CLASSICS TO GO

THE SECRET OF THE NIGHT

GASTON LEROUX

The Secret of the Night

Gaston Leroux

I.

GAYETY AND DYNAMITE

“BARINIA, the young stranger has arrived.”

“Where is he?”

“Oh, he is waiting at the lodge.”

“I told you to show him to Natacha’s sitting-room. Didn’t you understand me, Ermolai?”

“Pardon, Barinia, but the young stranger, when I asked to search him, as you directed, flatly refused to let me.”

“Did you explain to him that everybody is searched before being allowed to enter, that it is the order, and that even my mother herself has submitted to it?”

“I told him all that, Barinia; and I told him about madame your mother.”

“What did he say to that?”

“That he was not madame your mother. He acted angry.”

“Well, let him come in without being searched.”

“The Chief of Police won’t like it.”

“Do as I say.”

Ermolai bowed and returned to the garden. The “barinia” left the veranda, where she had come for this conversation with the old servant of General Trebassof, her husband, and returned to the dining-room in the datcha des Iles, where the gay Councilor Ivan Petrovitch was regaling his amused associates with his latest exploit at Cubat’s resort. They were a noisy company, and certainly the quietest among

them was not the general, who nursed on a sofa the leg which still held him captive after the recent attack, that to his old coachman and his two piebald horses had proved fatal. The story of the always-amiable Ivan Petrovitch (a lively, little, elderly man with his head bald as an egg) was about the evening before. After having, as he said, “recure la bouche” for these gentlemen spoke French like their own language and used it among themselves to keep their servants from understanding—after having wet his whistle with a large glass of sparkling rosy French wine, he cried:

“You would have laughed, Feodor Feodorovitch. We had sung songs on the Barque* and then the Bohemians left with their music and we went out onto the river-bank to stretch our legs and cool our faces in the freshness of the dawn, when a company of Cossacks of the Guard came along. I knew the officer in command and invited him to come along with us and drink the Emperor’s health at Cubat’s place. That officer, Feodor Feodorovitch, is a man who knows vintages and boasts that he has never swallowed a glass of anything so common as Crimean wine. When I named champagne he cried, ‘Vive l’Empereur!’ A true patriot. So we started, merry as school-children. The entire company followed, then all the diners playing little whistles, and all the servants besides, single file. At Cubat’s I hated to leave the companion-officers of my friend at the door, so I invited them in, too. They accepted, naturally. But the subalterns were thirsty as well. I understand discipline. You know, Feodor Feodorovitch, that I am a stickler for discipline. Just because one is gay of a spring morning, discipline should not be forgotten. I invited the officers to drink in a private room, and sent the subalterns into the main hall of the restaurant. Then the soldiers were thirsty, too, and I had drinks served to them out in the courtyard. Then, my word, there was a perplexing business, for now the horses whinnied. The brave horses, Feodor

Feodorovitch, who also wished to drink the health of the Emperor. I was bothered about the discipline. Hall, court, all were full. And I could not put the horses in private rooms. Well, I made them carry out champagne in pails and then came the perplexing business I had tried so hard to avoid, a grand mixture of boots and horse-shoes that was certainly the liveliest thing I have ever seen in my life. But the horses were the most joyous, and danced as if a torch was held under their nostrils, and all of them, my word! were ready to throw their riders because the men were not of the same mind with them as to the route to follow! From our window we laughed fit to kill at such a mixture of sprawling boots and dancing hoofs. But the troopers finally got all their horses to barracks, with patience, for the Emperor's cavalry are the best riders in the world, Feodor Feodorovitch. And we certainly had a great laugh!—Your health, Matrena Petrovna."

[* The "Barque" is a restaurant on a boat, among the isles, near the Gulf of Finland, on a bank of the Neva.]

These last graceful words were addressed to Madame Trebassof, who shrugged her shoulders at the undesired gallantry of the gay Councilor. She did not join in the conversation, excepting to calm the general, who wished to send the whole regiment to the guard-house, men and horses. And while the roisterers laughed over the adventure she said to her husband in the advisory voice of the helpful wife:

"Feodor, you must not attach importance to what that old fool Ivan tells you. He is the most imaginative man in the capital when he has had champagne."

"Ivan, you certainly have not had horses served with champagne in pails," the old boaster, Athanase Georgevitch, protested jealously. He was an advocate, well-known for his table-feats, who claimed the hardest drinking reputation of any man in the capital, and he regretted not to have invented that tale.

“On my word! And the best brands! I had won four thousand roubles. I left the little fete with fifteen kopecks.”

Matrena Petrovna was listening to Ermolai, the faithful country servant who wore always, even here in the city, his habit of fresh nankeen, his black leather belt, his large blue pantaloons and his boots glistening like ice, his country costume in his master’s city home. Madame Matrena rose, after lightly stroking the hair of her step-daughter Natacha, whose eyes followed her to the door, indifferent apparently to the tender manifestations of her father’s orderly, the soldier-poet, Boris Mourazoff, who had written beautiful verses on the death of the Moscow students, after having shot them, in the way of duty, on their barricades.

Ermolai conducted his mistress to the drawing-room and pointed across to a door that he had left open, which led to the sitting-room before Natacha’s chamber.

“He is there,” said Ermolai in a low voice.

Ermolai need have said nothing, for that matter, since Madame Matrena was aware of a stranger’s presence in the sitting-room by the extraordinary attitude of an individual in a maroon frock-coat bordered with false astrakhan, such as is on the coats of all the Russian police agents and makes the secret agents recognizable at first glance. This policeman was on his knees in the drawing-room watching what passed in the next room through the narrow space of light in the hinge-way of the door. In this manner, or some other, all persons who wished to approach General Trebassof were kept under observation without their knowing it, after having been first searched at the lodge, a measure adopted since the latest attack.

Madame Matrena touched the policeman’s shoulder with that heroic hand which had saved her husband’s life and which still bore traces of the terrible explosion in the last attack, when she had seized the infernal machine intended

for the general with her bare hand. The policeman rose and silently left the room, reached the veranda and lounged there on a sofa, pretending to be asleep, but in reality watching the garden paths.

Matrena Petrovna took his place at the hinge-vent. This was her rule; she always took the final glance at everything and everybody. She roved at all hours of the day and night round about the general, like a watch-dog, ready to bite, to throw itself before the danger, to receive the blows, to perish for its master. This had commenced at Moscow after the terrible repression, the massacre of revolutionaries under the walls of Presnia, when the surviving Nihilists left behind them a placard condemning the victorious General Trebassof to death. Matrena Petrovna lived only for the general. She had vowed that she would not survive him. So she had double reason to guard him.

But she had lost all confidence even within the walls of her own home.

Things had happened even there that defied her caution, her instinct, her love. She had not spoken of these things save to the Chief of Police, Koupriane, who had reported them to the Emperor. And here now was the man whom the Emperor had sent, as the supreme resource, this young stranger—Joseph Rouletabille, reporter.

“But he is a mere boy!” she exclaimed, without at all understanding the matter, this youthful figure, with soft, rounded cheeks, eyes clear and, at first view, extraordinarily naive, the eyes of an infant. True, at the moment Rouletabille’s expression hardly suggested any superhuman profundity of thought, for, left in view of a table, spread with hors-d’oeuvres, the young man appeared solely occupied in digging out with a spoon all the caviare that remained in the jars. Matrena noted the rosy freshness of his cheeks, the absence of down on his lip and not a hint of beard, the thick hair, with the curl over the forehead. Ah, that forehead—the

forehead was curious, with great over-hanging cranial lumps which moved above the deep arcade of the eye-sockets while the mouth was busy—well, one would have said that Rouletabille had not eaten for a week. He was demolishing a great slice of Volgan sturgeon, contemplating at the same time with immense interest a salad of creamed cucumbers, when Matrena Petrovna appeared.

He wished to excuse himself at once and spoke with his mouth full.

“I beg your pardon, madame, but the Czar forgot to invite me to breakfast.”

Madame Matrena smiled and gave him a hearty handshake as she urged him to be seated.

“You have seen His Majesty?”

“I come from him, madame. It is to Madame Trebassof that I have the honor of speaking?”

“Yes. And you are Monsieur—?”

“Joseph Rouletabille, madame. I do not add, ‘At your service—because I do not know about that yet. That is what I said just now to His Majesty.”

“Then?” asked Madame Matrena, rather amused by the tone the conversation had taken and the slightly flurried air of Rouletabille.

“Why, then, I am a reporter, you see. That is what I said at once to my editor in Paris, ‘I am not going to take part in revolutionary affairs that do not concern my country,’ to which my editor replied, ‘You do not have to take part. You must go to Russia to make an inquiry into the present status of the different parties. You will commence by interviewing the Emperor.’ I said, ‘Well, then, here goes,’ and took the train.”

“And you have interviewed the Emperor?”

“Oh, yes, that has not been difficult. I expected to arrive direct at St. Petersburg, but at Krasnoie-Coelo the train stopped and the grand-marshal of the court came to me and asked me to follow him. It was very flattering. Twenty minutes later I was before His Majesty. He awaited me! I understood at once that this was obviously for something out of the ordinary.”

“And what did he say to you?”

“He is a man of genuine majesty. He reassured me at once when I explained my scruples to him. He said there was no occasion for me to take part in the politics of the matter, but to save his most faithful servant, who was on the point of becoming the victim of the strangest family drama ever conceived.”

Madame Matrena, white as a sheet, rose to her feet.

“Ah,” she said simply.

But Rouletabille, whom nothing escaped, saw her hand tremble on the back of the chair.

He went on, not appearing to have noticed her emotion:

“His Majesty added these exact words: ‘It is I who ask it of you; I and Madame Trebassof. Go, monsieur, she awaits you.’”

He ceased and waited for Madame Trebassof to speak.

She made up her mind after brief reflection.

“Have you seen Koupriane?”

“The Chief of Police? Yes. The grand-marshal accompanied me back to the station at Krasnoie-Coelo, and the Chief of Police accompanied me to St. Petersburg station. One could not have been better received.”

“Monsieur Rouletabille,” said Matrena, who visibly strove to regain her self-control, “I am not of Koupriane’s opinion and I am not”—here she lowered her trembling voice—“of the opinion His Majesty holds. It is better for me to tell you

at once, so that you may not regret intervening in an affair where there are—where there are—risks—terrible risks to run. No, this is not a family drama. The family is small, very small: the general, his daughter Natacha (by his former marriage), and myself. There could not be a family drama among us three. It is simply about my husband, monsieur, who did his duty as a soldier in defending the throne of his sovereign, my husband whom they mean to assassinate! There is nothing else, no other situation, my dear little guest."

To hide her distress she started to carve a slice of jellied veal and carrot.

"You have not eaten, you are hungry. It is dreadful, my dear young man. See, you must dine with us, and then—you will say adieu. Yes, you will leave me all alone. I will undertake to save him all alone. Certainly, I will undertake it."

A tear fell on the slice she was cutting. Rouletabille, who felt the brave woman's emotion affecting him also, braced himself to keep from showing it.

"I am able to help you a little all the same," he said. "Monsieur Koupriane has told me that there is a deep mystery. It is my vocation to get to the bottom of mysteries."

"I know what Koupriane thinks," she said, shaking her head. "But if I could bring myself to think that for a single day I would rather be dead."

The good Matrena Petrovna lifted her beautiful eyes to Rouletabille, brimming with the tears she held back.

She added quickly:

"But eat now, my dear guest; eat. My dear child, you must forget what Koupriane has said to you, when you are back in France."

"I promise you that, madame."

“It is the Emperor who has caused you this long journey. For me, I did not wish it. Has he, indeed, so much confidence in you?” she asked naively, gazing at him fixedly through her tears.

“Madame, I was just about to tell you. I have been active in some important matters that have been reported to him, and then sometimes your Emperor is allowed to see the papers. He has heard talk, too (for everybody talked of them, madame), about the Mystery of the Yellow Room and the Perfume of the Lady in Black.”

Here Rouletabille watched Madame Trebassof and was much mortified at the undoubted ignorance that showed in her frank face of either the yellow room or the black perfume.

“My young friend,” said she, in a voice more and more hesitant, “you must excuse me, but it is a long time since I have had good eyes for reading.”

Tears, at last, ran down her cheeks.

Rouletabille could not restrain himself any further. He saw in one flash all this heroic woman had suffered in her combat day by day with the death which hovered. He took her little fat hands, whose fingers were overloaded with rings, tremulously into his own:

“Madame, do not weep. They wish to kill your husband. Well then, we will be two at least to defend him, I swear to you.”

“Even against the Nihilists!”

“Aye, madame, against all the world. I have eaten all your caviare. I am your guest. I am your friend.”

As he said this he was so excited, so sincere and so droll that Madame Trebassof could not help smiling through her tears. She made him sit down beside her.

“The Chief of Police has talked of you a great deal. He came here abruptly after the last attack and a mysterious happening that I will tell you about. He cried, ‘Ah, we need Rouletabille to unravel this!’ The next day he came here again. He had gone to the Court. There, everybody, it appears, was talking of you. The Emperor wished to know you. That is why steps were taken through the ambassador at Paris.”

“Yes, yes. And naturally all the world has learned of it. That makes it so lively. The Nihilists warned me immediately that I would not reach Russia alive. That, finally, was what decided me on coming. I am naturally very contrary.”

“And how did you get through the journey?”

“Not badly. I discovered at once in the train a young Slav assigned to kill me, and I reached an understanding with him. He was a charming youth, so it was easily arranged.”

Rouletabille was eating away now at strange viands that it would have been difficult for him to name. Matrena Petrovna laid her fat little hand on his arm:

“You speak seriously?”

“Very seriously.”

“A small glass of vodka?”

“No alcohol.”

Madame Matrena emptied her little glass at a draught.

“And how did you discover him? How did you know him?”

“First, he wore glasses. All Nihilists wear glasses when traveling. And then I had a good clew. A minute before the departure from Paris I had a friend go into the corridor of the sleeping-car, a reporter who would do anything I said without even wanting to know why. I said, ‘You call out suddenly and very loud, “Hello, here is Rouletabille.”’ So he called, ‘Hello, here is Rouletabille,’ and all those who were in the corridor turned and all those who were already in the

compartments came out, excepting the man with the glasses. Then I was sure about him."

Madame Trebassof looked at Rouletabille, who turned as red as the comb of a rooster and was rather embarrassed at his fatuity.

"That deserves a rebuff, I know, madame, but from the moment the Emperor of all the Russias had desired to see me I could not admit that any mere man with glasses had not the curiosity to see what I looked like. It was not natural. As soon as the train was off I sat down by this man and told him who I thought he was. I was right. He removed his glasses and, looking me straight in the eyes, said he was glad to have a little talk with me before anything unfortunate happened. A half-hour later the entente-cordiale was signed. I gave him to understand that I was coming here simply on business as a reporter and that there was always time to check me if I should be indiscreet. At the German frontier he left me to go on, and returned tranquilly to his nitro-glycerine."

"You are a marked man also, my poor boy."

"Oh, they have not got us yet."

Matrena Petrovna coughed. That *us* overwhelmed her. With what calmness this boy that she had not known an hour proposed to share the dangers of a situation that excited general pity but from which the bravest kept aloof either from prudence or dismay.

"Ah, my friend, a little of this fine smoked Hamburg beef?"

But the young man was already pouring out fresh yellow beer.

"There," said he. "Now, madame, I am listening. Tell me first about the earliest attack."

"Now," said Matrena, "we must go to dinner."

Rouletabille looked at her wide-eyed.

“But, madame, what have I just been doing?”

Madame Matrena smiled. All these strangers were alike. Because they had eaten some hors-d’oeuvres, some zakouskis, they imagined their host would be satisfied. They did not know how to eat.

“We will go to the dining-room. The general is expecting you. They are at table.”

“I understand I am supposed to know him.”

“Yes, you have met in Paris. It is entirely natural that in passing through St. Petersburg you should make him a visit. You know him very well indeed, so well that he opens his home to you. Ah, yes, my step-daughter also”—she flushed a little—“Natacha believes that her father knows you.”

She opened the door of the drawing-room, which they had to cross in order to reach the dining-room.

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 flaring 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 Headguarters. 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 it 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 to-morrow 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 Tchnichnikoff’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's conversation there was a babble 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."

* 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.

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 latest 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 Perovna 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 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, 1807,’ 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 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 er 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 highborn maidens who, in primal times, pressed the flowers as they passed without crushing them. But all her true grace seemed to be concentrated 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 Nikolaievitch. 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. Then they drank more, amid a perfect fracas of talk and laughter. Ivan Petrovitch and Athanase Georgevitch walked across and kissed the general. Rouletabille saw all around him great children who amused themselves with unbelievable naivete and who drank in a fashion more unbelievable still. Matrena Petrovna smoked cigarettes of yellow tobacco incessantly, rising almost continually to make a hurried round of the rooms, and after having prompted the servants to greater watchfulness, sat and looked long at Rouletabille, who did not stir, but caught every word, every gesture of each one there. Finally, sighing, she sat down by Feodor and asked how his leg felt. Michael and Natacha, in a corner, were deep in conversation, and Boris watched them with obvious impatience, still strumming the guzla. But the thing that struck Rouletabille’s youthful imagination beyond all else was the mild face of the general. He had not imagined the terrible Trebassof with so paternal and sympathetic an expression. The Paris papers had printed redoubtable pictures of him, more or less authentic, but the arts of photography and engraving had cut vigorous, rough features of an official—who knew no pity. Such pictures were in perfect accord with the idea one naturally had of the dominating figure of the government at Moscow, the man who, during eight days—the Red Week—had made so many corpses of students and workmen that the halls of the

University and the factories had opened their doors since in vain. The dead would have had to arise for those places to be peopled! Days of terrible battle where in one quarter or another of the city there was naught but massacre or burnings, until Matrena Petrovna and her step-daughter, Natacha (all the papers told of it), had fallen on their knees before the general and begged terms for the last of the revolutionaries, at bay in the Presnia quarter, and had been refused by him. “War is war,” had been his answer, with irrefutable logic. “How can you ask mercy for these men who never give it?” Be it said for the young men of the barricades that they never surrendered, and equally be it said for Trebassof that he necessarily shot them. “If I had only myself to consider,” the general had said to a Paris journalist, “I could have been gentle as a lamb with these unfortunates, and so I should not now myself be condemned to death. After all, I fail to see what they reproach me with. I have served my master as a brave and loyal subject, no more, and, after the fighting, I have let others ferret out the children that had hidden under their mothers’ skirts. Everybody talks of the repression of Moscow, but let us speak, my friend, of the Commune. There was a piece of work I would not have done, to massacre within a court an unresisting crowd of men, women and children. I am a rough and faithful soldier of His Majesty, but I am not a monster, and I have the feelings of a husband and father, my dear monsieur. Tell your readers that, if you care to, and do not surmise further about whether I appear to regret being condemned to death.”

Certainly what stupefied Rouletabille now was this staunch figure of the condemned man who appeared so tranquilly to enjoy his life. When the general was not furthering the gayety of his friends he was talking with his wife and daughter, who adored him and continually fondled him, and he seemed perfectly happy. With his enormous

grizzly mustache, his ruddy color, his keen, piercing eyes, he looked the typical spoiled father.

The reporter studied all these widely-different types and made his observations while pretending to a ravenous appetite, which served, moreover, to fix him in the good graces of his hosts of the datcha des Iles. But, in reality, he passed the food to an enormous bull-dog under the table, in whose good graces he was also thus firmly planting himself. As Trebassof had prayed his companions to let his young friend satisfy his ravening hunger in peace, they did not concern themselves to entertain him. Then, too, the music served to distract attention from him, and at a moment somewhat later, when Matrena Petrovna turned to speak to the young man, she was frightened at not seeing him. Where had he gone? She went out into the veranda and looked. She did not dare to call. She walked into the grand-salon and saw the reporter just as he came out of the sitting-room.

“Where were you?” she inquired.

“The sitting-room is certainly charming, and decorated exquisitely,” complimented Rouletabille. “It seems almost a boudoir.”

“It does serve as a boudoir for my step-daughter, whose bedroom opens directly from it; you see the door there. It is simply for the present that the luncheon table is set there, because for some time the police have pre-empted the veranda.”

“Is your dog a watch-dog, madame?” asked Rouletabille, caressing the beast, which had followed him.

“Khor is faithful and had guarded us well hitherto.”

“He sleeps now, then?”

“Yes. Koupriane has him shut in the lodge to keep him from barking nights. Koupriane fears that if he is out he will devour one of the police who watch in the garden at night. I

wanted him to sleep in the house, or by his master’s door, or even at the foot of the bed, but Koupriane said, ‘No, no; no dog. Don’t rely on the dog. Nothing is more dangerous than to rely on the dog. ‘Since then he has kept Khor locked up at night. But I do not understand Koupriane’s idea.”

“Monsieur Koupriane is right,” said the reporter. “Dogs are useful only against strangers.”

“Oh,” gasped the poor woman, dropping her eyes. “Koupriane certainly knows his business; he thinks of everything.”

“Come,” she added rapidly, as though to hide her disquiet, “do not go out like that without letting me know. They want you in the dining-room.”

“I must have you tell me right now about this attempt.”

“In the dining-room, in the dining-room. In spite of myself,” she said in a low voice, “it is stronger than I am. I am not able to leave the general by himself while he is on the ground-floor.”

She drew Rouletabille into the dining-room, where the gentlemen were now telling odd stories of street robberies amid loud laughter. Natacha was still talking with Michael Korsakoff; Boris, whose eyes never quitted them, was as pale as the wax on his guzla, which he rattled violently from time to time. Matrena made Rouletabille sit in a corner of the sofa, near her, and, counting on her fingers like a careful housewife who does not wish to overlook anything in her domestic calculations, she said:

“There have been three attempts; the first two in Moscow. The first happened very simply. The general knew he had been condemned to death. They had delivered to him at the palace in the afternoon the revoluntionary poster which proclaimed his intended fate to the whole city and country. So Feodor, who was just about to ride into the city, dismissed his escort. He ordered horses put to a sleigh. I

trembled and asked what he was going to do. He said he was going to drive quietly through all parts of the city, in order to show the Muscovites that a governor appointed according to law by the Little Father and who had in his conscience only the sense that he had done his full duty was not to be intimidated. It was nearly four o’clock, toward the end of a winter day that had been clear and bright, but very cold. I wrapped myself in my furs and took my seat beside him, and he said, ‘This is fine, Matrena; this will have a great effect on these imbeciles.’ So we started. At first we drove along the Naberjnaia. The sleigh glided like the wind. The general hit the driver a heavy blow in the back, crying, ‘Slower, fool; they will think we are afraid,’ and so the horses were almost walking when, passing behind the Church of Protection and intercession, we reached the Place Rouge. Until then the few passers-by had looked at us, and as they recognized him, hurried along to keep him in view. At the Place Rouge there was only a little knot of women kneeling before the Virgin. As soon as these women saw us and recognized the equipage of the Governor, they dispersed like a flock of crows, with frightened cries. Feodor laughed so hard that as we passed under the vault of the Virgin his laugh seemed to shake the stones. I felt reassured, monsieur. Our promenade continued without any remarkable incident. The city was almost deserted. Everything lay prostrated under the awful blow of that battle in the street. Feodor said, ‘Ah, they give me a wide berth; they do not know how much I love them,” and all through that promenade he said many more charming and delicate things to me.

“As we were talking pleasantly under our furs we came to la Place Koudrinsky, la rue Koudrinsky, to be exact. It was just four o’clock, and a light mist had commenced to mix with the sifting snow, and the houses to right and left were visible only as masses of shadow. We glided over the snow

like a boat along the river in foggy calm. Then, suddenly, we heard piercing cries and saw shadows of soldiers rushing around, with movements that looked larger than human through the mist; their short whips looked enormous as they knocked some other shadows that we saw down like logs. The general stopped the sleigh and got out to see what was going on. I got out with him. They were soldiers of the famous Semenowsky regiment, who had two prisoners, a young man and a child. The child was being beaten on the nape of the neck. It writhed on the ground and cried in torment. It couldn't have been more than nine years old. The other, the young man, held himself up and marched along without a single cry as the thongs fell brutally upon him. I was appalled. I did not give my husband time to open his mouth before I called to the subaltern who commanded the detachment, 'You should be ashamed to strike a child and a Christian like that, which cannot defend itself.' The general told him the same thing. Then the subaltern told us that the little child had just killed a lieutenant in the street by firing a revolver, which he showed us, and it was the biggest one I ever have seen, and must have been as heavy for that infant to lift as a small cannon. It was unbelievable.

"'And the other,' demanded the general; 'what has he done?'

"'He is a dangerous student,' replied the subaltern, 'who has delivered himself up as a prisoner because he promised the landlord of the house where he lives that he would do it to keep the house from being battered down with cannon.'

"'But that is right of him. Why do you beat him?'

"'Because he has told us he is a dangerous student.'

"'That is no reason,' Feodor told him. 'He will be shot if he deserves it, and the child also, but I forbid you to beat him. You have not been furnished with these whips in order to beat isolated prisoners, but to charge the crowd when it

does not obey the governor’s orders. In such a case you are ordered “Charge,” and you know what to do. You understand?’ Feodor said roughly. ‘I am General Trebassof, your governor.’

“Feodor was thoroughly human in saying this. Ah, well, he was badly compensed for it, very badly, I tell you. The student was truly dangerous, because he had no sooner heard my husband say, ‘I am General Trebassof, your governor,’ than he cried, ‘Ah, is it you, Trebassoff’ and drew a revolver from no one knows where and fired straight at the general, almost against his breast. But the general was not hit, happily, nor I either, who was by him and had thrown myself onto the student to disarm him and then was tossed about at the feet of the soldiers in the battle they waged around the student while the revolver was going off. Three soldiers were killed. You can understand that the others were furious. They raised me with many excuses and, all together, set to kicking the student in the loins and striking at him as he lay on the ground. The subaltern struck his face a blow that might have blinded him. Feodor hit the officer in the head with his fist and called, ‘Didn’t you hear what I said?’ The officer fell under the blow and Feodor himself carried him to the sleigh and laid him with the dead men. Then he took charge of the soldiers and led them to the barracks. I followed, as a sort of after-guard. We returned to the palace an hour later. It was quite dark by then, and almost at the entrance to the palace we were shot at by a group of revolutionaries who passed swiftly in two sleighs and disappeared in the darkness so fast that they could not be overtaken. I had a ball in my toque. The general had not been touched this time either, but our furs were ruined by the blood of the dead soldiers which they had forgotten to clean out of the sleigh. That was the first attempt, which meant little enough, after all, because it was

fighting in the open. It was some days later that they commenced to try assassination."

At this moment Ermolai brought in four bottles of champagne and Thaddeus struck lightly on the piano.

"Quickly, madame, the second attempt," said Rouletabille, who was aking hasty notes on his cuff, never ceasing, meanwhile, to watch the convivial group and listening with both ears wide open to Matrena.

"The second happened still in Moscow. We had had a jolly dinner because we thought that at last the good old days were back and good citizens could live in peace; and Boris had tried out the guzla singing songs of the Orel country to please me; he is so fine and sympathetic. Natacha had gone somewhere or other. The sleigh was waiting at the door and we went out and got in. Almost instantly there was a fearful noise, and we were thrown out into the snow, both the general and me. There remained no trace of sleigh or coachman; the two horses were disemboweled, two magnificent piebald horses, my dear young monsieur, that the general was so attached to. As to Feodor, he had that serious wound in his right leg; the calf was shattered. I simply had my shoulder a little wrenched, practically nothing. The bomb had been placed under the seat of the unhappy coachman, whose hat alone we found, in a pool of blood. From that attack the general lay two months in bed. In the second month they arrested two servants who were caught one night on the landing leading to the upper floor, where they had no business, and after that I sent at once for our old domestics in Orel to come and serve us. It was discovered that these detected servants were in touch with the revolutionaries, so they were hanged. The Emperor appointed a provisional governor, and now that the general was better we decided on a convalescence for him in the midi of France. We took train for St. Petersburg, but the journey started high fever in my husband and reopened the