

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 Trebasov (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 Trebasov (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 Trebasov. 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 Trebasov, 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-plin. He is confident of a plot against the General by nameless methods and watches the door of an unused entrance to the room where the General sleeps. Rouletabille discovers that entrance can be forced into the General's room through an unused door by means of a bent hat-pin and he and Madame Trebasov set themselves to watch. A mysterious hand is seen to pour a vial of poison into the General's medicine. The owner of the hand escapes.

"MADAME," he commenced. "It is impossible to work with you. Why in the world have you wept not two feet from your step-daughter's door? You and your Koupriane, you commence to make me regret the Faubourg Poissoniere, you know. Your step-daughter has certainly heard you. It is lucky that she attaches no importance at all to your nocturnal phantasmagorias, and that she has been used to them a long time. She has more sense than you, Mademoiselle Natacha has. She sleeps, or at least she pretends to sleep, which leaves everybody in peace. What reply will you give her if it happens that she asks you the reason today for your marching and counter-marching up and down the sitting-room and complains that you kept her from sleeping?"

Matrena only shook her old, old head. "No, no, she has not heard me. I was there like a shadow, like a shadow of myself. She will never hear me. No one hears a shadow."

Rouletabille felt returning pity for her and spoke more gently. "In that case, it is necessary, you must understand, that she could attach no more importance to what you have done tonight than to the things she knows of your doing other nights. It is not the first time, is it, that you have wandered in the sitting-room? You understand me? And tomorrow, madame, embrace her as you always have."

"No, not that," she moaned. "Never that. I could not."

"Why not?"

Matrena did not reply. She wept. He took her in his arms like a child consoling its mother.

"Don't cry. Don't cry. All is not lost. Someone did leave the villa this morning."

"Oh, little domovoi! How is that? How is that? How did you find that out?"

"Since we didn't find anything inside, it was certainly necessary to find something outside."

"And you have found it?"

"Certainly."

"The Virgin protect you!"

"She is with us. She will not desert us. I will even say that I believe she has a special guardianship over the Isles. She watches over them from evening to morning."

"What are you saying?"

"Certainly. You don't know what we call in France the watchers of the Virgin?"

"Oh, yes, they are the webs that the dear little beasts of the good God spin between the trees and that..."

"Exactly. You understand me and you will understand further when you know that in the garden the first thing that struck me across the face as I went into it was these watchers of the Virgin spun by the dear little spiders of the good God. At first when I felt them on my face I said to myself, 'Hold on, no one has passed this way' and so I went to search other places. The webs stopped me everywhere in the garden. But, outside the garden, they kept out of the way and let me pass undisturbed down a pathway which led to the Neva. So then I said to myself, 'Now, has the Virgin by accident overlooked her work in this pathway? Surely not. Someone has ruined it.' I found the shreds of them hanging to the bushes, and so I reached the river."

"And you threw yourself into the river, my dear angel. You swim like a little god."

"And I landed where the reeds all freshly broken. And I slipped in among the bushes."

"Where to?"

"Up to the Villa Krestowsky, madame—where they both live."

"Ah, it was from there someone came?"

There was a silence between them. She questioned: "Boris?"

"Someone who came from the villa and who returned there. Boris or Michael, or another. They went and returned through

the reeds. But in coming they used a boat; they returned by swimming."

Her customary agitation reasserted itself.

She demanded ardently: "And you are sure that he came here and that he left here?"

"Yes, I am sure of it."

"How?"

"By the sitting-room window."

"It is impossible, for we found it locked."

"It is possible, if someone closed it behind him."

"Ah!"

She commenced to tremble again, and, falling back into her nightmarish horror, she no longer wasted fond expletives on her domovoi as on a dear little angel who had just rendered a service ten times more precious to her than life. While he listened patiently, she said brutally:

"Why did you keep me from throwing myself on him, from rushing upon him as he opened the door? Ah, I would have, I would have... we would know."

"No. At the least noise he would have closed the door. A turn of the key and he would have escaped forever. And he would have been warned."

"Careless boy! Why then, if you knew he was going to come, didn't you leave me in the bedroom and you watch below yourself?"

"Because so long as I was below he would not have come. He only comes when there is no one downstairs."

"Ah, Saints Peter and Paul, pity a poor woman! Who do you think it is, then? Who do you think it is? I can't think any more. Tell me, tell me that. You ought to know—you know everything. Come—who? I demand the truth. Who? Still some agent of the Committee, of the Central Committee? Still the Nihilists?"

"If it was only that!" said Rouletabille quietly.

"You have sworn to drive me mad! What do you mean by your 'if it was only that'?"

Rouletabille, imperturbable, did not reply. "What have you done with the potion?"

He said he.

"The potion? The glass of the crime! I have locked it in my room, in the cupboard—safe, safe!"

"Ah, but madame, it is necessary to replace it where you took it from."

"What?"

"Yes, after having poured the poison into a phial, to wash the glass and fill it with another potion."

"You are right. You think of everything. If the general wakes and wants his potion, he must not be suspicious of anything, and he must be able to have his drink."

"It is not necessary that he should drink."

"Well, then, why have the drink there?"

"So that the person can be sure, madame, that if he has not drunk it is simply because he has not wished to. A pure chance, madame, that he is not poisoned. You understand this time?"

"Yes, yes. O Christ! But how now, if the general wakes and wishes to drink his narcotic?"

"Tell him I forbid it. And here is another thing you must do. When—Someone—comes into the general's chamber, in the morning, you must quite openly and naturally throw out the potion, useless and vapid, you see, and so someone will have no right to be astonished that the general continues to enjoy excellent health."

"Yes, yes, little one; you are wiser than King Solomon. And what will I do with the phial of poison?"

"Bring it to me."

"Right away."

She went for it and returned five minutes later.

"He is still asleep. I have put the glass on the table, out of his reach. He will call me."

"Very good. Then push the door to, close it; we have to talk things over."

"But if someone goes back up the servants' staircase?"

"Be easy about that. They think the general is poisoned already. It is the first care-free moment I have been able to enjoy in this house."

"When will you stop making me shake with horror little demon! You keep your secret well, I must say. The general is sleeping better than if he really were poisoned. But what shall we do about Natacha? I dare ask you that—you and you alone."

"Nothing at all."

"How—nothing?"

"We will watch her..."

"Ah, yes, yes."

"Still, Matrena, you let me watch her by myself."

"Yes, yes, I promise you. I will not pay any attention to her. That is promised. That is promised. Do as you please. Why, just now, when I spoke of the Nihilists to you, did you say, 'If it were only that? You believe, then, that she is not a Nihilist? She reads such things—things like on the barricades...'"

"Madame, madame, you think of nothing but Natacha. You have promised me not to watch her; promise me not to think about her."

"Why, why did you say, 'If it was only that?'"

"Because, if there were only Nihilists in your affair, dear madame, it would be too simple, or, rather it would have been more simple. Can you possibly believe, madame, that simply a Nihilist, a Nihilist who was only a Nihilist, would take pains that his bomb exploded from a vase of flowers—that it would have mattered where, so long as it overwhelmed the general? Do you imagine that the bomb would have had less effect behind the door than in front of it? And the little cavity under the floor, do you believe that a genuine revolutionary, such as you have here in Russia, would amuse himself by penetrating to the villa only to draw out two nails from a board, when one happens to give him time between two visits to the dining-room? Do

you suppose that a revolutionary who wished to avenge the dead of Moscow and who could succeed in getting so far as the door behind which General Trebasov slept would amuse himself by making a little hole with a pin in order to draw back the bolt and amuse himself by pouring poison into a glass? Why, in such a case, he would have thrown his bomb outright, whether it blew him up along with the villa, or he was arrested on the spot, or had to submit to the martyrdom of the dungeons in the Fortress of SS. Peter and Paul, or he hung at Schlusselburg. Isn't that what always happens? That is the way he would have done and not have acted like a hotel-rat! Now, there is someone in your home (or who comes to your home) who acts like a hotel-rat because he does not wish to be seen, because he does not wish to be discovered, because he does not wish to be taken in the act. Now, the moment he fears nothing, so much as to be taken in the act, so that he plays all these tricks of legerdemain, it is certain that his object lies beyond the act itself, beyond the bomb, beyond the poison. Why all this necessity for bombs of deferred explosions, for clockwork placed where it will be confused with other things, and not on a bare staircase forbidden to everybody, though you visit it 20 times a day?"

"But this man comes in as he pleases by day and by night? You don't answer. You don't know who he is, perhaps?"

"I know him, perhaps, but I am not sure who it is yet."

"You are not curious, little domovoi don't! A friend of the house, certainly, and who enters the house as he wishes, by night, because someone opens the window for him. And who comes from the Krestowsky Villa. Boris or Michael! Ah, poor miserable Matrena! Why don't they kill poor Matrena? Their general! Their general! And they are soldiers—soldiers who come at night to kill their general! Aided by—by whom? Do you believe that? You? Light of my eyes! you believe that! No, no, that is not possible! I want you to understand, monsieur le domovoi, that I am not able to believe anything so horrible. No, no, by Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, and who searches our hearts, I do not believe that Boris—who, however, has very advanced ideas, I admit—it is necessary not to forget that; very advanced; and who composes very advanced verses also, as I have always told him—I will not believe that Boris is capable of such a fearful crime. As to Michael, he is an honest man, and my daughter, my Natacha, is an honest girl. Everything looks very bad, truly, but I do not suspect either Michael or Boris or my pure and beloved Natacha (even though she has made a translation into French of very advanced verses, certainly most improper for the daughter of a general.) That is what lies at the bottom of my mind, the bottom of my heart—you have understood me perfectly, little angel of paradise? Ah, it is you the general owes his life to, that Matrena owes her life. Without you this house would already be a coffin. How shall I ever reward you? You wish for nothing! I annoy you! You don't even listen to me! A coffin—we would all be in our coffins! Tell me what you desire. All that I have belongs to you!"

"I desire to smoke a pipe."

"Ah, a pipe! Do you want some yellow perfumed tobacco that I receive every month from Constantinople, a treat right from the harem? I will get enough for you, if you like it, to smoke ten thousand pipes full."

"I prefer opium," replied Rouletabille. "But you are right. It is not wise to suspect anybody. See, watch, wait. There is always time, once the game is caught, to say whether it is a hare or a wild boar. Listen to me, then, my good mamma. We must know first what is in the phial. Where is it?"

"Here it is."

She drew it from her sleeve. He stowed it in his pocket.

"You wish the general a good appetite, for me. I am going out. I will be back in two hours at the latest. And, above all, don't let the general know anything. I am going to see one of my friends who lives in the Aptekarski pereulok."

"Depend on me and get back quickly for love of me. My blood clogs in my heart."

"The little street of the apothecaries."

when you are not here, dear servant of God."

She mounted to the general's room and came down at least 19 times to see if Rouletabille had not returned. Two hours later he was around the villa, as he had promised. She could not keep herself from running to meet him, for which she was scolded.

"Be calm. Be calm. Do you know what was in the phial?"

"No."

"Arsenate of soda, enough to kill ten people."

"Holy Mary!"

"Be quiet. Go upstairs to the general."

Feodor Feodorovitch was in charming humor. It was his first good night since the death of the youth of Moscow. He attributed it to his not having touched the narcotic and resolved, once more, to give up the narcotic, a resolve Rouletabille and Matrena encouraged. During the conversation there was a knock at the door of Matrena's chamber.

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