

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 Trebasoff (Pseudor Feodorovitch) who has been condemned to death by the Nihilist. He is received by the General's ever-faithful and ever-watchful wife, Madame Trebasoff (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 Trebasoff. 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 Trebasoff, 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 absents herself during the promenade on slight cause. Rouletabille becomes interested in hat-pins. He is confident of a plot against the General by careless methods and watches the door of an unused entrance to the room where the General sleeps.

THE dinner, where Matrena, Natacha and Rouletabille were together again, was lively. The young man having declared that he was more and more convinced that the mystery of the bomb in the bouquet was simply a play of the police, Natacha reinforced his opinion, and following that they found themselves in agreement on about everything else. For himself, the reporter during that conversation had a real horror which had seized him at the cynical and inappropriate tranquillity with which the young lady received all suggestions that accused the police or that assumed the general no longer ran any immediate danger. In short, he worked, or at least believed he worked, to clear Natacha as he had cleared Matrena, so that there would develop the absolute necessity of assuming a third person's intervention in the facts disclosed so clearly by Kouprine where Matrena or Natacha seemed alone to be possible agents. As he listened to Natacha Rouletabille commenced to doubt and quake just as he had seen Matrena do. The more he looked into the nature of Natacha the drier he grew. What abysmal obscurities were there in her nature!

Nothing interesting happened during dinner. Several times, in spite of Rouletabille's obvious impatience with her for doing it, Matrena went up to the general. She returned saying, "He is quiet. He doesn't sleep. He doesn't wish anything. He has asked me to prepare his narcotic. It is too bad. He has tried in vain, he cannot get along without it."

"You, too, mamma, ought to take something to make you sleep. They say morphine is very good."

"As for me," said Rouletabille, whose head for some few minutes had been dropping now toward one shoulder and now toward another, "I have no need of any narcotic to make me sleep. If you will permit me, I will get to bed at once."

"Eh, my little domovoi, I am going to carry you there in my arms."

Matrena extended her large round arms ready to take Rouletabille as though he had been a baby.

"No, no. I will get up there all right alone," said Rouletabille, rising stupidly and appearing ashamed of his excessive sleepiness.

"Oh, well, let us both accompany him to his chambers," said Natacha. "And I will wish papa good night. I'm eager for bed myself. We will all make a good night of it. Ermolai and Galagala will watch with the schwitzar in the lodge. Things are reasonably arranged now."

They all ascended the stairs. Rouletabille did not even go to see the general, but threw himself on his bed. Natacha got off to the bed beside her father, embraced him a dozen times, and went downstairs again. Matrena followed behind her, closed doors and windows, went upstairs again to close the door of the landing-place and found Rouletabille seated on his bed, his arms crossed, not appearing to have any desire for sleep at all. His face was so strangely pensive also that the anxiety of Matrena, who had been able to make nothing out of his acts and looks all day, came back upon her instantly in greater force than ever. She touched his arm in order to be sure that he knew she was there.

"My little friend," she said, "will you tell me now?"

"Yes, madame," he replied at once. "Sit in that chair and listen to me. There are things you must know at once, because we have reached a dangerous hour."

"The hatpins first. The hatpins!"

Rouletabille rose lightly from the bed and, facing her, but watching something besides her, said:

"It is necessary you should know that someone almost immediately is going to renew the attempt of the bouquet."

Matrena sprang to her feet as quickly as though she had been told there was a bomb in the seat of her chair. She made herself sit down again, however, in obedience to Rouletabille's urgent look commanding absolute quiet.

"Renew the attempt of the bouquet!" she murmured in a stifled voice. "But there is not a flower in the general's chamber."

"Be calm, madame. Understand me and answer me: You heard the tick-tack from the bouquet while you were in your own chamber?"

"Yes, with the doors open, naturally."

"You told me the persons who came to

say good night to the general. At that time there was no noise of tick-tack?"

"No, no."

"Do you think that if there had been any tick-tack then you would have heard it, with all those persons talking in the room?"

"I hear everything. I hear everything."

"Did you go downstairs at the same time those people did?"

"No, no; I remained near the general for some time, until he was sound asleep."

"And you heard nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You closed the doors behind those persons?"

"Yes, the door to the great staircase. The door of the servants' stairway was condemned a long time ago; it has been locked by me, I alone have the key and on the inside of the door opening into the general's chamber there is also a bolt which is always shot. All the other doors of the chamber have been condemned by me. In order to enter any of the four rooms on this floor it is necessary now to pass by the door of my chamber, which gives in the main staircase."

"Perfect. Then, no one has been able to enter the apartment. No one had been in the apartment for at least two hours excepting you and the general, when you heard the clockwork. From that the only conclusion is that only the general and you could have started it going."

"What are you trying to say?" Matrena demanded, astounded.

"I wish to prove to you by this absurd conclusion, madame, that it is necessary never—never, you understand? Never—to reason solely upon even the most evident external evidence when those seemingly conclusive appearances are in conflict with certain moral truths that also are clear as the light of day. The light of day for me, madame, is that the general does not desire to commit suicide and, above all, that he would not choose the strange method of suicide by clockwork. The light of day for me is that you adore your husband and that you are ready to sacrifice your life for his."

"Now! Here!" exclaimed Matrena, whose tears, always ready in emotional moments, flowed freely. "But, Holy Mary, why do you speak to me without looking at me? What is it? What is it?"

"Don't turn! Don't make a movement! You hear—not a move! And speak low, very low. And don't cry, for the love of God!"

"But you say at once . . . the bouquet! Come to the general's room!"

"Not a move. And continue listening to me without interrupting," said he, still inclining his ear, and still without looking at her. "It is because these things were as the light of day to me that I say to myself, 'It is impossible that it should be impossible for a third person not to have placed the bomb in the bouquet. Someone is able to enter the general's chamber even when the general is watching and all the doors are locked.'"

"Oh, no. No one could possibly enter, I swear it to you."

As she swore it a little too loudly, Rouletabille seized her arm so that she almost cried out, but she understood instantly that it was to keep her quiet.

"I tell you not to interrupt me, once for all."

"But, then, tell me what you are looking at like that!"

"I am watching the corner where someone is going to enter the general's chamber when everything is locked, madame. Do not move!"

Matrena, her teeth chattering, recalled that when she entered Rouletabille's chamber she had found all the doors open that communicated with the chain of rooms: the young man's chamber with hers, the dressing-room and the general's chamber. She tried, under Rouletabille's look, to keep calm, but in spite of all the reporter's exhortations she could not hold her tongue.

"But which way? Where will they enter?"

"By the door."

"Which door?"

"That of the chamber giving on the servants' stairway."

"Why, how? The key! The bolt!"

"They have made a key."

"But the bolt is drawn this side."

"They will draw it back from the other side."

"What! That is impossible."

Rouletabille laid his two hands on Matrena's strong shoulders and repeated, detaching each syllable, "They will draw it back from the other side."

"It is impossible. I repeat it."

"Madame, your Nihilists haven't invented anything. It is a trick much in vogue with sneak thieves in hotels. All it needs is a little hole the size of a pin bored in the panel of the door above the bolt."

"God!" quavered Matrena. "I don't understand what you mean by your little hole. Explain to me, little domovoi!"

"Follow me carefully, then," continued Rouletabille, his eyes all the time fixed elsewhere. "The person who wishes to enter sticks through the hole a brass wire that he has already given the necessary curve to and which is fitted on its end with a light point of steel curved inward. With such an instrument it is child's play, if the hole has been made where it ought to be, to touch the bolt on the inside from the outside, pick the knob on it, withdraw it, and open the door if the bolt is like this one, a small door-bolt."

"Oh, oh, oh," moaned Matrena, who paled visibly. "And that hole?"

"It exists."

"You have discovered it?"

"Yes, the first hour I was here."

"Oh, domovoi! But how did you do that when you never entered the general's chamber until tonight?"

"Doubtless, but I went up that servants' staircase much earlier than that. And I will tell you why. When I was brought into the villa the first time, and you

watched me, hidden behind the door, do you know what I was watching myself, while I appeared to be solely occupied digging out the caviare? The fresh print of boot-nails which left the carpet near the table, where someone had spilled beer (the beer was still running down the cloth). Someone had stepped in the beer. The boot-print was not clearly visible excepting there. But from there it went to the door of the servants' stairway and mounted the stairs. That boot was too fine to be mounting a stairway reserved to servants and that Kouprine told me had been condemned, and it was that made me notice it in a moment; but just then you entered."

"You never told me anything about it. Of course if I had known there was a boot-print . . ."

"I didn't tell you anything about it because I had my reasons for that, and, anyway, the trace dried while I was telling you about my journey."

"Ah, why not have told me later?"

"Because I didn't know you yet."

"Subtle devil! You will kill me. I can no longer . . . Let us go into the general's chamber. We will wake him."

"Remain here. Remain here. I have not told you anything. That boot-print preoccupied me, and later, when I could get away from the dining-room, I was not easy until I had climbed that stairway myself and gone to see that door, where I discovered what I have just told you and what I am going to tell you now."

"What? What? In all you have said there has been nothing about the hat-pins."

"We have come to them now."

"And the bouquet attack, which is going to happen again? Why? Why?"

"This is it. When this evening you let me go to the general's chamber, I examined the bolt of the door without your suspecting it. My opinion was confirmed. It was that way that the bomb was brought, and it is by that way that someone has prepared to return."

"But how? You are sure the little hole is the way someone came? But what makes you think that is how they mean to return? You know well enough that, not having succeeded in the general's chamber, they are at work in the dining-room."

"Madame, it is probable, it is certain that they have given up the work in the dining-room since they have commenced this very day working again in the general's chamber. Yes, someone returned, returned that way, and I was so sure of that, of the forthcoming return, that I removed the police in order to be able to study everything more at my ease. Do you understand now my confidence and why I have been able to assume so heavy a responsibility? It is because I knew I had only one thing to watch; one little hat-pin. It is not difficult, madam, to watch a single little hat-pin."

"A mistake," said Matrena, in a low voice. "Miserable little domovoi who told me nothing, me whom you let go to sleep on my mattress, in front of that door that might open any moment."

"No, madame. For I was behind it!"

"Ah, dear little holy angel! But what were you thinking of! That door has not been watched this afternoon. In our absence it could have been opened. If someone has placed a bomb during our absence!"

"That is why I sent you at once in to the dining-room on that search that I thought would be fruitless, dear madame. And that is why I hurried upstairs to the bedroom. I went to the stairway door instantly. I had prepared for proof positive if anyone had pushed it open even half a millimeter. No, no one had touched the door in our absence."

"Ah, dear heroic little friend of Jesus!"

But listen to me. Listen to me, my angel. Ah, I don't know where I am or what to say. My brain is no more than a flabby balloon punctured with pins, with little holes of hat-pins. Tell me about the hat-pins. Right off! No, at first, what is it that makes you believe—good God!—that someone will return by that door? How can you see that, all that, in a poor little hat-pin?"

"Madame, it is not a single hat-pin hole; there are two of them."

"Two hat-pin holes?"

"Yes, two. An old one and a new one. One quite new. Why this second hole? Because the old one was judged a little too narrow and they wished to enlarge it, and in enlarging it they broke off the point of a hat-pin in it. Madame, the point is there yet, filling up the little old hole and the piece of metal is very sharp and very bright."

"Ah, now I understand the examination of the hat-pins. Then it is so easy as that to get through a door with a hat-pin?"

"Nothing easier, especially if the panel is of pine. Sometimes one happens to break the point of a pin in the first hole. Then of necessity one makes a second. In order to commence the second hole, the point of the pin being broken, they have used the point of a penknife, that have finished the hole with the hat-pin. The second hole is still nearer the bolt than the first one. Don't move like that, madame."

"But they are going to come! They are going to come!"

"I believe so."

"But I can't understand how you can remain so quiet with such a certainty. Great heavens! what proof have you that they have not been there already?"

"Just an ordinary pin, madame, not a hat-pin this time. Don't confuse the pins, I will show you in a little while."

"He will drive me distracted with his pins, dear light of my eyes! Bounty of Heaven! God's envoy! Dear little happiness-bearer!"

In her transport she tried to take him in her trembling arms, but he waved her back. She caught her breath and resumed:

"Did the examination of all the hat-pins tell you anything?"

"Yes. The fifth hat-pin of Mademoiselle Natacha's, the one in the toque out in the veranda, has the tip newly broken off."

"O misery!" cried Matrena, crumpling in her chair.

Rouletabille raised her.

"What would you have? I have examined your own hat-pins. Do you think I would have suspected you if I had found one of them broken? I would simply have thought that someone had used your property for an abominable purpose, that is all."

"Oh, that is true, that is true. Pardon me. Mother of Christ, this boy crazes me! He consoles me and he horrifies me. He makes me think of such dreadful things, and then he reassures me. He does what he wishes with me. What should I become without him?"

And this time she succeeded in taking his head in her two hands and kissing him passionately. Rouletabille pushed her back roughly.

"You keep me from seeing," he said.

She was in tears over his rebuff. She understood now. Rouletabille during all this conversation had not ceased to watch through the open doors of Matrena's room and the dressing-room the farther fatal door whose brass bolt shone in the yellow light of the night lamp.

(To Be Continued.)

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