

Like Brian Gallagher, Martin Gately has also assembled a series of tales over several volumes of Tales of the Shadowmen, but his feature Gaston Leroux's sleuth, Joseph Rouletabille, published however in a diverse chronological order. "Leviathan Creek" (Volume 8) takes place in 1916. "Rouletabille and the New World Order" (Volume 11) takes place ten years later, sandwiched between parts 1 and 2 of "Rouletabille vs. The Cat" (Volume 10). "Rouletabille on Mysterious Island" (Volume 12) takes place a year later, in 1927. With this new installment, we jump back in time to an earlier segment of the young French journalist's life, located just after The Perfume of the Lady in Black, when he is summoned to the Tsar's Imperial Court for the adventure known as Rouletabille chez le Tsar (aka Rouletabille in Russia, or The Secret of the Night)...

Martin Gately: *Rouletabille Rides the Horror Express*

*(Inspired by the script Horror Express
by Arnaud d'Usseau and Julian Zimet)*

The following report to the Royal Geological Society by the undersigned, Alexander Saxton, is a true and faithful account of events that befell the Society's expedition in Manchuria. As the leader of the expedition, I must accept responsibility for its ending in disaster. But I will leave to the judgment of the honorable members the decision as to where the blame for the catastrophe lies...

Professor Sir Alexander Saxton, FRS, MCIjA

Prologue - Outer Manchuria, winter 1906

It had been a hard trek across the ice fields, but Saxton's spirits were high. The foothills were now in sight. And somewhere in those hills was the cave that a silk merchant in Peking had described to him nearly five weeks ago. The merchant said that he had sheltered in a cave system during a snow storm and stumbled upon the partially decomposed body of an ancient man-like creature encased in ice. The story had fired Saxton's imagination, and the merchant's obvious sincerity had defused the geologist's natural cynicism. In addition, the man had wanted no payment for the crude map he drew of the cave's location; in turn, the local guides Saxton had procured in the nearby town of Xiang-Jing seemed well aware of the cave and what it contained. Quite why they had not drawn the authority's attention to the ice creature he did not know—at this time.

Nearly two hours later, Saxton and his guides stood at the ragged mouth of the cavern. He removed his thick fur mittens and lit the portable limelight lantern he had brought with him. The searing cone of silver projected by the lantern illuminated the interior almost as brightly as natural daylight; the harsh light glinted prismaticly off the millions of tiny ice crystals on the cave's smooth walls.

Saxton allowed one of the guides to ease in front of him, and the man led him unerringly to where the creature lay. The silk merchant had not exaggerated. This was an anthropoid creature from out of the remote past. Saxton marveled at it. While it was not perfectly preserved, the level of protection created by the ice was extraordinary. Decomposition had twisted the waxy flesh of the thing's face into a terrifying sneer. And its eyes were still in place—remarkable! He was unaware of the discovery of any human-like creature with the eyes intact. This find would make his reputation, and the Royal Society of Geologists would surely agree that the diversion away from the study of alluvial deposits, with which he had been tasked, was well worth it. Of course, the matter did not truly fall within the field of geology; more properly, this was paleontology, or some weird offshoot of it. While it was quite obvious that the ice creature was flesh and bone, not stone, he resolved that he would refer to it as a fossil, particularly when speaking to the uninitiated and ignorant. Also, if the Chinese authorities misunderstood the nature of the find, and believed it to be a recently frozen man, he might be caught up in weeks of wrangling. Far better that it be thought of as a fossil by all concerned.

He turned to the guide.

“Fetch the tools from outside. We are going to have to cut it out of the ice and carry it back to the town,” said Saxton.

Trans-Siberia Station, Russian Concession, Harbin - three weeks later.

In some ways, Joseph Rouletabille had never felt happier. The appalling affair of the Living Bombs was retreating in his memory; it was months now since he had become entangled with the affairs of General Trebassof. Following that, the French journalist had been a little surprised when a call for his assistance had come from China, though he shouldn't have been since the Russian Concession had both Russian and French language newspapers which dutifully recorded his exploits. Yes, General Wang, whose role was a combination of military governor and minister for trade, had heard of Rouletabille, and required his assistance in finding the hidden den of a group of Dacoits allied to a certain *Devil Doctor*.

Rouletabille had worked more or less undercover with an Irish soldier, Captain Sean O'Hagan, who was serving in the concession's International Regiment. Ultimately, a raid had been organized on the tunnels the Dacoits had constructed beneath freight yards of the Chinese Eastern Railway. During his time in China, Rouletabille had concluded that the foreign concessions within the country were marvelous, cosmopolitan and egalitarian institutions. Perhaps they were even a blueprint for the future organization of society. After all, crime was very low and the corruption of public officials almost unknown, or was he just viewing this particular jointly administered enclave through rose-tinted *pince nez*?

In the office of the Trans-Siberian Rail, the calm was rapidly disappearing from the voice of Professor Sir Alexander Saxton. He pointed speculatively at a filing cabinet with his walking cane, while addressing the station master.

“My name is Alexander Saxton. If you check your records, you will find the telegram I sent you three weeks ago requesting both a single private berth and space within a freight car.”

“I'm sorry,” replied the official. “There isn't a single seat left.”

Saxton's outburst of fury was delayed by the arrival of Dr. James Wells, a fellow academician and acquaintance of Saxton's. The doctor was accompanied by a rather portly and matronly woman of about sixty, who generated the aura of that rare creature: the female scientist. Wells' extraordinarily gaunt face relaxed into a friendly smile

“Professor Saxton, I presume,” greeted Wells, in mock imitation of Henry Morton Stanley.

“Dr. Wells,” said Saxton, coldly. “What the Devil are you doing in Harbin province?”

“I might ask you the same... Actually, I'm here collecting both zoological specimens and bacterial cultures,” said Wells, who then gestured in a chivalrous way in the direction of the lady at his side. “This is my assistant, Miss Jones. She is a superb technician.”

“For a woman, he means,” said Miss Jones, self-deprecatingly.

Miss Jones extended her hand and Saxton just about managed to shake it politely; inside, he was still seething that he had not been allocated a private berth and space in the freight car.

Miss Jones looked Saxton up and down. Why, he didn't seem English at all; he looked more like a displaced Italian nobleman. He was six feet five inches at least, and his face was adorned with a thick, dark moustache. He was compellingly handsome, and so very obviously as volatile as a volcano.

Suddenly, Wells seemed to have the attention of the station-master.

“I realize that I'm asking the impossible, but I need two private berths on the next train to Moscow and space for three animal crates.” As he said this, he passed the man a thick bundle of pale turquoise Chinese banknotes.

“Of course, sir,” said the station-master, immediately returning to his desk to write out the travel warrants.

Wells turned back to Saxton.

“In China, it's called ‘squeeze,’ I believe,” said Wells.

“And in Britain, we call it bribery and corruption,” condemned Saxton.

Saxton advanced on the little station-master's desk with fury in his eyes, clutching his walking cane as if it were a club. With a single sweeping action, he knocked the typewriter, desk lamp and document basket off the desk and onto the floor with a crash. The official recoiled in fear, anticipating that he was about to take a beating from this madman.

The door into the office opened yet again. This time a platoon of International Regiment Soldiers in their distinctive peacock blue uniforms marched in; leading them was a European officer with a flaming red moustache.

"Captain O'Hagan, sir," said the officer to Saxton. "General Wang asked me to find you and see if I could make myself useful."

Saxton knew the seemingly omniscient General Wang only slightly, and had not thought to rely on him for favors, though he had, as a matter of courtesy, sent him a message describing the importance of the ice creature fossil find. He was extremely pleased that International Regiment troops would be on hand to move the crate and guard it.

Saxton noticed that the station-master was now filling out a reserved ticket travel warrant for him, just as he had for Wells.

"Your ticket, Excellency," said the little man, assuming expediently, although incorrectly, that Saxton had some form of diplomatic status because troops had been deployed to assist him.

Saxton shook Captain O'Hagan's hand warmly.

"You're a sight for sore eyes, Captain. I have an extremely valuable archeological find for transportation aboard the Express. Your men are just what I need."

Rouletabille had not seen O'Hagan, arrive on the station platform because he had been paged loudly to the local telegraph office. The message was from the French Diplomatic Bureau located within the French Concession in Shanghai. The telegram used plain text, but was couched in such a way that it was obvious that he was being asked to undertake a mission which would greatly benefit his government.

He considered it for a moment, then surreptitiously burned the telegram whilst lighting his pipe. Further along the crowded platform, a man caught the journalist's attention. His body language was furtive, and this stood out quite noticeably in the hustle and bustle of ordinary passengers and merchandise sellers. The man now loitered by a large padlocked and chain wrapped crate. Rouletabille could not see his hands, but the movement of his shoulders was highly distinctive. The man was picking the padlock.

Rouletabille continued to move nearer. Then, he became aware that there was another man at his side, keeping pace with him. It was a tall bearded Russian dressed in the distinctive black robes of a *strannik*—a religious wanderer. The holy man had obviously noticed, or sensed, what the brazen thief was now doing, and he, too, was moving in to apprehend him.

Rouletabille and the Russian exchanged a look; seemingly, they were allies on the side of right. But before they could reach the man picking the lock, he suddenly cried out and collapsed face down onto the rough flagstones of the platform.

Rouletabille suspected that the thief was shamming, and felt for his pulse. But the man was dead. The holy man turned over the body. The journalist wondered how he could have been so horribly mistaken. For the man could not have been a thief—he was blind! He had no pupils, no corneas. Both eyeballs were just a mass of white scar tissue, as if his eyes had been seared or cauterized by a red-hot poker.

The holy man began chanting incessantly in Russian, praying for the thief's soul. After a few minutes, the curious crowd parted to allow a policeman to approach the corpse. This was Inspector Pavel Mirov of the Trans-Siberian Express Constabulary Force.

"Why pray for *his* soul, *strannik*?" asked Mirov. "He was just a filthy sneak thief."

"You knew him?" said Rouletabille. "Yet surely, he could not really have been a thief. He was blind."

"He could see well enough when a policeman was after him!" spat Mirov. "It is Grashinski, the failed locksmith. His father was Russian and his mother Chinese."

Mirov moved closer, and was obviously shocked by the dead man's blank white eyes.

"I'll be damned," said Mirov.

"This *is* the work of the Devil," said the holy man.

Simultaneously, Rouletabille and the *strannik* started to pull the chains from the crate in order to get it open and see what was inside it. In his mind, the Frenchman was already forming a hypothesis: it was quite possible that someone was inside the wooden box and had squirted acid through the small rectangular aperture that he had now noticed in the side of the crate, and it had gone into Grashinski's eyes.

Saxton, who had just come out of the office, was appalled to see the two men seeking to open up his precious crate.

"Get away from my property," he bellowed.

Again getting ready to wield his cane as a weapon, he had completely forgotten that O'Hagan and a platoon of armed men were standing ready to back him up.

"Is this yours?" queried the French journalist. He had imagined the crate as belonging to some local crime lord, perhaps smuggling a wanted confederate out of the concession to the comparative safety of Moscow.

"It reeks of evil. Whatever is inside this box is unholy and must be destroyed," said the *strannik*.

"What is in the crate, Excellency?" asked Mirov.

"Merely fossils," said Saxton. And then adding by way of explanation, "Ancient bones that have, over time, become stone by way of a natural process of molecular petrification."

Mirov and the holy man both looked unconvinced, but Rouletabille was fascinated.

"What sort of bones? Animal bones?" he inquired, but his question went unanswered.

"It's just a laboratory specimen, of no value to a thief," assured Saxton.

"Everywhere there is a place for God," said the holy man, enigmatically. "Even on this stone floor," and with that, he stooped down, removed a small piece of chalk from his pocket and drew a cross on the flagstones. "But where the Devil is, the cross cannot be marked."

The holy man reached up to the wood of the crate, pressed hard and attempted to draw the cross again. This time, no mark was made at all. Mirov's face registered surprise, but Saxton was merely appalled at this display of charlatanry and superstition.

"A puerile conjuror's trick," said Saxton. "Captain O'Hagan, would you get your men to put the crate onto the train as carefully as humanly possible?"

While the troopers strained with the box, O'Hagan took the opportunity to say a proper farewell to Rouletabille.

"It has certainly been a pleasure working with you, Joseph. I hope you don't mind if I look you up if I'm ever in Paris?"

"My friend, I will show you all of the sights," promised Rouletabille. "A man who has not seen Paris has not lived."

Rouletabille wrestled his wallet out of his pocket to check his travel warrant reservation, and then started to make his way along the express train, looking for his carriage. He glanced back down the platform and saw that Mirov's uniformed men were already carrying away the body of Grashinski the locksmith. It looked as if he would have to place the mystery of the blind thief into the 'unsolved' section of the filing cabinet in his study.

In the freight and baggage car of the Trans-Siberian Express, Dr. Wells was already inspecting the placement and integrity of his animal crates and the smaller cases of culture specimens. Everything seemed to be in order. At that moment, the troopers carried the large crate containing the ice creature up the ramp and into the car under Saxton's watchful eye.

Without warning, a deep roar reverberated through the train car. It came from nowhere and everywhere—permeating every iota of Saxton's being. He looked suspiciously at Wells' small live animal crates. But rats, hares and juvenile deer do not roar. He moved closer to the crate, but the sound had stopped.

Bidding Saxton farewell, O'Hagan led the troopers away, leaving Saxton to his puzzlement. The scientist unlocked and swung open a rectangular door at the top of the crate which revealed the ice creature's head. Wells was at the far end of the freight car, feigning a lack of curiosity. Saxton put his hand to the anthropoid's face. The thing was starting to thaw.

Wells approached as Saxton was re-locking the door in the crate.

"What are you going to astound the scientific world with this time, old boy?"

"You'll read about it in the Academy's annual report. It is a most unique and remarkable fossil," said Saxton.

"You're joking! It's not a fossil! You've got something alive in there. A moment ago, it was growling," said Wells.

"You're badly mistaken," said Saxton, condescendingly.

"Well, if it's a fossil, you won't need to feed it," Wells teased.

"The occupant has not eaten for roughly two million years," said Saxton.

"That's one way to economize on the household food bill, I suppose," grinned Wells.

Wells exited the freight car just as two more people entered and the train started to move. The first was Maletero, the baggage man; the other an unfettered vision of loveliness, the Countess Irina Petrovski, an extraordinarily beautiful noblewoman in her late twenties. In one arm, she clutched a small white poodle, and with her free hand, she gently held a long red velvet bag—the sort in which a lady might place her most treasured valuables.

"You have a safe place for valuables?" she asked the quietly whistling Maletero.

"Yes, Countess, I shall make you out a receipt," said the baggage man, hurrying off towards his corner desk.

The Countess commenced to walk past the ice creature's crate, at which moment her little dog started to whimper horribly.

"Excuse me," she asked Saxton, "something is making Alinka afraid. What do you have in that crate?"

"Nothing that would interest Alinka, Madame," said Saxton.

"Then perhaps it *you*... but normally she likes Englishmen—all we Poles do" smiled the noblewoman rather charmingly. "Oh, yes—England, Queen Victoria, Sherlock Holmes, crumpets..."

"I admire Poland, Ma'am," said Saxton. "I believe that there is a bond between our countries."

"Yet, we Poles also have long memories—my husband the Count often mentions how your King Henry sided with the Lithuanians against King Jagaila of Poland in 1389."

"I hope that you and your husband will accept my profoundest apologies for that betrayal," said Saxton with grandiose sincerity. He had become totally entranced by her beauty.

Rouletabille had paused at the restaurant car only long enough to order soup and a sandwich, and then made his way along to his berth. The *strannik* had also been in the restaurant car ordering food, and the Frenchman was able to learn that his name was Father Pujardov, and, perhaps more surprisingly, that he was a passenger in a private first class coach allocated to Polish nobility.

At the moment Pujardov walked past Rouletabille, the express crossed a set of points at high speed and the holy man momentarily stumbled against him. The journalist could not resist satiating his curiosity regarding Pujardov's trick with the chalk, so he picked the pocket of his robe and relieved him of the item. Pujardov, oblivious, simply apologized and strode off to his coach.

Once he was out of sight, Rouletabille paused and examined the chalk. At first, it seemed perfectly ordinary, but then he saw that one end of the chalk had received a thick hard coat of white enamel paint. Pujardov was perhaps little more than a harmless charlatan. The trick had been a pre-rehearsed one, and the journalist could not help wondering in what other circumstances he had used it, as well as what else was in his repertoire.

Rouletabille slid open the door into his berth and found a blond man in his mid-thirties already settled in at the little table playing chess with himself.

“I hope you don’t mind company, my friend,” said the man. “This train has been overbooked and the conductor is doubling up everyone in what were supposed to be private berths.”

“Not at all,” said Rouletabille. “And I see that you play chess. What better way to pass the time as we journey through the Siberian wastes? I am Joseph Rouletabille.”

“And I am Oleg Yevtushenko, an engineer,” said the blond Russian. “Now will you play red or white?”

Back in the freight car, Wells pressed several turquoise Chinese bank notes into the hand of Maletero, the baggage man.

“If someone were to drill a little hole in this crate in the night and see what was inside, I’d be very grateful,” said Wells.

The woman had no ticket and was therefore desperate to avoid the relentless advance of Conductor Konev up the train. She knew that the Express was completely full, but was desperate to find some hiding place. The door to Berth 8 was partially open and there was no luggage at all inside it. That meant the passengers must’ve missed the train, for everyone was in their respective carriages by now. Possibly if she hid in, or under, one of the bunk beds she would escape Konev’s attention?

She stepped swiftly into the berth and shut the door behind her. Should she lock it? No. That would only arouse the conductor’s attention. The berth had a small cupboard for luggage; she might be able to squeeze into that. But before she had a chance, the door was opened again. Through the portal stepped a gaunt, kindly faced man with smiling eyes.

“You must help me,” she implored.

Wells shot her an admiring glance and did not allow himself to be distracted from storing his suitcase on the rack.

“My dear young lady, what could I possibly do to help you?” he asked.

“You see, I have no ticket,” said the woman. And her eyes widened as if to emphasize her extreme helplessness; while at the same time, she arranged herself to show off the nubile form that lay beneath the tight blue silk of her Chinese-style suit. The transaction offered was most apparent: “Cover for me and I’m yours.” Wells was instantly aroused at the thought of it. For the price of a sheaf of turquoise notes pressed into Konev’s moist palm, he could be spending himself inside her all the way to Moscow.

Tears welled up in the woman’s eyes. She was obviously just about to lose control. She pressed herself into his body for comfort.

“There, there...don’t cry,” said Wells.

The woman’s scent was intoxicating. In another few seconds, he would have to start maneuvering her towards the lower bunk. He wondered idly if there was a do not disturb sign for the door.

“I had to get out of Harbin...there is a man there, an evil Chinese Doctor... I barely escaped with my life from his women’s quarters,” said the woman.

Suddenly, the door opened again and this time Saxton entered and immediately started securing his luggage on the rack.

“Sorry, dear fellow, you’re in the wrong pew,” said Wells, rather diplomatically. “You see: Berth 8,” he continued, showing his ticket.

“I have a ticket for Berth 8 also—for the upper berth,” Saxton confirmed, as he ascended into his allocated top bunk, after putting his case and hunting rifle in the luggage rack.

“This young lady is in trouble,” explained Wells.

“Well, what would you like me to do about it?” asked Saxton. And then, realizing that it would be ungentlemanly to cast out a damsel in distress, he added, “I am sure we shall get along swimmingly.”

He unfolded a French language copy of the *Harbin Times* from under his coat and started reading.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK