

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 dismiss 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. Natacha assents herself during the promenade on slight cause.

THE transparency of the sky and the transparency of the gulf blended their two unrealities so that one could not note where the horizons met.

Rouletabille looked at the view and looked at the General, and in all his young vibrating soul there was a sense of infinite sadness, for he recalled those terrible words in the night: "They have gone into all the corners of the Russian land, and they have not found a single corner of that land where there are not moanings." "Well," thought he, "they have not come into this corner, apparently. I don't know anything lovelier or happier in the world." No, no, Rouletabille, they have not come here. In every country there is a corner of happy life, which the poor are ashamed to approach, which they know nothing of, and of which merely the sight would turn famished mothers enraged, with their thin bosoms, and, if it is not more beautiful than that, certainly no part of the earth is made so atrocious to live in for some, nor so happy for others as in this Scythian country, the boreal country of the world.

Meanwhile the little group about the General's rolling-chair had attracted attention. Some passer-by saluted, and the news spread quickly that General Trebassoff had come for a promenade to "the Point." Heads turned as carriages passed. The General, noticing how much excitement his presence produced, begged Matrena Petrovna to push his chair into an adjacent bypath, behind a shield of trees, where he would be able to enjoy the spectacle in peace.

He was found, nevertheless, by Koupriane, the chief of police, who was looking for him. He had gone to the datcha and been told there that the General, accompanied by his friends and the young Frenchman, had gone for a turn along the gulf. Koupriane had left his carriage at the datcha, and taken the shortest route after them.

He was a fine man, large, solid, clear-eyed. His uniform showed his fine build to advantage. He was generally liked in St. Petersburg, where his martial bearing and his well-known bravery had given him a sort of popularity in society, which, on the other hand, had great disdain for Gounzovski, the head of the secret police, who was known to be capable of anything underhanded, and had been accused of sometimes playing into the hands of the Nihilists, whom he disguised as agents-provocateurs, without anybody really doubting it, and he had to fight against these widespread political suspicions.

Well-informed men declared that the death of the previous "prime minister," who had been blown up before Varsovie station when he was on his way to the Tsar at Peterhof, was Gounzovski's work and that in this he was the instrument of the party at court which had sworn the death of the minister which inconvenienced it. On the other hand, everyone regarded Koupriane as incapable of participating in any such horrors and that he contented himself with honest performance of his obvious duties, confining himself to ridding the streets of its troublesome elements, and sending to Siberia as many as he could of the hot-heads, without lowering himself to the compromises which, more than once, had given grounds for the enemies of the empire to maintain that it was difficult to say whether the chiefs of the Russian police played the part of the law or that of the revolutionary party, even that the police had been at the end of a certain time of such mixed procedure hardly able to decide themselves which they did.

This afternoon Koupriane appeared very nervous. He paid his compliments to the General, grumbled at his imprudence, praised him for his bravery, and then at once picked out Rouletabille, whom he took aside to talk to.

"You have sent my men back to me," said he to the young reporter. "You understand that I do not allow that. They are furious, and quite rightly. You have given publicly as explanation of their departure—a departure which has naturally astonished, stupefied the General's friends—the suspicion of their possible participation in the last attack. That is abominable, and I will not permit it. My men have not been trained in the methods of Gounzovski, and it does them a cruel injury, which I resent, for that matter, personally, to treat them this way. But let that go, as a matter of sentiment, and return to the simple fact itself, which proves your excessive im-

prudence, not to say more, and which involves you, you alone, in a responsibility of which you certainly have not measured the importance. All in all, I consider that you have strangely abused the complete authority that I gave you upon the Emperor's orders. When I learned what you had done I went to find the Tsar, as was my duty, and told him the whole thing. He was more astonished than can be expressed. He directed me to go myself to find out just how things were and to furnish the General the guard you had removed. I arrive at the isles and not only find the villa open like a mill where anyone may enter, but I am informed, and then I see, that the General is promenading in the midst of the crowd, at the mercy of the first miserable venturer. Monsieur Rouletabille, I am not satisfied. The Tsar is not satisfied. And, within an hour, my men will return to assume their guard at the datcha."

Rouletabille listened to the end. No one ever had spoken to him in that tone. He was red, and as ready to burst as a child's balloon blown too hard. He said:

"And I will take the train this evening."

"You will go?"

"Yes, and you can guard your General all alone. I have had enough of it. Ah, you are not satisfied! Ah, the Tsar is not satisfied! It is too bad. No more of it for me. Monsieur, I am not satisfied, and I say good-evening to you. Only do not forget to send me from here every three or four days a letter which will keep me informed of the health of the General, whom I love dearly. I will offer up a little prayer for him."

Thereupon he was silent, for he caught the glance of Matrena Petrovna, a glance so desolate, so imploring, so desperate, that the poor woman inspired him anew with great pity. Natacha had not returned. What was the young girl doing at that moment? If Matrena really loved Natacha she must be suffering atrociously. Koupriane spoke; Rouletabille did not hear him, and he had already forgotten his own anger. His spirit was wrapped in the mystery.

"Monsieur," Koupriane finished by saying, tugging his sleeve, "do you hear me? I pray you at least reply to me. I offer all possible excuses for speaking to you in that tone. I reiterate them. I ask your pardon. I pray you to explain your conduct, which appeared imprudent to me but which, after all, should have some reason. I have to explain to the Emperor. Will you tell me? What ought I to say to the Emperor?"

"Nothing at all," said Rouletabille. "I have no explanation to give you or the Emperor, or to anyone. You can offer him my utmost homage and do me the kindness to vise my passport for this evening."

And he sighed:

"It is too bad, for we were just about to see something interesting."

Koupriane looked at him. Rouletabille had not quitted Matrena Petrovna's eyes, and her pallor struck Koupriane.

"Just a minute," continued the young man. "I'm sure there is someone who will miss me—that brave woman there. Ask her which she prefers, all your police, or her dear little domovoi. We are good friends already. And—don't forget to present my condolences to her when the terrible moment has come."

It was Koupriane's turn to be troubled. He coughed and said:

"You believe, then, that the General runs a great immediate danger?"

"I do not only believe it, monsieur. I am sure of it. His death is a matter of hours, the poor dear man. Before I go I shall not fail to tell him, so that he can prepare himself comfortably for the great journey and ask pardon of the Lord for the rather heavy hand he has laid on these poor men of Presnia."

"Monsieur Rouletabille, have you discovered something?"

"Good Lord, yes, I have discovered something, Monsieur Koupriane. You don't suppose I have come so far to waste my time, do you?"

"Something no one else knows?"

"Yes, Monsieur Koupriane, otherwise I shouldn't have troubled to feel concerned. Something I have not confided to anyone, not even to my note-book, because a note-book, you know, a note-book can always be lost. I just mention that in case you had any idea of having me searched before my departure."

"Oh, Monsieur Rouletabille!"

"Eh, eh, like the way the police do in your country; in mine too, for that matter. Yes, that's often enough seen. The police, furious because they can't hit a clue in some case that interests them, arrest a reporter who knows more than they do, in order to make him talk. But—nothing of that sort with me, monsieur. You might have me taken to your famous 'Terrible Section,' I'd not open my mouth, not even in the famous rocking-chair, not even under the blows of clenched fists."

"Monsieur Rouletabille, what do you take us for? You are the guest of the Tsar."

"Ah, I have the word of an honest man. Very well. I will treat you as an honest man. I will tell you what I have discovered. I don't wish through any false pride to keep you in darkness about something which may perhaps—I say perhaps—permit you to save the General."

"Tell me," I am listening."

"But it is perfectly understood that once I have told you this you will give me my passport and allow me to depart?"

"You feel that you couldn't possibly," inquired Koupriane, more and more troubled, and after a moment of hesitation, "you couldn't possibly tell me that and yet remain?"

"No, monsieur. From the moment you place me under the necessity of explaining each of my movements and each of my acts, I prefer to go and leave to you that 'responsibility' of which you spoke just now, my dear Monsieur Koupriane."

Astonished and disquieted by this long conversation between Rouletabille and the

Head of Police, Matrena Petrovna continually turned upon them her anguished glance, which always insensibly softened as it rested on Rouletabille. Koupriane read there all the hope that the brave woman had in the young reporter, and he read also in Rouletabille's eye all the extraordinary confidence that the mere boy had in himself. As a last consideration had he not already something in hand in circumstances where all the police of the world had admitted themselves vanquished? Koupriane pressed Rouletabille's hand and said just one word to him:

"Remain."

Having saluted the General and Matrena affectionately, and a group of friends in one courteous sweep, he departed, with thoughtful brow.

During all this time the General, enchanted with the promenade, told stories of the Caucasus to his friends, believing himself young again and reliving his nights as sub-lieutenant at Tiflis. As to Natacha, no one had seen her. They retraced the way to the villa along deserted by-paths. Koupriane's call made occasion for Athanasie Georgevitch and Thaddeus, and the two officers also, to say that he was the only honest man in all the Russian police, and that Matrena Petrovna was a great woman to have dared rid herself of the entire clique of agents, who are often more revolutionary than the Nihilists themselves. Thus they arrived at the datcha.

The General inquired for Natacha, not understanding why she had left him thus during his first venture out. The schvitzar replied that the young mistress had returned to the house and had left again about a quarter of an hour later, taking the way that the party had gone on their promenade, and he had not seen her since.

Boris spoke up:

"She must have passed on the other side of the carriage while we were behind the trees, General, and not seeing us she has gone on her way, making the round of the island, over as far as the Barque."

The explanation seemed the most plausible one.

"Has anyone else been here?" demanded Matrena, forcing her voice to be calm. Rouletabille saw her hand tremble on the handle of the rolling-chair, which she had not quitted for a second during all the promenade, refusing aid from the officers, the friends, and even from Rouletabille. "First there came the Head of Police, who told me he would go and find you, Barina, and right after, His Excellency the Marshal of the Court. His Excellency will return, although he is very pressed for time, before he takes the train at 7 o'clock for Krasnoie-Coelo."

All this had been said in Russian, naturally, but Matrena translated the words of the schvitzar into French in a low voice for Rouletabille, who was near her. The General during this time had taken Rouletabille's hand and pressed it affectionately.

as if, in that mute way, to thank him for all the young man had done for them. Feodor himself also had confidence, and he was grateful for the freer air that he was being allowed to breathe. It seemed to him that he was emerging from prison. Nevertheless, as the promenade had been a little fatiguing, Matrena ordered him to go and rest immediately. Athanasie and Thaddeus took their leave. The two officers were already at the end of the garden, talking coldly, and almost confronting one another, like wooden soldiers. Without doubt they were arranging the conditions of an encounter to settle their little difference at once.

The schvitzar gathered the General into his great arms and carried him into the veranda. Feodor demanded five minutes' respite before he was taken upstairs to his chamber. Matrena Petrovna had a light luncheon brought at his request. In truth, the good woman trembled with impatience and hardly dared move without consulting Rouletabille's face. While the General talked with Ermoval, who passed him his tea, Rouletabille made a sign to Matrena that she understood at once. She joined the young man in the drawing-room.

"Madame," he said rapidly, in a low voice, "you must go at once to see what has happened there."

He pointed to the dining-room.

"Very well."

It was pitiful to watch her.

"Go, madame, with courage."

"Why don't you come with me?"

"Because, madame, I have something to do elsewhere. Give me the keys of the next floor."

"No, no. What for?"

"Not a second's delay, for the love of Heaven. Do what I tell you on your side, and let me do mine. The keys! Come, the keys!"

He snatched them rather than took them, and pointed a last time to the dining-room with a gesture so commanding that she did not hesitate further. She entered the dining-room, shaking, while he bounded to the upper floor. He was not long. He took only time to open the doors, throw a glance into the General's chamber, a single glance, and to return, letting a cry of joy escape him, borrowed from his new and very limited accomplishment of Russian, "Caracho!"

(To Be Continued.)



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