabille aloud.

"I can understand her hanging onto him," said Michael Korsakoff, blowing the smoke of his yellow cigarette. "Look at her. She watches him like a treasure."

"What do you mean, Michael Nikolavitch?" said Boris, curiously. "You believe, do you, that the devotion of Matrena Petrovna is not disinterested? You must know her very poorly to dare utter such a thought."

"I have never had that thought, Boris Alexandrovitch," replied the other in a tone curter still. "To be able to imagine that anyone who lives in the Trebassoffs' home could have such a thought needs an ass' head, surely."

"We will speak of it again, Michael Nikolavitch."

"At your pleasure, Boris Alexandrovitch."

They had exchanged these latter

words tranquilly continuing their walk and negligently smoking their yellow tobacco. Rouletabille was between them. He did not regard them; he paid no attention even to their quarrel; he had eyes only for Natacha, who just now quit her place beside her father's wheel-chair and passed by them with a little nod of the head, seeming in haste to retrace the way back to the villa.

"Are you leaving us?" Boris demanded of her.

"Oh, I will rejoin you immediately. I have forgotten my umbrella."

"But I will go and get it for you," proposed Michael.

"No, no. I have to go to the villa. I will return right away."

She was already past them. Rouletabille, during this, looked at Matrena Petrovna, who looked at him also, turning toward the young man a visage pale as wax. But no one else noted the emotion of the good Matrena, who resumed pushing the General's wheel-chair.

Rouletabille asked the officers, "Was this arrangement because the first wife of the General, Natacha's mother, was rich?"

"No. The General, who always had his heart in his hand," said Boris, married her for her great beauty. She was a beautiful girl of the Caucasus, of excellent family besides, that Feodor Feodorovitch had known when he was in garrison at Tiflis."

"In short," said Rouletabille, "the day that General Trebassoff dies Madame Trebassoff, who now possesses everything, will have nothing, and the daughter, who now has nothing, will have everything."

"Exactly that," said Michael.

"That doesn't keep Matrena Petrovna and Natacha Feodorovna from deeply loving each other," observed Boris.

The little party drew near the "Point." So far the promenade had been along pleasant open country, among the low meadows traversed by fresh streams, across which tiny bridges had been built, among bright gardens guarded by porcelain dwarfs, or in the shade of small weeds from the feet of whose trees the newly-cut grass gave a seasonal fragrance. All was reflected in the pools—which lay like glass whereon a scene-painter had cut the green hearts of the pond lily leaves. An adorable country glimpse which seemed to have been created centuries back for the amusement of a queen and preserved, immaculately trimmed and cleaned, from generation to generation, for the eternal charm of such an hour as this on the banks of the Gulf of Finland.

Now they had reached the bank of the Gulf, and the waves rippled to the brows of the light ships, which dipped gracefully like huge and rapid sea-gulls, under the pressure of their great white sails.

Along the roadway, broader now, glided, silently and at walking pace, the double file of luxurious equipages with impatient horses, the open carriages in which the great personages of the court saw the view and let themselves be seen. Enormous coachmen held the reins high. Lively young women, negligently reclining against the cushions, displayed their new Paris toilettes, and kept young officers on horseback busy with salutes. There were all kinds of uniforms. No talking was heard. Everyone was kept busy looking. There rang in the pure, thin air only the noise of the clamping bits and the tintinnabulation of the bells attached to the hairy Finnish ponies' collars. And all that, so beautiful, fresh, charming and clear, and silent, it all seemed more a dream than even that which hung in the pools, suspended between the crystal of the air and the crystal of the water.

(To Be Continued.)

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