ГАСТОН ЛЕРУ

THE SECRET OF THE NIGHT

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The Secret of the Night

Леру Г.

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Содержание

Gaston Leroux
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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[1] 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

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

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."

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 Rouletabile, 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[2] 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."

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:

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[2] 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.

"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 wound in his calf. The doctors ordered absolute rest and so we settled here in the datcha des Iles. Since then, not a day has passed without the general receiving an anonymous letter telling him that nothing can save him from the revenge of the revolutionaries. He is brave and only smiles over them, but for me, I know well that so long as we are in Russia we have not a moment's security. So I watch him every minute and let no one approach him except his intimate friends and us of the family. I have brought an old gniagnia who watched me grow up, Ermolai, and the Orel servants. In the meantime, two months later, the third attempt suddenly occurred. It is certainly of them all the most frightening, because it is so mysterious, a mystery that has not yet, alas, been solved."

But Athanase Georgevitch had told a "good story" which raised so much hubbub that nothing else could be heard. Feodor Feodorovitch was so amused that he had tears in his eyes. Rouletabille said to himself as Matrena talked, "I never have seen men so gay, and yet they know perfectly they are apt to be blown up all together any moment."

General Trebassof, who had steadily watched Rouletabille, who, for that matter, had been kept in eye by everyone there, said:

"Eh, eh, monsieur le journaliste, you find us very gay?"

"I find you very brave," said Rouletabille quietly.

"How is that?" said Feodor Feodorovitch, smiling.

"You must pardon me for thinking of the things that you seem to have forgotten entirely."

He indicated the general's wounded leg.

"The chances of war! the chances of war!" said the general. "A leg here, an arm there. But, as you see, I am still here. They will end by growing tired and leaving me in peace. Your health, my friend!"

"Your health, general!"

"You understand," continued Feodor Feodorovitch, "there is no occasion to excite ourselves. It is our business to defend the empire at the peril of our lives. We find that quite natural, and there is no occasion to think of it. I have had terrors enough in other directions, not to speak of the terrors of love, that are more ferocious than you can yet imagine. Look at what they did to my poor friend the Chief of the Surete, Boichlikoff. He was commendable certainly. There was a brave man. Of an evening, when his work was over, he always left the bureau of the prefecture and went to join his wife and children in their apartment in the ruelle des Loups. Not a soldier! No guard! The others had every chance. One evening a score of revolutionaries, after having driven away the terrorized servants, mounted to his apartments. He was dining with his family. They knocked and he opened the door. He saw who they were, and tried to speak. They gave him no time. Before his wife and children, mad with terror and on their knees before the revolutionaries, they read him his death-sentence. A fine end that to a dinner!"

As he listened Rouletabille paled and he kept his eyes on the door as if he expected to see it open of itself, giving access to ferocious Nihilists of whom one, with a paper in his hand, would read the sentence of death to Feodor Feodorovitch. Rouletabille's stomach was not yet seasoned to such stories. He almost regretted, momentarily, having taken the terrible responsibility of dismissing the police. After what Koupriane had confided to him of things that had happened in this house, he had not hesitated to risk everything on that audacious decision, but all the same, all the same—these stories of Nihilists who appear at the end of a meal, death-sentence in hand, they haunted him, they upset him. Certainly it had been a piece of foolhardiness to dismiss the police!

"Well," he asked, conquering his misgivings and resuming, as always, his confidence in himself, "then, what did they do then, after reading the sentence?"

"The Chief of the Surete knew he had no time to spare. He did not ask for it. The revolutionaries ordered him to bid his family farewell. He raised his wife, his children, clasped them, bade them be of good courage, then said he was ready. They took him into the street. They stood him against a wall. His wife and children watched from a window. A volley sounded. They descended to secure the body, pierced with twenty-five bullets."

"That was exactly the number of wounds that were made on the body of little Jacques Zloriksky," came in the even tones of Natacha.

"Oh, you, you always find an excuse," grumbled the general. "Poor Boichlikoff did his duty, as I did mine.

"Yes, papa, you acted like a soldier. That is what the revolutionaries ought not to forget. But have no fears for us, papa; because if they kill you we will all die with you."

"And gayly too," declared Athanase Georgevitch.

"They should come this evening. We are in form!"

Upon which Athanase filled the glasses again.

"None the less, permit me to say," ventured the timber-merchant, Thaddeus Tchnitchnikof, timidly, "permit me to say that this Boichlikoff was very imprudent."

"Yes, indeed, very gravely imprudent," agreed Rouletabille. "When a man has had twenty-five good bullets shot into the body of a child, he ought certainly to keep his home well guarded if he wishes to dine in peace."

He stammered a little toward the end of this, because it occurred to him that it was a little inconsistent to express such opinions, seeing what he had done with the guard over the general.

"Ah," cried Athanase Georgevitch, in a stage-struck voice, "Ah, it was not imprudence! It was contempt of death! Yes, it was contempt of death that killed him! Even as the contempt of death keeps us, at this moment, in perfect health. To you, ladies and gentlemen! Do you know anything lovelier, grander, in the world than contempt of death? Gaze on Feodor Feodorovitch and answer me. Superb! My word, superb! To you all! The revolutionaries who are not of the police are of the same mind regarding our heroes. They may curse the tchinownicks who execute the terrible orders given them by those higher up, but those who are not of the police (there are some, I believe)—these surely recognize that men like the Chief of the Surete our dead friend, are brave."

"Certainly," endorsed the general. "Counting all things, they need more heroism for a promenade in a salon than a soldier on a battle-field."

"I have met some of these men," continued Athanase in exalted vein. "I have found in all their homes the same—imprudence, as our young French friend calls it. A few days after the assassination of the Chief of Police in Moscow I was received by his successor in the same place where the assassination had occurred. He did not take the slightest precaution with me, whom he did not know at all, nor with men of the middle class who came to present their petitions, in spite of the fact that it was under precisely identical conditions that his predecessor had been slain. Before I left I looked over to where on the floor there had so recently occurred such agony. They had placed a rug there and on the rug a table, and on that table there was a book. Guess what book. 'Women's Stockings,' by Willy! And—and then—Your health, Matrena Petrovna. What's the odds!"

"You yourselves, my friends," declared the general, "prove your great courage by coming to share the hours that remain of my life with me."

"Not at all, not at all! It is war."

"Yes, it is war."

"Oh, there's no occasion to pat us on the shoulder, Athanase," insisted Thaddeus modestly. "What risk do we run? We are well guarded."

"We are protected by the finger of God," declared Athanase, "because the police—well, I haven't any confidence in the police."

Michael Korsakoff, who had been for a turn in the garden, entered during the remark.

"Be happy, then, Athanase Georgevitch," said he, "for there are now no police around the villa."

"Where are they?" inquired the timber-merchant uneasily.

"An order came from Koupriane to remove them," explained Matrena Petrovna, who exerted herself to appear calm.

"And are they not replaced?" asked Michael.

"No. It is incomprehensible. There must have been some confusion in the orders given." And Matrena reddened, for she loathed a lie and it was in tribulation of spirit that she used this fable under Rouletabille's directions.

"Oh, well, all the better," said the general. "It will give me pleasure to see my home ridded for a while of such people."

Athanase was naturally of the same mind as the general, and when Thaddeus and Ivan Petrovitch and the orderlies offered to pass the night at the villa and take the place of the absent police, Feodor Feodorovitch caught a gesture from Rouletabille which disapproved the idea of this new guard.

"No, no," cried the general emphatically. "You leave at the usual time. I want now to get back into the ordinary run of things, my word! To live as everyone else does. We shall be all right. Koupriane and I have arranged the matter. Koupriane is less sure of his men, after all, than I am of

my servants. You understand me. I do not need to explain further. You will go home to bed—and we will all sleep. Those are the orders. Besides, you must remember that the guard-post is only a step from here, at the corner of the road, and we have only to give a signal to bring them all here. But—more secret agents or special police—no, no! Good-night. All of us to bed now!"

They did not insist further. When Feodor had said, "Those are the orders," there was room for nothing more, not even in the way of polite insistence.

But before going to their beds all went into the veranda, where liqueurs were served by the brave Ermolai, as always. Matrena pushed the wheel-chair of the general there, and he kept repeating, "No, no. No more such people. No more police. They only bring trouble."

"Feodor! Feodor!" sighed Matrena, whose anxiety deepened in spite of all she could do, "they watched over your dear life."

"Life is dear to me only because of you, Matrena Petrovna."

"And not at all because of me, papa?" said Natacha.

"Oh, Natacha!"

He took both her hands in his. It was an affecting glimpse of family intimacy.

From time to time, while Ermolai poured the liqueurs, Feodor struck his band on the coverings over his leg.

"It gets better," said he. "It gets better."

Then melancholy showed in his rugged face, and he watched night deepen over the isles, the golden night of St. Petersburg. It was not quite yet the time of year for what they call the golden nights there, the "white nights," nights which never deepen to darkness, but they were already beautiful in their soft clarity, caressed, here by the Gulf of Finland, almost at the same time by the last and the first rays of the sun, by twilight and dawn.

From the height of the veranda one of the most beautiful bits of the isles lay in view, and the hour was so lovely that its charm thrilled these people, of whom several, as Thaddeus, were still close to nature. It was he, first, who called to Natacha:

"Natacha! Natacha! Sing us your 'Soir des Iles.'"

Natacha's voice floated out upon the peace of the islands under the dim arched sky, light and clear as a night rose, and the guzla of Boris accompanied it. Natacha sang:

"This is the night of the Isles—at the north of the world. The sky presses in its stainless arms the bosom of earth, Night kisses the rose that dawn gave to the twilight. And the night air is sweet and fresh from across the shivering gulf, Like the breath of young girls from the world still farther north. Beneath the two lighted horizons, sinking and rising at once, The sun rolls rebounding from the gods at the north of the world. In this moment, beloved, when in the clear shadows of this rose-stained evening I am here alone with you, Respond, respond with a heart less timid to the holy, accustomed cry of 'Good-evening.'"

Ah, how Boris Nikolaievitch and Michael Korsakoff watched her as she sang! Truly, no one ever can guess the anger or the love that broods in a Slavic heart under a soldier's tunic, whether the soldier wisely plays at the guzla, as the correct Boris, or merely lounges, twirling his mustache with his manicured and perfumed fingers, like Michael, the indifferent.

Natacha ceased singing, but all seemed to be listening to her still—the convivial group on the terrace appeared to be held in charmed attention, and the porcelain statuettes of men on the lawn, according to the mode of the Iles, seemed to lift on their short legs the better to hear pass the sighing harmony of Natacha in the rose nights at the north of the world.

Meanwhile Matrena wandered through the house from cellar to attic, watching over her husband like a dog on guard, ready to bite, to throw itself in the way of danger, to receive the blows, to die for its master—and hunting for Rouletabille, who had disappeared again.

III. THE WATCH

She went out to caution the servants to a strict watch, armed to the teeth, before the gate all night long, and she crossed the deserted garden. Under the veranda the schwitzar was spreading a mattress for Ermolai. She asked him if he had seen the young Frenchman anywhere, and after the answer, could only say to herself, "Where is he, then?" Where had Rouletabille gone? The general, whom she had carried up to his room on her back, without any help, and had helped into bed without assistance, was disturbed by this singular disappearance. Had someone already carried off "their" Rouletabille? Their friends were gone and the orderlies had taken leave without being able to say where this boy of a journalist had gone. But it would be foolish to worry about the disappearance of a Journalist, they had said. That kind of man—these journalists—came, went, arrived when one least expected them, and quitted their company—even the highest society—without formality. It was what they called in France "leaving English fashion." However, it appeared it was not meant to be impolite. Perhaps he had gone to telegraph. A journalist had to keep in touch with the telegraph at all hours. Poor Matrena Petrovna roamed the solitary garden in tumult of heart. There was the light in the general's window on the first floor. There were lights in the basement from the kitchens. There was a light on the ground-floor near the sitting-room, from Natacha's chamber window. Ah, the night was hard to bear. And this night the shadows weighed heavier than ever on the valiant breast of Matrena. As she breathed she felt as though she lifted all the weight of the threatening night. She examined everything—everything. All was shut tight, was perfectly secure, and there was no one within excepting people she was absolutely sure of—but whom, all the same, she did not allow to go anywhere in the house excepting where their work called them. Each in his place. That made things surer. She wished each one could remain fixed like the porcelain statues of men out on the lawn. Even as she thought it, here at her feet, right at her very feet, a shadow of one of the porcelain men moved, stretched itself out, rose to its knees, grasped her skirt and spoke in the voice of Rouletabille. Ah, good! it was Rouletabille. "Himself, dear madame; himself."

"Why is Ermolai in the veranda? Send him back to the kitchens and tell the schwitzar to go to bed. The servants are enough for an ordinary guard outside. Then you go in at once, shut the door, and don't concern yourself about me, dear madame. Good-night."

Rouletabille had resumed, in the shadows, among the other porcelain figures, his pose of a porcelain man.

Matrena Petrovna did as she was told, returned to the house, spoke to the schwitzar, who removed to the lodge with Ermolai, and their mistress closed the outside door. She had closed long before the door of the kitchen stair which allowed the domestics to enter the villa from below. Down there each night the devoted gniagnia and the faithful Ermolai watched in turn.

Within the villa, now closed, there were on the ground-floor only Matrena herself and her step-daughter Natacha, who slept in the chamber off the sitting-room, and, above on the first floor, the general asleep, or who ought to be asleep if he had taken his potion. Matrena remained in the darkness of the drawing-room, her dark-lantern in her hand. All her nights passed thus, gliding from door to door, from chamber to chamber, watching over the watch of the police, not daring to stop her stealthy promenade even to throw herself on the mattress that she had placed across the doorway of her husband's chamber. Did she ever sleep? She herself could hardly say. Who else could, then? A tag of sleep here and there, over the arm of a chair, or leaning against the wall, waked always by some noise that she heard or dreamed, some warning, perhaps, that she alone had heard. And to-night, to-night there is Rouletabille's alert guard to help her, and she feels a little less the aching terror of watchfulness, until there surges back into her mind the recollection that the police are no longer there. Was he right, this young man? Certainly she could not deny that some way she feels more confidence now that the police are gone. She does not have to spend her time watching their

shadows in the shadows, searching the darkness, the arm-chairs, the sofas, to rouse them, to appeal in low tones to all they held binding, by their own name and the name of their father, to promise them a bonus that would amount to something if they watched well, to count them in order to know where they all were, and, suddenly, to throw full in their face the ray of light from her little dark-lantern in order to be sure, absolutely sure, that she was face to face with them, one of the police, and not with some other, some other with an infernal machine under his arm. Yes, she surely had less work now that she had no longer to watch the police. And she had less fear!

She thanked the young reporter for that. Where was he? Did he remain in the pose of a porcelain statue all this time out there on the lawn? She peered through the lattice of the veranda shutters and looked anxiously out into the darkened garden. Where could he be? Was that he, down yonder, that crouching black heap with an unlighted pipe in his mouth? No, no. That, she knew well, was the dwarf she genuinely loved, her little domovoi-doukh, the familiar spirit of the house, who watched with her over the general's life and thanks to whom serious injury had not yet befallen Feodor Feodorovitch —one could not regard a mangled leg that seriously. Ordinarily in her own country (she was from the Orel district) one did not care to see the domovoi-doukh appear in flesh and blood. When she was little she was always afraid that she would come upon him around a turn of the path in her father's garden. She always thought of him as no higher than that, seated back on his haunches and smoking his pipe. Then, after she was married, she had suddenly run across him at a turning in the bazaar at Moscow. He was just as she had imagined him, and she had immediately bought him, carried him home herself and placed him, with many precautions, for he was of very delicate porcelain, in the vestibule of the palace. And in leaving Moscow she had been careful not to leave him there. She had carried him herself in a case and had placed him herself on the lawn of the datcha des Iles, that he might continue to watch over her happiness and over the life of her Feodor. And in order that he should not be bored, eternally smoking his pipe all alone, she had surrounded him with a group of little porcelain genii, after the fashion of the Jardins des Iles. Lord! how that young Frenchman had frightened her, rising suddenly like that, without warning, on the lawn. She had believed for a moment that it was the domovoi-doukh himself rising to stretch his legs. Happily he had spoken at once and she had recognized his voice. And besides, her domovoi surely would not speak French. Ah! Matrena Petrovna breathed freely now. It seemed to her, this night, that there were two little familiar genii watching over the house. And that was worth more than all the police in the world, surely. How wily that little fellow was to order all those men away. There was something it was necessary to know; it was necessary therefore that nothing should be in the way of learning it. As things were now, the mystery could operate without suspicion or interference. Only one man watched it, and he had not the air of watching. Certainly Rouletabille had not the air of constantly watching anything. He had the manner, out in the night, of an easy little man in porcelain, neither more nor less, yet he could see everything—if anything were there to see—and he could hear everything—if there were anything to hear. One passed beside him without suspecting him, and men might talk to each other without an idea that he heard them, and even talk to themselves according to the habit people have sometimes when they think themselves quite alone. All the guests had departed thus, passing close by him, almost brushing him, had exchanged their "Adieus," their "Au revoirs," and all their final, drawn-out farewells. That dear little living domovoi certainly was a rogue! Oh, that dear little domovoi who had been so affected by the tears of Matrena Petrovna! The good, fat, sentimental, heroic woman longed to hear, just then, his reassuring voice.

"It is I. Here I am," said the voice of her little living familiar spirit at that instant, and she felt her skirt grasped. She waited for what he should say. She felt no fear. Yet she had supposed he was outside the house. Still, after all, she was not too astonished that he was within. He was so adroit! He had entered behind her, in the shadow of her skirts, on all-fours, and had slipped away without anyone noticing him, while she was speaking to her enormous, majestic schwitzar.

"So you were here?" she said, taking his hand and pressing it nervously in hers.

"Yes, yes. I have watched you closing the house. It is a task well-done, certainly. You have not forgotten anything."

"But where were you, dear little demon? I have been into all the corners, and my hands did not touch you."

"I was under the table set with hors-d'oeuvres in the sitting-room."

"Ah, under the table of zakouskis! I have forbidden them before now to spread a long hanging cloth there, which obliges me to kick my foot underneath casually in order to be sure there is no one beneath. It is imprudent, very imprudent, such table-cloths. And under the table of zakouskis have you been able to see or hear anything?"

"Madame, do you think that anyone could possibly see or hear anything in the villa when you are watching it alone, when the general is asleep and your step-daughter is preparing for bed?"

"No. No. I do not believe so. I do not. No, oh, Christ!"

They talked thus very low in the dark, both seated in a corner of the sofa, Rouletabille's hand held tightly in the burning hands of Matrena Petrovna.

She sighed anxiously. "And in the garden—have you heard anything?"

"I heard the officer Boris say to the officer Michael, in French, 'Shall we return at once to the villa?' The other replied in Russian in a way I could see was a refusal. Then they had a discussion in Russian which I, naturally, could not understand. But from the way they talked I gathered that they disagreed and that no love was lost between them."

"No, they do not love each other. They both love Natacha."

"And she, which one of them does she love? It is necessary to tell me."

"She pretends that she loves Boris, and I believe she does, and yet she is very friendly with Michael and often she goes into nooks and corners to chat with him, which makes Boris mad with jealousy. She has forbidden Boris to speak to her father about their marriage, on the pretext that she does not wish to leave her father now, while each day, each minute the general's life is in danger."

"And you, madame—do you love your step-daughter?" brutally inquired the reporter.

"Yes—sincerely," replied Matrena Petrovna, withdrawing her hand from those of Rouletabille.

"And she—does she love you?"

"I believe so, monsieur, I believe so sincerely. Yes, she loves me, and there is not any reason why she should not love me. I believe—understand me thoroughly, because it comes from my heart—that we all here in this house love one another. Our friends are old proved friends. Boris has been orderly to my husband for a very long time. We do not share any of his too-modern ideas, and there were many discussions on the duty of soldiers at the time of the massacres. I reproached him with being as womanish as we were in going down on his knees to the general behind Natacha and me, when it became necessary to kill all those poor moujiks of Presnia. It was not his role. A soldier is a soldier. My husband raised him roughly and ordered him, for his pains, to march at the head of the troops. It was right. What else could he do? The general already had enough to fight against, with the whole revolution, with his conscience, with the natural pity in his heart of a brave man, and with the tears and insupportable moanings, at such a moment, of his daughter and his wife. Boris understood and obeyed him, but, after the death of the poor students, he behaved again like a woman in composing those verses on the heroes of the barricades; don't you think so? Verses that Natacha and he learned by heart, working together, when they were surprised at it by the general. There was a terrible scene. It was before the next-to-the-last attack. The general then had the use of both legs. He stamped his feet and fairly shook the house."

"Madame," said Rouletabille, "a propos of the attacks, you must tell me about the third."

As he said this, leaning toward her, Matrena Petrovna ejaculated a "Listen!" that made him rigid in the night with ear alert. What had she heard? For him, he had heard nothing.

"You hear nothing?" she whispered to him with an effort. "A tick-tack?"

"No, I hear nothing."

"You know—like the tick-tack of a clock. Listen."

"How can you hear the tick-tack? I've noticed that no clocks are running here."

"Don't you understand? It is so that we shall be able to hear the tick-tack better."

"Oh, yes, I understand. But I do not hear anything."

"For myself, I think I hear the tick-tack all the time since the last attempt. It haunts my ears, it is frightful, to say to one's self: There is clockwork somewhere, just about to reach the death-tick—and not to know where, not to know where! When the police were here I made them all listen, and I was not sure even when they had all listened and said there was no tick-tack. It is terrible to hear it in my ear any moment when I least expect it. Tick-tack! Tick-tack! It is the blood beating in my ear, for instance, hard, as if it struck on a sounding-board. Why, here are drops of perspiration on my hands! Listen!"

"Ah, this time someone is talking—is crying," said the young man.

"Sh-h-h!" And Rouletabille felt the rigid hand of Matrena Petrovna on his arm. "It is the general. The general is dreaming!"

She drew him into the dining-room, into a corner where they could no longer hear the moanings. But all the doors that communicated with the dining-room, the drawing-room and the sitting-room remained open behind him, by the secret precaution of Rouletabille.

He waited while Matrena, whose breath he heard come hard, was a little behind. In a moment, quite talkative, and as though she wished to distract Rouletabille's attention from the sounds above, the broken words and sighs, she continued:

"See, you speak of clocks. My husband has a watch which strikes. Well, I have stopped his watch because more than once I have been startled by hearing the tick-tack of his watch in his waistcoat-pocket. Koupriane gave me that advice one day when he was here and had pricked his ears at the noise of the pendulums, to stop all my watches and clocks so that there would be no chance of confusing them with the tick-tack that might come from an infernal machine planted in some corner. He spoke from experience, my dear little monsieur, and it was by his order that all the clocks at the Ministry, on the Naberjnaia, were stopped, my dear little friend. The Nihilists, he told me, often use clockworks to set off their machines at the time they decide on. No one can guess all the inventions that they have, those brigands. In the same way, Koupriane advised me to take away all the draught-boards from the fireplaces. By that precaution they were enabled to avoid a terrible disaster at the Ministry near the Pont-des-chantres, you know, petit demovoi? They saw a bomb just as it was being lowered into the fire-place of the minister's cabinet.[3] The Nihilists held it by a cord and were up on the roof letting it down the chimney. One of them was caught, taken to Schlusselbourg and hanged. Here you can see that all the draught-boards of the fireplaces are cleared away."

"Madame," interrupted Rouletabille (Matrena Petrovna did not know that no one ever succeeded in distracting Rouletabille's attention), "madame, someone moans still, upstairs."

"Oh, that is nothing, my little friend. It is the general, who has bad nights. He cannot sleep without a narcotic, and that gives him a fever. I am going to tell you now how the third attack came about. And then you will understand, by the Virgin Mary, how it is I have yet, always have, the tick-tack in my ears.

"One evening when the general had got to sleep and I was in my own room, I heard distinctly the tick-tack of clockwork operating. All the clocks had been stopped, as Koupriane advised, and I had made an excuse to send Feodor's great watch to the repairer. You can understand how I felt when I heard that tick-tack. I was frenzied. I turned my head in all directions, and decided that the sound came from my husband's chamber. I ran there. He still slept, man that he is! The tick-tack was there. But where? I turned here and there like a fool. The chamber was in darkness and it seemed absolutely impossible for me to light a lamp because I thought I could not take the time for fear the

[3] Actual attack on Witte.

infernal machine would go off in those few seconds. I threw myself on the floor and listened under the bed. The noise came from above. But where? I sprang to the fireplace, hoping that, against my orders, someone had started the mantel-clock. No, it was not that! It seemed to me now that the tick-tack came from the bed itself, that the machine was in the bed. The general awaked just then and cried to me, 'What is it, Matrena? What are you doing?' And he raised himself in bed, while I cried, 'Listen! Hear the tick-tack. Don't you hear the tick-tack?' I threw myself upon him and gathered him up in my arms to carry him, but I trembled too much, was too weak from fear, and fell back with him onto the bed, crying, 'Help!' He thrust me away and said roughly, 'Listen.' The frightful tick-tack was behind us now, on the table. But there was nothing on the table, only the night-light, the glass with the potion in it, and a gold vase where I had placed with my own hands that morning a cluster of grasses and wild flowers that Ermolai had brought that morning on his return from the Orel country. With one bound I was on the table and at the flowers. I struck my fingers among the grasses and the flowers, and felt a resistance. The tick-tack was in the bouquet! I took the bouquet in both hands, opened the window and threw it as far as I could into the garden. At the same moment the bomb burst with a terrible noise, giving me quite a deep wound in the hand. Truly, my dear little domovoi, that day we had been very near death, but God and the Little Father watched over us."

And Matrena Petrovna made the sign of the cross.

"All the windows of the house were broken. In all, we escaped with the fright and a visit from the glazier, my little friend, but I certainly believed that all was over."

"And Mademoiselle Natacha?" inquired Rouletabille. "She must also have been terribly frightened, because the whole house must have rocked."

"Surely. But Natacha was not here that night. It was a Saturday. She had been invited to the soiree du 'Michel' by the parents of Boris Nikolaievitch, and she slept at their house, after supper at the Ours, as had been planned. The next day, when she learned the danger the general had escaped, she trembled in every limb. She threw herself in her father's arms, weeping, which was natural enough, and declared that she never would go away from him again. The general told her how I had managed. Then she pressed me to her heart, saying that she never would forget such an action, and that she loved me more than if I were truly her mother. It was all in vain that during the days following we sought to understand how the infernal machine had been placed in the bouquet of wild flowers. Only the general's friends that you saw this evening, Natacha and I had entered the general's chamber during the day or in the evening. No servant, no chamber-maid, had been on that floor. In the day-time as well as all night long that entire floor is closed and I have the keys. The door of the servants' staircase which opens onto that floor, directly into the general's chamber, is always locked and barred on the inside with iron. Natacha and I do the chamber work. There is no way of taking greater precautions. Three police agents watched over us night and day. The night of the bouquet two had spent their time watching around the house, and the third lay on the sofa in the veranda. Then, too, we found all the doors and windows of the villa shut tight. In such circumstances you can judge whether my anguish was not deeper than any I had known hitherto. Because to whom, henceforth, could we trust ourselves? what and whom could we believe? what and whom could we watch? From that day, no other person but Natacha and me have the right to go to the first floor. The general's chamber was forbidden to his friends. Anyway, the general improved, and soon had the pleasure of receiving them himself at his table. I carry the general down and take him to his room again on my back. I do not wish anyone to help. I am strong enough for that. I feel that I could carry him to the end of the world if that would save him. Instead of three police, we had ten; five outside, five inside. The days went well enough, but the nights were frightful, because the shadows of the police that I encountered always made me fear that I was face to face with the Nihilists. One night I almost strangled one with my hand. It was after that incident that we arranged with Koupriane that the agents who watched at night, inside, should stay placed in the veranda, after having, at the end of the evening, made complete examination of everything. They were not to leave the veranda unless they heard a suspicious noise

or I called to them. And it was after that arrangement that the incident of the floor happened, that has puzzled so both Koupriane and me."

"Pardon, madame," interrupted Rouletabille, "but the agents, during the examination of everything, never went to the bedroom floor?"

"No, my child, there is only myself and Natacha, I repeat, who, since the bouquet, go there."

"Well, madame, it is necessary to take me there at once."

"At once!"

"Yes, into the general's chamber."

"But he is sleeping, my child. Let me tell you exactly how the affair of the floor happened, and you will know as much of it as I and as Koupriane."

"To the general's chamber at once."

She took both his hands and pressed them nervously. "Little friend! Little friend! One hears there sometimes things which are the secret of the night! You understand me?"

"To the general's chamber, at once, madame."

Abruptly she decided to take him there, agitated, upset as she was by ideas and sentiments which held her without respite between the wildest inquietude and the most imprudent audacity.

IV. "THE YOUTH OF MOSCOW IS DEAD"

Rouletabille let himself be led by Matrena through the night, but he stumbled and his awkward hands struck against various things. The ascent to the first floor was accomplished in profound silence. Nothing broke it except that restless moaning which had so affected the young man just before.

The tepid warmth, the perfume of a woman's boudoir, then, beyond, through two doors opening upon the dressing-room which lay between Matrena's chamber and Feodor's, the dim luster of a night-lamp showed the bed where was stretched the sleeping tyrant of Moscow. Ah, he was frightening to see, with the play of faint yellow light and diffused shadows upon him. Such heavy-arched eyebrows, such an aspect of pain and menace, the massive jaw of a savage come from the plains of Tartary to be the Scourge of God, the stiff, thick, spreading beard. This was a form akin to the gallery of old nobles at Kasan, and young Rouletabille imagined him as none other than Ivan the Terrible himself. Thus appeared as he slept the excellent Feodor Feodorovitch, the easy, spoiled father of the family table, the friend of the advocate celebrated for his feats with knife and fork and of the bantering timber-merchant and amiable bear-hunter, the joyous Thaddeus and Athanase; Feodor, the faithful spouse of Matrena Petrovna and the adored papa of Natacha, a brave man who was so unfortunate as to have nights of cruel sleeplessness or dreams more frightful still.

At that moment a hoarse sigh heaved his huge chest in an uneven rhythm, and Rouletabille, leaning in the doorway of the dressing-room, watched—but it was no longer the general that he watched, it was something else, lower down, beside the wall, near the door, and it was that which set him tiptoeing so lightly across the floor that it gave no sound. There was no slightest sound in the chamber, except the heavy breathing lifting the rough chest. Behind Rouletabille Matrena raised her arms, as though she wished to hold him back, because she did not know where he was going. What was he doing? Why did he stoop thus beside the door and why did he press his thumb all along the floor at the doorway? He rose again and returned. He passed again before the bed, where rumbled now, like the bellows of a forge, the respiration of the sleeper. Matrena grasped Rouletabille by the hand. And she had already hurried him into the dressing-room when a moan stopped them.

"The youth of Moscow is dead!"

It was the sleeper speaking. The mouth which had given the stringent orders moaned. And the lamentation was still a menace. In the haunted sleep thrust upon that man by the inadequate narcotic the words Feodor Feodorovitch spoke were words of mourning and pity. This perfect fiend of a soldier, whom neither bullets nor bombs could intimidate, had a way of saying words which transformed their meaning as they came from his terrible mouth. The listeners could not but feel absorbed in the tones of the brutal victor.

Matrena Petrovna and Rouletabille had leant their two shadows, blended one into the other, against the open doorway just beyond the gleam of the night-lamp, and they heard with horror:

"The youth of Moscow is dead! They have cleared away the corpses. There is nothing but ruin left. The Kremlin itself has shut its gates—that it may not see. The youth of Moscow is dead!"

Feodor Feodorovitch's fist shook above his bed; it seemed that he was about to strike, to kill again, and Rouletabille felt Matrena trembling against him, while he trembled as well before the fearful vision of the killer in the Red Week!

Feodor heaved an immense sigh and his breast descended under the bed-clothes, the fist relaxed and fell, the great head lay over on its ear. There was silence. Had he repose at last? No, no. He sighed, he choked anew, he tossed on his couch like the damned in torment, and the words written by his daughter—by his daughter—blazed in his eyes, which now were wide open—words written on the wall, that he read on the wall, written in blood.

> "The youth of Moscow is dead! They had gone so young into the fields and into the mines,
> And they had not found a single corner of the Russian land where there were not moanings.
> Now the youth of Moscow is dead and no more moanings are heard,
> Because those for whom all youth died do not dare even to moan any more.

But—what? The voice of Feodor lost its threatening tone. His breath came as from a weeping child. And it was with sobs in his throat that he said the last verse, the verse written by his daughter in the album, in red letters:

> "The last barricade had standing there the girl of eighteen winters, the virgin of Moscow, flower of the snow.
> Who gave her kisses to the workmen struck by the bullets from the soldiers of the Czar;
> "She aroused the admiration of the very soldiers who, weeping, killed her:
> "What killing! All the houses shuttered, the windows with heavy eyelids of plank in order not to see!—
> "And the Kremlin itself has closed its gates—that it may not see.
> "The youth of Moscow is dead!"

"Feodor! Feodor!"

She had caught him in her arms, holding him fast, comforting him while still he raved, "The youth of Moscow is dead," and appeared to thrust away with insensate gestures a crowd of phantoms. She crushed him to her breast, she put her hands over his mouth to make him stop, but he, saying, "Do you hear? Do you hear? What do they say? They say nothing, now. What a tangle of bodies under the sleigh, Matrena! Look at those frozen legs of those poor girls we pass, sticking out in all directions, like logs, from under their icy, blooded skirts. Look, Matrena!"

And then came further delirium uttered in Russian, which was all the more terrible to Rouletabille because he could not comprehend it.

Then, suddenly, Feodor became silent and thrust away Matrena Petrovna.

"It is that abominable narcotic," he said with an immense sigh. "I'll drink no more of it. I do not wish to drink it."

With one hand he pointed to a large glass on the table beside him, still half full of a soporific mixture with which he moistened his lips each time he woke; with the other hand he wiped the perspiration from his face. Matrena Petrovna stayed trembling near him, suddenly overpowered by the idea that he might discover there was someone there behind the door, who had seen and heard the sleep of General Trebassof! Ah, if he learned that, everything was over. She might say her prayers; she should die.

But Rouletabille was careful to give no sign. He barely breathed. What a nightmare! He understood now the emotion of the general's friends when Natacha had sung in her low, sweet voice, "Good-night. May your eyes have rest from tears and calm re-enter your heart oppressed." The friends had certainly been made aware, by Matrena's anxious talking, of the general's insomnia, and they could not repress their tears as they listened to the poetic wish of charming Natacha. "All the same," thought Rouletabille, "no one could imagine what I have just seen. They are not dead for everyone in the world, the youths of Moscow, and every night I know now a chamber where in the glow of the night-lamp they rise—they rise—they rise!" and the young man frankly, naively regretted to have

intruded where he was; to have penetrated, however unintentionally, into an affair which, after all, concerned only the many dead and the one living. Why had he come to put himself between the dead and the living? It might be said to him: "The living has done his whole heroic duty," but the dead, what else was it that they had done?

Ah, Rouletabille cursed his curiosity, for—he saw it now—it was the desire to approach the mystery revealed by Koupriane and to penetrate once more, through all the besetting dangers, an astounding and perhaps monstrous enigma, that had brought him to the threshold of the datcha des Iles, which had placed him in the trembling hands of Matrena Petrovna in promising her his help. He had shown pity, certainly, pity for the delirious distress of that heroic woman. But there had been more curiosity than pity in his motives. And now he must pay, because it was too late now to withdraw, to say casually, "I wash my hands of it." He had sent away the police and he alone remained between the general and the vengeance of the dead! He might desert, perhaps! That one idea brought him to himself, roused all his spirit. Circumstances had brought him into a camp that he must defend at any cost, unless he was afraid!

The general slept now, or, at least, with eyelids closed simulated sleep, doubtless in order to reassure poor Matrena who, on her knees beside his pillow, had retained the hand of her terrible husband in her own. Shortly she rose and rejoined Rouletabille in her chamber. She took him then to a little guest-chamber where she urged him to get some sleep. He replied that it was she who needed rest. But, agitated still by what had just happened, she babbled:

"No, no! after such a scene I would have nightmares myself as well. Ah, it is dreadful! Appalling! Appalling! Dear little monsieur, it is the secret of the night. The poor man! Poor unhappy man! He cannot tear his thoughts away from it. It is his worst and unmerited punishment, this translation that Natacha has made of Boris's abominable verses. He knows them by heart, they are in his brain and on his tongue all night long, in spite of narcotics, and he says over and over again all the time, 'It is my daughter who has written that!—my daughter!—my daughter!' It is enough to wring all the tears from one's body—that an aide-de-camp of a general, who himself has killed the youth of Moscow, is allowed to write such verses and that Natacha should take it upon herself to translate them into lovely poetic French for her album. It is hard to account for what they do nowadays, to our misery."

She ceased, for just then they heard the floor creak under a step downstairs. Rouletabille stopped Matrena short and drew his revolver. He wished to creep down alone, but he had not time. As the floor creaked a second time, Matrena's anguished voice called down the staircase in Russian, "Who is there?" and immediately the calm voice of Natacha answered something in the same language. Then Matrena, trembling more and more, and very much excited keeping steadily to the same place as though she had been nailed to the step of the stairway, said in French, "Yes, all is well; your father is resting. Good-night, Natacha." They heard Natacha's step cross the drawing-room and the sitting-room. Then the door of her chamber closed. Matrena and Rouletabille descended, holding their breath. They reached the dining-room and Matrena played her dark-lantern on the sofa where the general always reclined. The sofa was in its usual place on the carpet. She pushed it back and raised the carpet, laying the floor bare. Then she got onto her knees and examined the floor minutely. She rose, wiping the perspiration from her brow, put the carpet hack in place, adjusted the sofa and dropped upon it with a great sigh.

"Well?" demanded Rouletabille.

"Nothing at all," said she.

"Why did you call so openly?"

"Because there was no doubt that it could only be my step-daughter on the ground-floor at that hour."

"And why this anxiety to examine the floor again?"

"I entreat you, my dear little child, do not see in my acts anything mysterious, anything hard to explain. That anxiety you speak of never leaves me. Whenever I have the chance I examine the flooring."

"Madame," demanded the young man, "what was your daughter doing in this room?"

"She came for a glass of mineral water; the bottle is still on the table."

"Madame, it is necessary that you tell me precisely what Koupriane has only hinted to me, unless I am entirely mistaken. The first time that you thought to examine the floor, was it after you heard a noise on the ground-floor such as has just happened?"

"Yes. I will tell you all that is necessary. It was the night after the attempt with the bouquet, my dear little monsieur, my dear little domovoi; it seemed to me I heard a noise on the ground-floor. I hurried downstairs and saw nothing suspicious at first. Everything was shut tight. I opened the door of Natacha's chamber softly. I wished to ask her if she had heard anything. But she was so fast asleep that I had not the heart to awaken her. I opened the door of the veranda, and all the police—all, you understand—slept soundly. I took another turn around the furniture, and, with my lantern in my hand, I was just going out of the dining-room when I noticed that the carpet on the floor was disarranged at one corner. I got down and my hand struck a great fold of carpet near the general's sofa. You would have said that the sofa had been rolled carelessly, trying to replace it in the position it usually occupied. Prompted by a sinister presentiment, I pushed away the sofa and I lifted the carpet. At first glance I saw nothing, but when I examined things closer I saw that a strip of wood did not lie well with the others on the floor. With a knife I was able to lift that strip and I found that two nails which had fastened it to the beam below had been freshly pulled out. It was just so I could raise the end of the board a little without being able to slip my hand under. To lift it any more it would be necessary to pull at least half-a-dozen nails. What could it mean? Was I on the point of discovering some new terrible and mysterious plan? I let the board fall back into place. I spread the carpet back again carefully, put the sofa in its place, and in the morning sent for Koupriane."

Rouletabille interrupted.

"You had not, madame, spoken to anyone of this discovery?"

"To no one."

"Not even to your step-daughter?"

"No," said the husky voice of Matrena, "not even to my step-daughter."

"Why?" demanded Rouletabille.

"Because," replied Matrena, after a moment's hesitation, "there were already enough frightening things about the house. I would not have spoken to my daughter any more than I would have said a word to the general. Why add to the disquiet they already suffered so much, in case nothing developed?"

"And what did Koupriane say?"

"We examined the floor together, secretly. Koupriane slipped his hand under more easily than I had done, and ascertained that under the board, that is to say between the beam and the ceiling of the kitchen, there was a hollow where any number of things might be placed. For the moment the board was still too little released for any maneuver to be possible. Koupriane, when he rose, said to me, 'You have happened, madame, to interrupt the person in her operations. But we are prepared henceforth. We know what she does and she is unaware that we know. Act as though you had not noticed anything; do not speak of it to anyone whatever—and watch. Let the general continue to sit in his usual place and let no one suspect that we have discovered the beginnings of this attempt. It is the only way we can plan so that they will continue. All the same,' he added, 'I will give my agents orders to patrol the ground-floor anew during the night. I would be risking too much to let the person continue her work each night. She might continue it so well that she would be able to accomplish it —you understand me? But by day you arrange that the rooms on the ground-floor be free from time to time—not for long, but from time to time.' I don't know why, but what he said and the way he

said it frightened me more than ever. However, I carried out his program. Then, three days later, about eight o'clock, when the night watch was not yet started, that is to say at the moment when the police were still all out in the garden or walking around the house, outside, and when I had left the the ground-floor perfectly free while I helped the general to bed, I felt drawn even against myself suddenly to the dining-room. I lifted the carpet and examined the floor. Three more nails had been drawn from the board, which lifted more easily now, and under it, I could see that the normal cavity had been made wider still!"

When she had said this, Matrena stopped, as if, overcome, she could not tell more.

"Well?" insisted Rouletabille.

"Well, I replaced things as I found them and made rapid inquiries of the police and their chief; no one had entered the ground-floor. You understand me?—no one at all. Neither had anyone come out from it."

"How could anyone come out if no one had entered?"

"I wish to say," said she with a sob, "that Natacha during this space of time had been in her chamber, in her chamber on the ground-floor."

"You appear to be very disturbed, madame, at this recollection. Can you tell me further, and precisely, why you are agitated?"

"You understand me, surely," she said, shaking her head.

"If I understand you correctly, I have to understand that from the previous time you examined the floor until the time that you noted three more nails drawn out, no other person could have entered the dining-room but you and your step-daughter Natacha."

Matrena took Rouletabille's hand as though she had reached an important decision.

"My little friend," moaned she, "there are things I am not able to think about and which I can no longer entertain when Natacha embraces me. It is a mystery more frightful than all else. Koupriane tells me that he is sure, absolutely sure, of the agents he kept here; my sole consolation, do you see, my little friend can tell you frankly, now that you have sent away those men—my sole consolation since that day has been that Koupriane is less sure of his men than I am of Natacha."

She broke down and sobbed.

When she was calmed, she looked for Rouletabille, and could not find him. Then she wiped her eyes, picked up her dark-lantern, and, furtively, crept to her post beside the general.

For that day these are the points in Rouletabille's notebook:

"Topography: Villa surrounded by a large garden on three sides. The fourth side gives directly onto a wooded field that stretches to the river Neva. On this side the level of the ground is much lower, so low that the sole window opening in that wall (the window of Natacha's sitting-room on the ground-floor) is as high from the ground as though it were on the next floor in any other part of the house. This window is closed by iron shutters, fastened inside by a bar of iron.

"Friends: Athanase Georgevitch, Ivan Petrovitch, Thaddeus the timber-merchant (peat boots), Michael and Boris (fine shoes). Matrena, sincere love, blundering heroism. Natacha unknown. Against Natacha: Never there during the attacks. At Moscow at the time of the bomb in the sleigh, no one knows where she was, and it is she who should have accompanied the general (detail furnished by Koupriane that Matrena generously kept back). The night of the bouquet is the only night Natacha has slept away from the house. Coincidence of the disappearance of the nails and the presence all alone on the ground-floor of Natacha, in case, of course, Matrena did not pull them out herself. For Natacha: Her eyes when she looks at her father."

And this bizarre phrase:

"We mustn't be rash. This evening I have not yet spoken to Matrena Petrovna about the little hat-pin. That little hat-pin is the greatest relief of my life."

V. BY ROULETABILLE'S ORDER THE GENERAL PROMENADES

"Good morning, my dear little familiar spirit. The general slept splendidly the latter part of the night. He did not touch his narcotic. I am sure it is that dreadful mixture that gives him such frightful dreams. And you, my dear little friend, you have not slept an instant. I know it. I felt you going everywhere about the house like a little mouse. Ah, it seems good, so good. I slept so peacefully, hearing the subdued movement of your little steps. Thanks for the sleep you have given me, little friend."

Matrena talked on to Rouletabille, whom she had found the morning after the nightmare tranquilly smoking his pipe in the garden.

"Ah, ah, you smoke a pipe. Now you do certainly look exactly like a dear little domovoi-doukh. See how much you are alike. He smokes just like you. Nothing new, eh? You do not look very bright this morning. You are worn out. I have just arranged the little guest-chamber for you, the only one we have, just behind mine. Your bed is waiting for you. Is there anything you need? Tell me. Everything here is at your service."

"I'm not in need of anything, madame," said the young man smilingly, after this outpouring of words from the good, heroic dame.

"How can you say that, dear child? You will make yourself sick. I want you to understand that I wish you to rest. I want to be a mother to you, if you please, and you must obey me, my child. Have you had breakfast yet this morning? If you do not have breakfast promptly mornings, I will think you are annoyed. I am so annoyed that you have heard the secret of the night. I have been afraid that you would want to leave at once and for good, and that you would have mistaken ideas about the general. There is not a better man in the world than Feodor, and he must have a good, a very good conscience to dare, without fail, to perform such terrible duties as those at Moscow, when he is so good at heart. These things are easy enough for wicked people, but for good men, for good men who can reason it out, who know what they do and that they are condemned to death into the bargain, it is terrible, it is terrible! Why, I told him the moment things began to go wrong in Moscow, 'You know what to expect, Feodor. Here is a dreadful time to get through—make out you are sick.' I believed he was going to strike me, to kill me on the spot. 'I! Betray the Emperor in such a moment! His Majesty, to whom I owe everything! What are you thinking of, Matrena Petrovna!' And he did not speak to me after that for two days. It was only when he saw I was growing very ill that he pardoned me, but he had to be plagued with my jeremiads and the appealing looks of Natacha without end in his own home each time we heard any shooting in the street. Natacha attended the lectures of the Faculty, you know. And she knew many of them, and even some of those who were being killed on the barricades. Ah, life was not easy for him in his own home, the poor general! Besides, there was also Boris, whom I love as well, for that matter, as my own child, because I shall be very happy to see him married to Natacha—there was poor Boris who always came home from the attacks paler than a corpse and who could not keep from moaning with us."

"And Michael?" questioned Rouletabille.

"Oh, Michael only came towards the last. He is a new orderly to the general. The government at St. Petersburg sent him, because of course they couldn't help learning that Boris rather lacked zeal in repressing the students and did not encourage the general in being as severe as was necessary for the safety of the Empire. But Michael, he has a heart of stone; he knows nothing but the countersign and massacres fathers and mothers, crying, 'Vive le Tsar!' Truly, it seems his heart can only be touched by the sight of Natacha. And that again has caused a good deal of anxiety to Feodor and me. It has caught us in a useless complication that we would have liked to end by the prompt marriage of Natacha and

Boris. But Natacha, to our great surprise, has not wished it to be so. No, she has not wished it, saying that there is always time to think of her wedding and that she is in no hurry to leave us. Meantime she entertains herself with this Michael as if she did not fear his passion, and neither has Michael the desperate air of a man who knows the definite engagement of Natacha and Boris. And my step-daughter is not a coquette. No, no. No one can say she is a coquette. At least, no one had been able to say it up to the time that Michael arrived. Can it be that she is a coquette? They are mysterious, these young girls, very mysterious, above all when they have that calm and tranquil look that Natacha always has; a face, monsieur, as you have noticed perhaps, whose beauty is rather passive whatever one says and does, excepting when the volleys in the streets kill her young comrades of the schools. Then I have seen her almost faint, which proves she has a great heart under her tranquil beauty. Poor Natacha! I have seen her excited as I over the life of her father. My little friend, I have seen her searching in the middle of the night, with me, for infernal machines under the furniture, and then she has expressed the opinion that it is nervous, childish, unworthy of us to act like that, like timid beasts under the sofas, and she has left me to search by myself. True, she never quits the general. She is more reassured, and is reassuring to him, at his side. It has an excellent moral effect on him, while I walk about and search like a beast. And she has become as fatalistic as he, and now she sings verses to the guzla, like Boris, or talks in corners with Michael, which makes the two enraged each with the other. They are curious, the young women of St. Petersburg and Moscow, very curious. We were not like that in our time, at Orel. We did not try to enrage people. We would have received a box on the ears if we had."

Natacha came in upon this conversation, happy, in white voile, fresh and smiling like a girl who had passed an excellent night. She asked after the health of the young man very prettily and embraced Matrena, in truth as one embraces a much-beloved mother. She complained again of Matrena's night-watch.

"You have not stopped it, mamma; you have not stopped it, eh? You are not going to be a little reasonable at last? I beg of you! What has given me such a mother! Why don't you sleep? Night is made for sleep. Koupriane has upset you. All the terrible things are over in Moscow. There is no occasion to think of them any more. That Koupriane makes himself important with his police-agents and obsesses us all. I am convinced that the affair of the bouquet was the work of his police."

"Mademoiselle," said Rouletabille, "I have just had them all sent away, all of them—because I think very much the same as you do."

"Well, then, you will be my friend, Monsieur Rouletabille I promise you, since you have done that. Now that the police are gone we have nothing more to fear. Nothing. I tell you, mamma; you can believe me and not weep any more, mamma dear."

"Yes, yes; kiss me. Kiss me again!" repeated Matrena, drying her eyes. "When you kiss me I forget everything. You love me like your own mother, don't you?"

"Like my mother. Like my own mother."

"You have nothing to hide from me?—tell me, Natacha."

"Nothing to hide."

"Then why do you make Boris suffer so? Why don't you marry him?"

"Because I don't wish to leave you, mamma dear."

She escaped further parley by jumping up on the garden edge away from Khor, who had just been set free for the day.

"The dear child," said Matrena; "the dear little one, she little knows how much pain she has caused us without being aware of it, by her ideas, her extravagant ideas. Her father said to me one day at Moscow, 'Matrena Petrovna, I'll tell you what I think—Natacha is the victim of the wicked books that have turned the brains of all these poor rebellious students. Yes, yes; it would be better for her and for us if she did not know how to read, for there are moments—my word!—when she talks very wildly, and I have said to myself more than once that with such ideas her place is not in

our salon hut behind a barricade. All the same,' he added after reflection, 'I prefer to find her in the salon where I can embrace her than behind a barricade where I would kill her like a mad dog.' But my husband, dear little monsieur, did not say what he really thinks, for he loves his daughter more than all the rest of the world put together, and there are things that even a general, yes, even a governor-general, would not be able to do without violating both divine and human laws. He suspects Boris also of setting Natacha's wits awry. We really have to consider that when they are married they will read everything they have a mind to. My husband has much more real respect for Michael Korsakoff because of his impregnable character and his granite conscience. More than once he has said, 'Here is the aide I should have had in the worst days of Moscow. He would have spared me much of the individual pain.' I can understand how that would please the general, but how such a tigerish nature succeeds in appealing to Natacha, how it succeeds in not actually revolting her, these young girls of the capital, one never can tell about them—they get away from all your notions of them."

Rouletabille inquired:

"Why did Boris say to Michael, 'We will return together'? Do they live together?"

"Yes, in the small villa on the Krestowsky Ostrov, the isle across from ours, that you can see from the window of the sitting-room. Boris chose it because of that. The orderlies wished to have camp-beds prepared for them right here in the general's house, by a natural devotion to him; but I opposed it, in order to keep them both from Natacha, in whom, of course, I have the most complete confidence, but one cannot be sure about the extravagance of men nowadays."

Ermolai came to announce the petit-dejeuner. They found Natacha already at table and she poured them coffee and milk, eating away all the time at a sandwich of anchovies and caviare.

"Tell me, mamma, do you know what gives me such an appetite? It is the thought of the way poor Koupriane must have taken this dismissal of his men. I should like to go to see him."

"If you see him," said Rouletabille, "it is unnecessary to tell him that the general will go for a long promenade among the isles this afternoon, because without fail he would send us an escort of gendarmes."

"Papa! A promenade among the islands? Truly? Oh, that is going to be lovely!"

Matrena Petrovna sprang to her feet.

"Are you mad, my dear little domovoi, actually mad?"

"Why? Why? It is fine. I must run and tell papa."

"Your father's room is locked," said Matrena brusquely.

"Yes, yes; he is locked in. You have the key. Locked away until death! You will kill him. It will be you who kills him."

She left the table without waiting for a reply and went and shut herself also in her chamber.

Matrena looked at Rouletabille, who continued his breakfast as though nothing had happened.

"Is it possible that you speak seriously?" she demanded, coming over and sitting down beside him. "A promenade! Without the police, when we have received again this morning a letter saying now that before forty-eight hours the general will be dead!"

"Forty-eight hours," said Rouletabille, soaking his bread in his chocolate, "forty-eight hours? It is possible. In any case, I know they will try something very soon."

"My God, how is it that you believe that? You speak with assurance."

"Madame, it is necessary to do everything I tell you, to the letter."

"But to have the general go out, unless he is guarded—how can you take such a responsibility? When I think about it, when I really think about it, I ask myself how you have dared send away the police. But here, at least, I know what to do in order to feel a little safe, I know that downstairs with Gniagnia and Ermolai we have nothing to fear. No stranger can approach even the basement. The provisions are brought from the lodge by our dvornicks whom we have had sent from my mother's home in the Orel country and who are as devoted to us as bull-dogs. Not a bottle of preserves is taken into the kitchens without having been previously opened outside. No package comes from any

tradesman without being opened in the lodge. Here, within, we are able to feel a little safe, even without the police—but away from here—outside!"

"Madame, they are going to try to kill your husband within forty-eight hours. Do you desire me to save him perhaps for a long time—for good, perhaps?"

"Ah, listen to him! Listen to him, the dear little domovoi! But what will Koupriane say? He will not permit any venturing beyond the villa; none, at least for the moment. Ah, now, how he looks at me, the dear little domovoi! Oh, well, yes. There, I will do as you wish."

"Very well, come into the garden with me."

She accompanied him, leaning on his arm.

"Here's the idea," said Rouletabille. "This afternoon you will go with the general in his rolling-chair. Everybody will follow. Everyone, you understand, Madame—understand me thoroughly, I mean to say that everyone who wishes to come must be invited to. Only those who wish to remain behind will do so. And do not insist. Ah, now, I see, you understand me. Why do you tremble?"

"But who will guard the house?"

"No one. Simply tell the servant at the lodge to watch from the lodge those who enter the villa, but simply from the lodge, without interfering with them, and saying nothing to them, nothing."

"I will do as you wish. Do you want me to announce our promenade beforehand?"

"Why, certainly. Don't be uneasy; let everybody have the good news."

"Oh, I will tell only the general and his friends, you may be sure."

"Now, dear Madame, just one more word. Do not wait for me at luncheon."

"What! You are going to leave us?" she cried instantly, breathless. "No, no. I do not wish it. I am willing to do without the police, but I am not willing to do without you. Everything might happen in your absence. Everything! Everything!" she repeated with singular energy. "Because, for me, I cannot feel sure as I should, perhaps. Ah, you make me say these things. Such things! But do not go."

"Do not be afraid; I am not going to leave you, madame."

"Ah, you are good! You are kind, kind! Caracho! (Very well.)"

"I will not leave you. But I must not be at luncheon. If anyone asks where I am, say that I have my business to look after, and have gone to interview political personages in the city."

"There's only one political personage in Russia," replied Matrena Petrovna bluntly; "that is the Tsar."

"Very well; say I have gone to interview the Tsar."

"But no one will believe that. And where will you be?"

"I do not know myself. But I will be about the house."

"Very well, very well, dear little domovoi."

She left him, not knowing what she thought about it all, nor what she should think—her head was all in a muddle.

In the course of the morning Athanase Georgevitch and Thaddeus Tchnitchnikof arrived. The general was already in the veranda. Michael and Boris arrived shortly after, and inquired in their turn how he had passed the night without the police. When they were told that Feodor was going for a promenade that afternoon they applauded his decision. "Bravo! A promenade a la strielka (to the head of the island) at the hour when all St. Petersburg is driving there. That is fine. We will all be there." The general made them stay for luncheon. Natacha appeared for the meal, in rather melancholy mood. A little before luncheon she had held a double conversation in the garden with Michael and Boris. No one ever could have known what these three young people had said if some stenographic notes in Rouletabille's memorandum-book did not give us a notion; the reporter had overheard, by accident surely, since all self-respecting reporters are quite incapable of eavesdropping.

The memorandum notes:

Natacha went into the garden with a book, which she gave to Boris, who pressed her hand lingeringly to his lips. "Here is your book; I return it to you. I don't want any more of them, the ideas

surge so in my brain. It makes my head ache. It is true, you are right, I don't love novelties. I can satisfy myself with Pouchkine perfectly. The rest are all one to me. Did you pass a good night?"

Boris (good-looking young man, about thirty years old, blonde, a little effeminate, wistful. A curious appurtenance in the military household of so vigorous a general). "Natacha, there is not an hour that I can call truly good if I spend it away from you, dear, dear Natacha."

"I ask you seriously if you have passed a good night?"

She touched his hand a moment and looked into his eyes, but he shook his head.

"What did you do last night after you reached home?" she demanded insistently. "Did you stay up?"

"I obeyed you; I only sat a half-hour by the window looking over here at the villa, and then I went to bed."

"Yes, it is necessary you should get your rest. I wish it for you as for everyone else. This feverish life is impossible. Matrena Petrovna is getting us all ill, and we shall be prostrated."

"Yesterday," said Boris, "I looked at the villa for a half-hour from my window. Dear, dear villa, dear night when I can feel you breathing, living near me. As if you had been against my heart. I could have wept because I could hear Michael snoring in his chamber. He seemed happy. At last, I heard nothing more, there was nothing more to hear but the double chorus of frogs in the pools of the island. Our pools, Natacha, are like the enchanted lakes of the Caucasus which are silent by day and sing at evening; there are innumerable throngs of frogs which sing on the same chord, some of them on a major and some on a minor. The chorus speaks from pool to pool, lamenting and moaning across the fields and gardens, and re-echoing like AEolian harps placed opposite one another."

"Do AEolian harps make so much noise, Boris?"

"You laugh? I don't find you yourself half the time. It is Michael who has changed you, and I am out of it. (Here they spoke in Russian.) I shall not be easy until I am your husband. I can't understand your manner with Michael at all."

(Here more Russian words which I do not understand.)

"Speak French; here is the gardener," said Natacha.

"I do not like the way you are managing our lives. Why do you delay our marriage? Why?"

(Russian words from Natacha. Gesture of desperation from Boris.)

"How long? You say a long time? But that says nothing—a long time. How long? A year? Two years? Ten years? Tell me, or I will kill myself at your feet. No, no; speak or I will kill Michael. On my word! Like a dog!"

"I swear to you, by the dear head of your mother, Boris, that the date of our marriage does not depend on Michael."

(Some words in Russian. Boris, a little consoled, holds her hand lingeringly to his lips.)

Conversation between Michael and Natacha in the garden:

"Well? Have you told him?"

"I ended at last by making him understand that there is not any hope. None. It is necessary to have patience. I have to have it myself."

"He is stupid and provoking."

"Stupid, no. Provoking, yes, if you wish. But you also, you are provoking."

"Natacha! Natacha!"

(Here more Russian.) As Natacha started to leave, Michael placed his hand on her shoulder, stopped her and said, looking her direct in the eyes:

"There will be a letter from Annouchka this evening, by a messenger at five o'clock." He made each syllable explicit. "Very important and requiring an immediate reply."

These notes of Rouletabille's are not followed by any commentary.

After luncheon the gentlemen played poker until half-past four, which is the "chic" hour for the promenade to the head of the island. Rouletabille had directed Matrena to start exactly at a

quarter to five. He appeared in the meantime, announcing that he had just interviewed the mayor of St. Petersburg, which made Athanase laugh, who could not understand that anyone would come clear from Paris to talk with men like that. Natacha came from her chamber to join them for the promenade. Her father told her she looked too worried.

They left the villa. Rouletabille noted that the dvornicks were before the gate and that the schwitzar was at his post, from which he could detect everyone who might enter or leave the villa. Matrena pushed the rolling-chair herself. The general was radiant. He had Natacha at his right and at his left Athanase and Thaddeus. The two orderlies followed, talking with Rouletabille, who had monopolized them. The conversation turned on the devotion of Matrena Petrovna, which they placed above the finest heroic traits in the women of antiquity, and also on Natacha's love for her father. Rouletabille made them talk.

Boris Mourazoff explained that this exceptional love was accounted for by the fact that Natacha's own mother, the general's first wife, died in giving birth to their daughter, and accordingly Feodor Feodorovitch had been both father and mother to his daughter. He had raised her with the most touching care, not permitting anyone else, when she was sick, to have the care of passing the nights by her bedside.

Natacha was seven years old when Feodor Feodorovitch was appointed governor of Orel. In the country near Orel, during the summer, the general and his daughter lived on neighborly terms near the family of old Petroff, one of the richest fur merchants in Russia. Old Petroff had a daughter, Matrena, who was magnificent to see, like a beautiful field-flower. She was always in excellent humor, never spoke ill of anyone in the neighborhood, and not only had the fine manners of a city dame but a great, simple heart, which she lavished on the little Natacha.

The child returned the affection of the beautiful Matrena, and it was on seeing them always happy to find themselves together that Trebassof dreamed of reestablishing his fireside. The nuptials were quickly arranged, and the child, when she learned that her good Matrena was to wed her papa, danced with joy. Then misfortune came only a few weeks before the ceremony. Old Petroff, who speculated on the Exchange for a long time without anyone knowing anything about it, was ruined from top to bottom. Matrena came one evening to apprise Feodor Feodorovitch of this sad news and return his pledge to him. For all response Feodor placed Natacha in Matrena's arms. "Embrace your mother," he said to the child, and to Matrena, "From to-day I consider you my wife, Matrena Petrovna. You should obey me in all things. Take that reply to your father and tell him my purse is at his disposition."

The general was already, at that time, even before he had inherited the Cheremaieff, immensely rich. He had lands behind Nijni as vast as a province, and it would have been difficult to count the number of moujiks who worked for him on his property. Old Pretroff gave his daughter and did not wish to accept anything in exchange. Feodor wished to settle a large allowance on his wife; her father opposed that, and Matrena sided with him in the matter against her husband, because of Natacha. "It all belongs to the little one," she insisted. "I accept the position of her mother, but on the condition that she shall never lose a kopeck of her inheritance."

"So that," concluded Boris, "if the general died tomorrow she would be poorer than Job."

"Then the general is Matrena's sole resource," reflected Rouletabille aloud.

"I can understand her hanging onto him," said Michael Korsakoff, blowing the smoke of his yellow cigarette. "Look at her. She watches him like a treasure."

"What do you mean, Michael Nikolaievitch?" said Boris, curtly. "You believe, do you, that the devotion of Matrena Petrovna is not disinterested. You must know her very poorly to dare utter such a thought."

"I have never had that thought, Boris Alexandrovitch," replied the other in a tone curter still. "To be able to imagine that anyone who lives in the Trebassofs' home could have such a thought needs an ass's head, surely."

"We will speak of it again, Michael Nikolaievitch."

"At your pleasure, Boris Alexandrovitch."

They had exchanged these latter words tranquilly continuing their walk and negligently smoking their yellow tobacco. Rouletabille was between them. He did not regard them; he paid no attention even to their quarrel; he had eyes only for Natacha, who just now quit her place beside her father's wheel-chair and passed by them with a little nod of the head, seeming in haste to retrace the way back to the villa.

"Are you leaving us?" Boris demanded of her.

"Oh, I will rejoin you immediately. I have forgotten my umbrella."

"But I will go and get it for you," proposed Michael.

"No, no. I have to go to the villa; I will return right away."

She was already past them. Rouletabille, during this, looked at Matrena Petrovna, who looked at him also, turning toward the young man a visage pale as wax. But no one else noted the emotion of the good Matrena, who resumed pushing the general's wheel-chair.

Rouletabille asked the officers, "Was this arrangement because the first wife of the general, Natacha's mother, was rich?"

"No. The general, who always had his heart in his hand," said Boris, "married her for her great beauty. She was a beautiful girl of the Caucasus, of excellent family besides, that Feodor Feodorovitch had known when he was in garrison at Tiflis."

"In short," said Rouletabille, "the day that General Trebassof dies Madame Trebassof, who now possesses everything, will have nothing, and the daughter, who now has nothing, will have everything."

"Exactly that," said Michael.

"That doesn't keep Matrena Petrovna and Natacha Feodorovna from deeply loving each other," observed Boris.

The little party drew near the "Point." So far the promenade had been along pleasant open country, among the low meadows traversed by fresh streams, across which tiny bridges had been built, among bright gardens guarded by porcelain dwarfs, or in the shade of small weeds from the feet of whose trees the newly-cut grass gave a seasonal fragrance. All was reflected in the pools—which lay like glass whereon a scene-painter had cut the green hearts of the pond-lily leaves. An adorable country glimpse which seemed to have been created centuries back for the amusement of a queen and preserved, immaculately trimmed and cleaned, from generation to generation, for the eternal charm of such an hour as this on the banks of the Gulf of Finland.

Now they had reached the bank of the Gulf, and the waves rippled to the prows of the light ships, which dipped gracefully like huge and rapid sea-gulls, under the pressure of their great white sails.

Along the roadway, broader now, glided, silently and at walking pace, the double file of luxurious equipages with impatient horses, the open carriages in which the great personages of the court saw the view and let themselves be seen. Enormous coachmen held the reins high. Lively young women, negligently reclining against the cushions, displayed their new Paris toilettes, and kept young officers on horseback busy with salutes. There were all kinds of uniforms. No talking was heard. Everyone was kept busy looking. There rang in the pure, thin air only the noise of the champing bits and the tintinnabulation of the bells attached to the hairy Finnish ponies' collars. And all that, so beautiful, fresh, charming and clear, and silent, it all seemed more a dream than even that which hung in the pools, suspended between the crystal of the air and the crystal of the water. The transparence of the sky and the transparence of the gulf blended their two unrealities so that one could not note where the horizons met.

Rouletabille looked at the view and looked at the general, and in all his young vibrating soul there was a sense of infinite sadness, for he recalled those terrible words in the night: "They have

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

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

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.