

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 Trebassof (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 Trebassof (Matrena Petrovna). He meets Natacha, the General's daughter by a previous marriage.

FROM his present position Rouletabille could see all the corners of the drawing-room, the veranda, the garden and the entrance lodge at the gate. In the veranda the man in the maroon frock-coat trimmed with false astrakhan seemed still to be asleep on the sofa; in one of the corners of the drawing-room another individual, silent and motionless as a statue, dressed exactly the same, in a maroon frock-coat with false astrakhan, stood with his hands behind his back seemingly struck with general paralysis at the sight of a glaring sunset which illumined as with a torch the golden spires of Saints Peter and Paul. And in the garden and before the lodge three others dressed in maroon roved like souls in pain over the lawn or back and forth at the entrance. Rouletabille motioned to Madame Matrena, stepped back into the sitting-room and closed the door.

"Police?" he asked.

Matrena Petrovna nodded her head and put her finger to her mouth in a naive way, as one would caution a child to silence. Rouletabille smiled.

"How many are there?"

"Ten, relieved every six hours."

"That makes forty unknown men around your house each day."

"Not unknown," she replied. "Police."

"Yet, in spite of them, you have had the affair of the bouquet in the general's chamber."

"No, there were only three then. It is since the affair of the bouquet that there have been ten."

"It hardly matters. It is since these ten that you have had . . ."

"What?" she demanded anxiously.

"You know well—the flooring."

"Sh-h-h."

She glanced at the door, watching the policeman statuesque before the setting sun.

"No one knows that—not even my husband."

"So M. Koupriane told me. Then it is you who have arranged for these ten police-agents?"

"Certainly."

"Well, we will commence now by sending all these police away."

Matrena Petrovna grasped his hand, astounded.

"Surely you don't think of doing such a thing as that!"

"Yes. We must know where the blow is coming from. You have four different groups of people around here—the police, the domestics, your friends, your family. Get rid of the police first. They must not be permitted to cross your threshold. They have not been able to protect you. You have nothing to regret. And if, after they are gone, something new turns up, we can leave M. Koupriane to conduct the inquiries without his being preoccupied here at the house."

"But you do not know the admirable police of Koupriane. These brave men have given proof of their devotion."

"Madame, if I were face to face with a Nihilist the first thing I would ask myself about him would be, 'Is he one of the police?'" The first thing I ask in the presence of an agent of your police is, 'Is he not a Nihilist?'"

"But they will not wish to go."

"Do any of them speak French?"

"Yes, their sergeant, who is out there in the salon."

"Pray call him."

Madame Trebassof walked into the salon and signaled. The man appeared. Rouletabille handed him a paper, which the other read.

"You will gather your men together and quit the villa," ordered Rouletabille. "You will return to the police headquarters. Say to M. Koupriane that I have commanded this and that I require all police service around the villa to be suspended until further orders."

The man bowed, appeared not to understand, looked at Madame Trebassof and said to the young man:

"At your service."

He went out.

"Wait here a moment, urged Madame Trebassof, who did not know how to take this abrupt action and whose anxiety was really painful to see.

She disappeared after the man of the false astrakhan. A few moments afterwards she returned. She appeared even more agitated.

"I beg your pardon," she murmured, "but I cannot let them go like this. They are much chagrined. They have insisted on knowing where they have failed in their service. I have appeased them with money."

"Yes, and tell me the whole truth. Madame. You have directed them not to go far away, but to remain near

the villa so as to watch as closely as possible."

She reddened.

"It is true. But they have gone, nevertheless. They had to obey you. What can that paper be you have shown them?"

Rouletabille drew out again the billet covered with seals and signs and cabalistics that he did not understand. Madame Trebassof translated it aloud:

"Order to all officials in surveillance of the Villa Trebassof to obey the bearer absolutely. Signed: Koupriane."

"Is it possible?" murmured Matrena Petrovna. "But Koupriane would never have given you this paper if he had imagined that you would use it to dismiss his agents."

"Evidently, I have not asked him his advice, madame, you may be sure. But I will see him tomorrow and he will understand."

"Meanwhile, who is going to watch over him?" cried she.

Rouletabille took her hands again. He saw her suffering, a prey to anguish almost prostrating. He pitied her. He wished to give her immediate confidence.

"We will," he said.

She saw his young, clear eyes, so deep, so intelligent, the well-formed young head, the willing face, all his young-ardency for her, and it reassured her. Rouletabille waited for what she might say. She said nothing. She took him in her arms and embraced him.

## II.

### Natacha.

In the dining-room it was Thaddeus Technichnikoff's turn to tell hunting stories. He was the greatest timber merchant in Lithuania. He owned immense forests and he loved Feodor Feodorovitch\* as a brother, for they had played together all through their childhood, and once he had saved him from a bear that was just about to crush his skull as one might knock off a hat. General Trebassof's father was Governor of Courlande at that time by the grace of God and the Little Father. Thaddeus, who was just thirteen years old, killed the bear with a single stroke of his boar-spear, and just in time. Close ties were knit between the two families by this occurrence, and though Thaddeus was neither noble-born nor a soldier, Feodor considered him his brother and felt toward him as such. Now Thaddeus had become the greatest timber merchant of the western provinces, with his own forests and also with his massive body, his fat, oily face, his bull-neck—and his ample paunch. He quitted everything at once—all his affairs, his family—as soon as he learned of the first attack, to come and remain by the side of his dear comrade, Feodor. He had done this after each attack, without forgetting one. He was a faithful friend. But he fretted because they might not go bear-hunting as in their youth. Where, he would ask, are there any bears remaining in Courlande, or trees for that matter, what you could call trees, growing since the days of the grand-dukes of Lithuania, giant trees that threw their shade right up to the very edge of the towns? Where were such things nowadays? Thaddeus was very amusing, for it was he, certainly, who had cut them away tranquilly enough and watched them vanish in locomotive smoke. It was what was called Progress. Ah, hunting lost its national character assuredly with tiny new-growth trees which had not had time to grow. And, besides, one nowadays had not time for hunting. All the big game was so far away. Lucky enough if one seized the time to bring down a brace of woodcock early in the morning. At this point in Thaddeus' conversation there was a babble

\*In this story, according to Russian habit General Trebassof is called alternately by that name or the family name Feodor Feodorovitch, and Madame Trebassof by that name or her family name, Matrena Petrovna.—Translator's Note.

of talk among the convivial gentlemen, for they had all the time in the world at their disposal and could not see why he should be so concerned about snatching a little while at morning or evening, or at midday for that matter. Champagne was flowing like a river when Rouletabille was brought in by Matrena Petrovna. The general, whose eyes had been on the door for some time, cried at once, as though responding to a cue:

"Ah, my dear Rouletabille! I have been looking for you. Our friends wrote me you were coming to St. Petersburg."

Rouletabille hurried over to him and they shook hands like friends who meet after a long separation. The reporter was presented to the company as a close young friend from Paris whom they had enjoyed so much during their last visit to the City of Light. Everybody inquired for the latest word of Paris as of a dear acquaintance.

"How is everybody at Maxim's?" urged the excellent Athanase Georgevitch.

Thaddeus, too, had been once in Paris and he returned with an enthusiastic liking for the French demoiselles.

"Vos gogottes, monsieur," he said, appearing very amiable and leaning on each word, with a guttural emphasis such as is common in the western provinces, "ah, vos gogottes!"

Matrena Petrovna tried to silence him, but Thaddeus insisted on his right to appreciate the fair sex away from home. He had a turgid, sentimental wife, always weeping and cramming her religious notions down his throat. Of course someone asked Rouletabille what he thought of Russia, but he had no more than opened his mouth to reply than Athanase Georgevitch closed it by interrupting:

"Permettez! Permettez! You others, of the young generation, what do you know of it? You need to have lived a long time and in all its districts to appreciate Russia at its true value. Russia, my young sir, is as yet a closed book to you."

"Naturally," Rouletabille answered, smiling.

"Well, well, here's your health! What I would point out to you first of all is that it is a good buyer of champagne, eh?"—and he gave a huge grin. "But the hardest drinker I ever knew was born on the banks of the Seine. Did you know him, Feodor Feodorovitch? Poor Charles Dufour, who died two years ago at a fete of the officers of the Guard. He wagered at the end of the banquet that he could drink a glassful of champagne to the health of each man there. There were sixty when you came to count them. He commenced the round of the table and the affair went splendidly up to the fifty-eighth man. But at the fifty-ninth—think of the misfortune!—the champagne ran out! That poor, that charming, that excellent Charles took up a glass of vin dore which was in the glass of this fifty-ninth, wished him long life, drained the glass at one draught, had just time to murmur, 'Tokay, 1897,' and fell back dead! Ah, he knew the brands, my word! and he proved it to his last breath! Peace to his ashes! They asked what he died of. I knew he died because of the inappropriate blend of flavors. There should be discipline in all things and not promiscuous mixing. One more glass of champagne and he would have been drinking with us this evening. Your health, Matrena Petrovna. Champagne, Feodor Feodorovitch! Vive la France, monsieur! Natacha, my child, you must sing something. Boris will accompany you on the guzla. Your father will enjoy it."

All eyes were turned toward Natacha as she rose.

Rouletabille was struck by her serene beauty. That was the first enthralling impression, an impression so strong it astonished him, the perfect serenity, the supreme calm, the tranquil harmony of her noble features. Natacha

was twenty. Heavy brown hair circled about her forehead and was looped about her ears, which were half concealed. Her profile was clear-cut; her mouth was strong and revealed between red, firm lips the even pearliness of her teeth. She was of medium height. In walking she had the free, light step of the high-born maidens who, in primal times, pressed the flowers as they passed without crushing them. But all her true grace seemed to be accentuated in her eyes, which were deep and of a dark blue. The impression she made upon a beholder was very complex. And it would have been difficult to say whether the calm which pervaded every manifestation of her beauty was the result of conscious control or the most perfect ease.

She took down the guzla and handed it to Boris, who struck some plaintive preliminary chords.

"What shall I sing?" she inquired, raising her father's hand from the back of the sofa, where he rested, and kissing it with filial tenderness.

"Improvise," said the general. "Improvise in French, for the sake of our guest."

"Oh, yes," cried Boris; "improvise as you did the other evening."

He immediately struck a minor chord. Natacha looked fondly at her father as she sang:

When the moment comes that parts us at the close of day, when the Angel of Sleep covers you with azure wings;

Oh, may your eyes rest from so many tears, and your oppressed heart have calm;

In each moment that we have together, Father dear, let our souls feel harmony sweet and mystical;

And when your thoughts may have flown to other worlds, oh, may my image, at least, nestle within your sleeping eyes.

Natacha's voice was sweet, and the charm of it subtly pervasive. The words as she uttered them seemed to have all the quality of a prayer and there were tears in all eyes, excepting those of Michael Korsakoff, the second orderly, whom Rouletabille appraised as a man with a rough heart not much open to sentiment.

"Feodor Feodorovitch," said this officer, when the young girl's voice had faded away into the blending with the last note of the guzla. "Feodor Feodorovitch is a man and a glorious soldier who is able to sleep in peace, because he has labored for his country and for his Czar."

"Yes, yes. Labored well! A glorious soldier!" repeated Athanase Georgevitch and Ivan Petrovitch. "Well may he sleep peacefully."

"Natacha sang like an angel," said Boris, the first orderly, in a tremulous voice.

"Like an angel, Boris Nikolalevitch. But why did she speak of his heart oppressed? I don't see that General Trebassof has a heart oppressed, for my part." Michael Korsakoff spoke roughly as he drained his glass.

"No, that's so, isn't it?" agreed the others.

"A young girl may wish her father a pleasant sleep, surely!" said Matrena Petrovna, with a certain good sense. "Natacha has affected us all, has she not, Feodor?"

"Yes, she made me weep," declared the general. "But let us have champagne to cheer us up. Our young friend here will think we are chicken-hearted."

"Never think that," said Rouletabille. "Mademoiselle has touched me deeply as well. She is an artist, really a great artist. And a poet."

"He is from Paris; he knows," said the others.

And all drank.

Then they talked about music, with great display of knowledge concerning things operatic. First one, then another went to the piano and ran through some motif that the rest hummed a little first, then shouted in a rousing chorus.

(To Be Continued.)

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