

IV. The Nyctalope

On that same morning, Leo Saint-Clair was suddenly taken by the idea of going to lunch in a restaurant in the Parc de Saint-Cloud. The weather was delightful, with a clear sky studded with light clouds, gentle sunlight and a breeze perfumed with all the aromas and languid with all the sensuality of spring.

Leo Saint-Clair alias the Nyctalope! Who in the world does not know that name and its reputation? Officially sanctioned, but free to act on his own initiative, he had organized, at his own expense, an expedition that had forced the surrender of the last dissident warlords in Southern Morocco. He had discovered and rescued the King of Spain, who had been abducted and imprisoned by a gang of terrorists. In China, accompanied by 30 volunteers, he had captured and killed a triumvirate of brilliant but insane masterminds who had been planning to turn their vast Asiatic empire into an hellish anarchist's haven, subject only to their bloody and barbaric whims. For these deeds, and others no less peremptory, he was famous throughout the world—but he was more famous still because he merited the strange title of Nyctalope.

He was of medium height, slim and muscular, wiry and athletic—a complete and consummate athlete. His face and profile were Gallic, but without a moustache, like a clean-shaven Vercingetorix.ⁱ His features were handsome and clean-cut and his expression virile. He had incomparable eyes, which were most often brown, but sometimes green and sometimes yellow. In poor light, the irises of these eyes dilated, for Leo Saint-Clair could see in complete darkness, not as well as in sunlight, but as well as any man might in the evening twilight on the Algerian coast in summer, when a clear sky surrounds the Moon and the swarming stars—well enough to read, without difficulty, the printed text of a newspaper. In semi-darkness, Saint-Clair could see much better, with a more precise perception of details, than in the light of noon. For this man, therefore, darkness did not exist, so long as he had his eyes open. It was largely to this nyctalopic faculty that Saint-Clair owed his success in his mad enterprises—in which it had amused him, more than once, to risk his life.

May 7 was Leo Saint-Clair the Nyctalope's 35th birthday.ⁱⁱ He had a habit of saying, and thinking, that the most intense sensual experiences are to be found in solitude—entirely alone, if one's heart is free; in the company of one other, if one is prey to amorous passion. Saint-Clair had returned from the Sudan only ten days previously and had not yet made an appearance in his various circles of acquaintance, having departed 14 months and a half before that to flee the place where his beloved mother had died of pneumonia; he still had grief in his heart, and had no appetite for any other company than his own. This is why, on that particular morning, when he had woken up with a powerful sense of renewal and serenity—as if the dear dead woman herself had wished that life would return to the forehead she had kissed while rendering her last sigh—Saint-Clair thought of taking a walk in the Parc de Saint-Cloud.

It's Monday, he said to himself. *There won't be many people on the further pathways, and no one in the new luxurious restaurant in front of the Terrace. Let's go! I'll build up a healthy appetite with a brisk walk in the park.*

The Nyctalope lived in the Rue Nansouty, on the edge of the Parc Montsouris in the 14th *arrondissement*. He had bought a little townhouse with an artist's studio, which he had converted into a very comfortable library and trophy-room. His household included a manservant and a chauffeur, sturdy fellows who were intelligent and resolute, companions in his adventures, loyal to the last drop of their blood and the last thought in their skulls. There was also a concierge-groundskeeper and his wife, a fine cook whose talents were well-suited to Saint-Clair's delicate tastes. The Nyctalope was both gourmet and gourmand, all the more so because he was well aware that, when he was on his expeditions, he had to content himself with dried meat, smoked fish, processed cheese, pressed figs, coarse dates, biscuits that had to be broken with a hammer—in sum, anything that could serve the purpose of human nutrition.

“Corsat,” said Saint-Clair to the manservant, who had arrived in his dressing-room to administer his daily massage, “tell Pilou that we'll be lunching in Saint-Cloud today. We'll leave at 9 a.m. You'll come too. Warn Sidonie and tell her that for dinner, I'll only want boiled eggs with tomatoes and baked endives. Fetch two bottles of the '96 Chateau Margaux—I distrust vintages that I haven't chosen for myself.”

Having taken these precautions, Saint-Clair—feeling healthy and youthful, illuminated by a serenity he had not known for 15 months—climbed into the car that was waiting for him in the enclosed courtyard of his little house. Pilou, who was sitting at the steering-wheel, looked like a young English general in his

eccentric uniform. In a similarly correct manner, Corsat closed the door and took the seat next to the chauffeur. The concierge-groundskeeper, Choiffour, opened the gate and gave a military salute as the low-slung roadster went past.ⁱⁱⁱ

Just as the rear wheels were passing through the gateway, however, Saint-Clair sat up straight and said: "Stop!" The car came to an abrupt halt. Then, in the silence of the deserted quarter, the four men were able to hear quite clearly the repetition of the sound that Saint-Clair's super-refined hearing had already caught, which had prompted him to give the order to halt: it was the ringing of a telephone.

If such a simple thing caused the Nyctalope's return to his home, it was because the ring had an exceptional quality. The telephone installed in the studio was a special line, private and secret, which only served one of Saint-Clair's correspondents: Monsieur Alexandre Prillant, an illustrious politician and intimate friend of his, who was presently President of the Council and Minister of the Interior. Furthermore, Monsieur Prillant did not always use that special line to communicate telephonically with Saint-Clair. Normally, he asked the operator to connect him, just like anyone else, and the call would cause an ordinary instrument in the smoking-room or the ground floor of the house to ring—which would not have been audible outside. For the President of the Council to use the secret telephone, it must be a matter of extreme importance.

Saint-Clair snatched up the receiver.

"Is that you, Leo?" said a voice that he recognized—Monsieur Prillant's—gravely.

"Yes, Alex," Saint-Clair replied.

"Are you free?"

"Yes."

"Can you come straight away?"

"To your house or the ministry?"

"My house. Immediately?"

"Yes—my car's in the courtyard. I was going to spend the day in the country."

"Forget the country. I need you. It's serious."

"I'll hurry."

"Thank you."

On hearing that word, Saint-Clair buttoned his coat, went downstairs, leapt back into the car and said to Pilou: "Monsieur Prillant's house—quickly!"

Choiffour opened the gate again and the roadster shot out. The Nyctalope's car only took a quarter of an hour to go from the Rue Nansouty to the Avenue Kléber, where Alexandre Prillant lived.

Monsieur Prillant was waiting for his young friend—the explorer was 15 years younger than the statesman—in his study. Outside his public duties, the Minister, who had been widowed three years before, devoted himself entirely to his belatedly-born son named Henri—a handsome, robust and intelligent boy of ten, for whom he entertained greater ambitions of happiness than he had ever entertained on his own behalf. Prillant had adored his wife, and his son was his only consolation; he said sometimes that if misfortune were to overtake his son, the Sun would turn black for him, and life would no longer be anything but gloom.

"Dear God, what's the matter?" cried Saint-Clair, at the sight of his great and powerful friend.

Alexandre Prillant's face was livid and drawn; his eyes were hollow and burning with fever—but the two vertical wrinkles between his furrowed eyebrows testified that the decisive will of a man of mature years remained intact within this man of 50, tormented by some atrocious pain.

After shaking Saint-Clair's hand, Prillant asked him to sit down, then sat down himself. "Something horrible is happening," he said, in a slow, dull voice with a grave and sonorous tone. "Henri is dying, by slow degrees, of intermittent strangulation."

"What?" said Saint-Clair, startled.

"Yes! Listen, and don't interrupt—the minutes are worth as much as hours. I shall be brief, in any case. With you, the essentials are sufficient..."

"You know that, for ten days now, France has been threatened by a general strike, fomented clandestinely by Communist organizations and planned by the Confédération Générale du Travail, to express solidarity with the agricultural workers, who have been on strike for two weeks."

"I know."

"Today, at noon, a meeting was to have taken place between the delegates of the CGT, the Association Patronale des Mines and the government. I convened the conference and I was to chair it. I'm sure that it would have concluded with an agreement; tomorrow, there would have been a universal return

to work on entirely new terms, the general strike would have been called off, and social peace would be ensured in our nation for at least a decade..."

"I know that—I believe you."

"Well, my friend," Prillant went on, in a voice that was now slightly tremulous, "since that conference was announced, exactly six days ago, I have received a telegram like this every morning. This is today's—take it and read it. The other five were identical."

Prillant pushed a sheet of blue-tinted paper, folded in two, towards the corner of the desk where Saint-Clair was sitting. Saint-Clair took it up impassively, and read:

To Monsieur Alexandre Prillant,

President of the Council, Minister of the Interior

Call off the conference. Discourage the APM by a curt refusal to negotiate. Oppose the proposals of the CGT by refusing point-blank to see them. Otherwise, your son Henri, to whom I am applying strangulation every six hours, will be completely asphyxiated and killed at noon on May 7.

Lucifer.

Saint-Clair remained motionless and mute for 30 seconds. He was very pale. Then he raised his head and gazed at his friend; his large eyes were fiery. "This isn't a sinister, joke, is it?" he said, dryly.

Prillant shook his head. Making an effort to remain calm, although his voice was plaintive with suppressed emotion, he replied: "Four times a day, at regular intervals—at 6 a.m., noon, 6 p.m. and midnight—my beloved Henri's throat is violently seized by invisible hands. He is choked and strangled. He suffocates; he croaks; he almost expires. Then the strangulation abruptly ceases. The marks of the strangler's fingers remain visible..." There was a silence charged with anguish; then Prillant began speaking again. "For the first three days, I observed and reflected, swearing everyone here to silence regarding the unimaginable phenomenon. On the evening of the third day, I telephoned Professor Lourmel, but he had just left for Italy. Immediately, I summoned the Prefect of Police and the head of the Sûreté. They instituted a general surveillance in post offices of people sending telegrams. On the evening of May 4, 5 and 6, three women were arrested—three Alsatian women. They were immediately interrogated, examined and studied. They had acted under the influence of hypnotic suggestion; their will was not their own and they could not remember anything. Then, in desperation, I called you."

Prillant fell silent.

After a terrible pause, Saint-Clair simply said: "Why do you not obey this Lucifer?"

Prillant replied with the same simplicity. "Never! The circumstances, the facts, my reputation, my ideas relating to the present social conflict—everything indicates that I am the one man in France, at this moment, who can prevent France from falling victim to a Communist Revolution in years to come! My duty as a Frenchman, a Minister and a civilized human being is to act..." He stiffened, seeming to draw himself up in his armchair. His face was implacable. "My son Henri," he said, in a voice that was hoarse but firm, "will probably die at noon when I, the President of the Council of Ministers of the Republic, the supreme holder of authority in France, will open the meeting from which an agreement will emerge between labor and capital."

"And afterwards?" said Saint-Clair, still impassive.

"Ah! Afterwards..." The father let his face fall into his hands and a sob shook his entire body—but he got up immediately, abruptly straightening his nimble and vigorous body. "Afterwards," he said, determinedly, "I shall devote everything I have—my power, my fortune, my grief and my hatred—to avenging my son."

Saint-Clair also got up, though, and clasped his friend's hands almost brutally. "Alex," he said, his tone curt, his voice authoritative and his gaze fixed, "do you trust me?"

"Yes, completely," Prillant affirmed, forcefully.

"If I say that your son will not die, will you believe me?"

"Yes, I'll believe you!"

"And you will do your duty with serenity—with total serenity?"

"Yes, absolutely."

Saint-Clair laughed—a peculiar laugh of bravado and triumph, terrible in the circumstances. "Well," he said, "I tell you this, my friend—your son will not die."

"Oh, Leo..."

"Shut up. It's time to act. Where's Henri?"

"In his room, with his English governess and his tutor."

"The same ones he had 15 months ago?"

“Yes, Miss Ellen and Monsieur Verfeuil.”

“Is he dressed?”

“Yes. I saw him before I telephoned.”

“Good. I’ll take him away.”

“You...”

“Will you hesitate now?” Saint-Clair said, interrupting.

“No, no! Go—take him! Provided that you save him, do whatever you wish.”

“I’ll take him away. I don’t know when I’ll be able to return him to you—a week, a fortnight, a month... but he’ll live! Have no doubt about that, by God!”

“I don’t doubt it, Leo. Do you know, then...?”

“I suspect... I deduce... Oh, the hell with it—Yes, I know!”

“Explain then, as briefly as possible.”

“No! We must act now, and talk later.”

“You’re right, as always. Come on, then.”

Henri Prilliant had not forgotten his “Uncle Saint-Clair” who, like an uncle who was both genuine and marvelous, brought or sent him the most miraculous toys. The children that Henri played with in the Trocadéro gardens and his friends’ houses never had such things.

Containing his emotion with difficulty, Saint-Clair said to Henri: “My boy, I shall cure the illness that has afflicted you from time to time for several days. Furthermore, your father is allowing me to give you a great treat. Can you guess what?”

“What? What is it?” said the child, his eyes avid with curiosity.

“A journey—a lovely journey in a motor car. We’re leaving straight away. Papa says we may— isn’t that so?”

“Yes, yes!” said Prilliant, smiling but almost weeping with emotion.

“Oh, in a motor car!” cried the child, clapping his hands and then throwing his arms around Saint-Clair’s neck.

Three minutes later, the explorer climbed back into his roadster with Henri and Miss Ellen. Monsieur Prilliant and the tutor Verfeuil brought blankets and coats.

“Pilou,” Saint-Clair said, in the curt, incisive tone that the Nyctalope’s voice took on in matters of life and death, “it’s 9:30 a.m. It’s necessary to be in Le Havre by 11:30 a.m. It’s 228 kilometers...”

“We’ll be there, boss! The tires are brand new, and I have three spare wheels. Even if one bursts, we’ll get there. There are stretches where I can do 150 kph...”

“Good—I’m counting on you and your machine.” Turning to Prilliant, Saint-Clair went on: “Can you reach the director of the Subtransatlantic Company in Le Havre by radio within an hour?”

“Yes, if I take care of it myself,” the Minister replied.

“Good. Have their top man in Paris send the director in Le Havre the following message: *Prepare the submarine Lampas for an immediate departure and submersion at 11:30 a.m. and place it at the disposal of Leo Saint-Clair.*”

Then, in response to a “Get going!” the car moved off, carrying the enraptured Henri Prilliant wedged between Saint-Clair and Miss Ellen.

The 228 kilometers were covered in an hour and 52 minutes. Having left the Avenue Kléber in Paris at 9:30 a.m., Saint-Clair and little Henri arrived at the main quay in Le Havre at 11:22 a.m. The car stopped in front of the pontoon hangar in which the *Lampas* and the *Synancée* were moored. The *Lampas*, already outside, was maneuvering slowly in the harbor, scarcely a cable’s length away. Saint-Clair, leaping out of the roadster, saw a silhouette and a face he recognized on the submarine’s gangway.

“Ciserat!” he cried.

“Saint-Clair!” the naval officer replied.

A dinghy was moored nearby; Saint-Clair leapt nimbly into it. “Miss,” he said, “pass me the child and get aboard.”

The Englishwoman obeyed, rapidly and dexterously.

The explorer took the oars and soon came abreast of the submarine.

“You, here!” said Ciserat, assisting his friend, the young woman and Henri to climb on to the gangway. “Who’s the child? Is he yours? I don’t know—the radio message that was passed to me as we were about to depart didn’t explain anything.”

"You talk too much, old chap," Saint-Clair said. "Get the young lady aboard, and the boy—who is the only son of Alexandre Prillant, President of the Council and Minister... do you hear? Get aboard, get going, submerge! Before noon, the *Lampas* has to be under 100 meters of water."

At that moment, a head appeared at one of the open hatchways between the conning-tower and the gangway, which led down into the submarine's interior. On seeing that head, Saint-Clair cried out in amazement. "Oh! Professor Lourmel! So you're not in Italy?"

"I have been," the Professor said, climbing on to the bridge. "I heard you—what's happening?" He looked at the child and frowned—then experienced the sudden illumination of which brains of genius are capable, went to Saint-Clair and whispered in his ear: "Another case of spell-casting, eh?"

Saint-Clair started. "What do you mean, another?"

"Yes, my niece, Ciserat's wife. In Venice... Phenomena of torture by supernatural means. Mattol, my pupil, had the idea of the opposition of milieux—but for you, in similar circumstances, to have thought of the *Lampas*... of sheltering underwater... you must believe that..."

"I don't believe, I know! God's blood! Too much talking. At midday..."

"One more minute, Nyctalope!" the Professor commanded, in a masterful voice. "Since you're certain, you surely aren't leaving with the infant?"

"Oh, I'm not leaving. I have a investigation to conduct."

"I thought so, Saint-Clair. I, too, need to investigate, to punish..." And he called out: "Mattol! I'm getting off! The suitcases, quickly!" Then, to Ciserat, he said: "Not another word. You heard and understood. Be calm. Once we're in the dinghy, depart and submerge. Poste restante, New York, a fortnight hence."

Mattol emerged, looking slightly haggard. A sailor passed him the suitcases, which he threw into the moored dinghy. Lourmel had already quit the gangway. Saint-Clair followed him. As they passed an open hatchway, Irène de Ciserat suddenly appeared in front of the explorer. An exclamation sprang to his lips, but she put the index finger of her left hand to her lips, instructing him to be silent, while her right hand thrust a folded piece of white paper into his. She knew Saint-Clair, having met him at least 20 times at her father's dinner-parties. He took the paper and went on.

At another hatchway, Ciserat helped Miss Ellen and Henri into the submarine. Mattol followed them. Lourmel and Saint-Clair got into the dinghy and cast off the mooring-rope.

Ciserat gave his orders. The waters behind the *Lampas* became agitated. Sailors appeared and set about dismantling the guard-rails and walkway of the gangway. Then they dived into the hatchways, which were sealed. There was a metallic clicking sound, distinct at first, dull thereafter. Ciserat remained alone on the conning-tower—and the *Lampas* drew away, towards the harbor entrance.

Saint-Clair and Lourmel watched it mutely from the quay, on to which they had just climbed, a few paces away from the roadster. When they had seen Ciserat wave his cap in the air and the *Lampas* disappear behind the curve of the quay where the semaphore tower was, they looked at one another, smiling.

"He's saved!" said Saint-Clair.

"She too," said Lourmel.

"But it's a provisional measure," Saint-Clair said, gravely. "It's necessary to make it definitive. We must return to Paris. We'll eat in the car—after that, you must tell me about your adventure, and I'll tell you mine. Have you identified the spell-caster?"

"No, have you?"

"No—I only found out about it three hours ago."

"Amazing!"

"Bah!" Saint-Clair shrugged his shoulders. "If he learns of our intervention, he'll try to kill us before I can be on his trail—but can he? Let's get going! To Paris, Pilou—but first, go to the Place Gambetta and stop at the restaurant there for five minutes. That'll give you and Corsat time to buy a roasted chicken, three bottles of Moët, bread and fruit. We'll lunch on the road. Don't worry, Professor, I've a complete picnic basket in the car! It will be comfortable and proper—but I warn you, we'll be doing 80 kilometers an hour. I have motoring goggles for both of us, though."

By the time the roadster drew into the courtyard of the little house in the Rue Nansouty, three hours later, Saint-Clair knew every detail of Irène de Ciserat's painful adventure and Professor Onésime Lourmel had learned the whole story of the tragic blackmail to which Alexandre Prillant was subjected.

Once they were in the house, the explorer entrusted his guest to Corsat, who led him to the little guest-apartment on the first floor, where he was able to shave while his clothes were brushed. Before going to his own dressing-room, Saint-Clair went into the studio and finally brought out of his pocket the piece of paper that Irène had given him aboard the *Lampas*. He read it.

It was the letter containing Lucifer's ultimatum—the letter that had been given to Irène on the quayside in Le Havre.

Saint-Clair re-read the letter, then put it into his wallet with the telegram that Prillant had left with him. He put the wallet on the table, along with several other objects—a chronometer, a matchbox, a bunch of keys and a Browning. Then, he undressed, washed, rinsed and dried himself rapidly and put on fresh underclothes and flannel pajamas.

Rested and refreshed, with his feet bare inside his oriental slippers, Saint-Clair went down to the smoking-room on the ground floor where Professor Lourmel was waiting for him. As he passed through the studio, he picked up his wallet, which he threw on a table. After that, he went straight to the little desk in the corner of the room which bore a telephone, notepads and various directories.

On one of the pads, he saw a note in Choiffour's handwriting—the concierge answered all telephone calls in his master's absence. It said: *Monsieur Mathias Narbonne asks to be informed as soon as Monsieur de Saint-Clair returns. The matter extremely serious and urgent.*

The Nyctalope had met the celebrated philanthropist in America. He had a presentiment, which immediately expressed itself aloud: "Ah! Is this another matter concerning the mysterious Lucifer?" Turning to Lourmel, he said: "We must start a sort of council of war. I think there will be at least four of us—perhaps more. My intuitions are rarely mistaken. Monsieur Narbonne, whom you know, wishes to talk to me about an extremely serious and urgent matter. Is he involved too?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," the Professor said. "Our national philanthropist is an ideal target for the hatred of a malefactor of this Lucifer's sort."

"We'll find out."

Unhooking the telephone receiver, Saint-Clair dialed Narbonne's number. He got through immediately.

"Hello? Monsieur Narbonne? Oh, it's you, d'Arbol. Yes—what is it?... Oh! Oh! The case is not an isolated one... Ah, Monsieur Narbonne! Good day!... Yes! You are not alone... No, not on the telephone... What?... Very well, we'll be waiting for you... Who, us? You'll see... Understood."

He hung up, then remained silent and still for a minute, while the interested Lourmel waited patiently. Then he unhooked the receiver again.

"Hello!... Hello Mademoiselle, my name is Leo Saint-Clair. Yes... Perfectly. Get me the President of the Council... Yes, at the Place Beauvau. Thank you."

There was another pause, during which he remained still. Then: "Hello, is that you, Alex?... Yes, it's me, Leo... All is well. The child is safe. I'll tell you how and where... Right away, if you can spare two hours... Yes? Perfect. Come, then... You'll find two important people here... Who? Professor Lourmel and Monsieur Narbonne... Perfectly... Hurry... Understood!"

Saint-Clair replaced the receiver, this time definitively. Then, addressing the Professor, not without a certain solemnity, he said: "My dear Professor, I have the pleasure of informing you that, under the chairmanship of Monsieur Prillant, the meeting of the mineworkers's employers and the delegates of the CGT has just concluded with a solid agreement that guarantees France, save for some unforeseeable catastrophe, at least ten years of social harmony. And I can also tell you that the same Monsieur Prillant will be here in 20 minutes, shortly preceded by Monsieur Mathias Narbonne." He changed his tone to add, in a more familiar manner: "It's useless to say anything more until they're here—we'd only have to repeat ourselves. Cigars and cigarettes are here—I'll have some water brought in, sugar, fruits, rum... Is that all right by you? Good!"

Mathias Narbonne and André d'Arbol arrived first. Their car, a saloon devoid of luxury but solid and comfortable, had scarcely parked on one side of the courtyard when a horn sounded and the concierge had to open the gate again. It was Monsieur Prillant's limousine. Saint-Clair appeared at the door of the house.

The statesman and the philanthropist knew one another, naturally. They shook hands, then Narbonne and André exchanged brief cordial greetings with Saint-Clair. Afterwards, in the smoking-room, there was a short conversation between Prillant and Lourmel, while the philanthropist gave a concise explanation to Saint-Clair in a low voice.

When the hats and gloves had been taken away by Corsat, everyone sat down around a table, on which bottles, carafes, glasses, and fruits—both fresh and dried—had been set out, along with spoons and knives, boxes of cigars and cigarettes, a few blotting-pads and paper and pens.

There was a moment of silence while everyone concentrated his thoughts.

“My friends,” Saint-Clair said, eventually, “let us first summarize the facts in chronological order.

“First, Mademoiselle Irène de Ciserat is subjected to some kind of strange abuse in Venice, the observation of which led Professor Lourmel and Louis Mattol to conclude that she was under a spell—a phenomenon that falls into the category of what are nowadays called the occult sciences.

“Second, young Henri Prillant, age ten, is subjected to partial strangulation four times in every 24 hours, at regular intervals—strangulation that can only be explained supernaturally.

“Third, Monsieur Narbonne receives in his right hand—which is presently bandaged and supported by a sling—a dagger-blow that transpierces it, under conditions that again require the admission of a supernatural factor.

“Further:

“First, in Le Havre, while crossing the pavement of the main quay, between the car that had brought her and the building that she was entering, Mademoiselle Irène de Ciserat is intercepted by an unknown man, who slips a piece of paper into her hand, then disappears round the next street-corner. This is the piece of paper. It is a letter. I shall read it.”

When the letter had been read, Saint-Clair—without taking any notice of the violent emotion that his listeners did not even think of hiding—calmly put the piece of paper down to his left. Drawing another sheet of paper out of his wallet, he continued.

“Second, every morning for six days, including today, Monsieur Prillant has received a telegram. The six telegrams are identical. A police operation allowed them to arrest three women—the intermediaries who sent the last three telegrams; their examination at Saint-Anne revealed that they had acted under the influence of hypnotic suggestion, that they came from various villages in the Haute-Alsace, that they did not know one another and that they had no memory of the messages they had sent from Parisian post offices. I will read you one of these telegrams.”

Saint-Clair read, while his audience—even Prillant, who was already perfectly familiar with the terrible message—listened intently. The uttering of the infernal signature resounded, lugubriously and menacingly, in the silence they maintained, while the impassive Saint-Clair put the paper down to his left and withdrew a third sheet from his wallet.

“Third,” he said, without pausing, “in the post brought to him by his manservant shortly after the piercing of his hand, Monsieur Narbonne received this registered letter. I will read it after calling your attention to this skull engraved at its head...”

He showed the sinister image all around, and began reading again. Having read it, Saint-Clair put the letter down to his left and set both his forearms on the table, with the palms of his hands flat.

“Finally,” he said, still calm, his delivery slow, precise and emphatic, “I make particular note of one fact: Mademoiselle Irène’s statement reveals to us that, before her marriage, she was obliged to reject an impromptu proposal of marriage made by a mysterious red-haired man on the occasion of a party given by Monsieur Lourmel in honor of the American Professor Jameson. The disappearance thereafter of three photographs of Irène has been established.

“These, then, are the facts.

“One: after investigating Irène’s case, Professor Lourmel and Louis Mattol have concluded that a spell had been cast. Two: as soon as I was apprised of Henri’s situation, I, too, concluded that a spell had been cast. Three: knowing now what happened to Monsieur Narbonne, I conclude that it, too, was the result of a spell. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that the spell-caster revealed himself and confessed his responsibility in the letters that he signed Lucifer.

“The objectives of the three spells are also revealed by the spell-caster himself. He desires to possess Irène; he intends to annex Monsieur Narbonne’s billions; and he wishes to foster Communist anarchy in France.

“It is up to us, on the one hand, to ensure that these three objectives are unattained, and, on the other hand, to prevent Lucifer from taking revenge on his victims—or anyone else he may choose.

“Without any communication between us, thanks to our relative familiarity with the so-called occult sciences, Mattol and I immediately thought of the same protective device: the antagonism of milieux—the *Lampas* and its submersion under the sea. The cushion of water will form a shield between the designated victim and the projection of the spell. I was familiar with Ciserat’s preparations for submarine explorations

and knew about the *Lampas*, too. I hastened to shelter Henri Prillant therein before the fatal hour, just as Irène's relatives did the same to protect the young woman from the threat of further abuse.

"As to the rest, Irène will not submit to the demand made of her. Monsieur Prillant has not submitted either, since the conference has taken place and reached its fortunate conclusion. This, my friends, is where we are now. The exposure of these facts was necessary, but now, all that is in the past; we shall speak of it no more. The future lies before us. What are we to do? First, Monsieur Narbonne, do you intend to capitulate?"

"Never!" said Narbonne, firmly. "I summoned my solicitor this morning and added a peremptory codicil to my will, which gives my entire fortune to certain benevolent causes, by means of a simple and inexpensive foundation. When the lawyer left, I said to André: 'Now let's wait for June 10. If I should die...' He did not dare say to no—I would not have taken it well! But while talking about the supernatural—for that seemed to me to be the only explanation—and trying to counter his objections—for André has remained a skeptic despite it all—I thought of you, Saint-Clair. Your knowledge is encyclopedic, and you have done such astonishing things! Besides, I, too, now have the resource of a submarine!" And the brave Monsieur Narbonne burst into laughter.

"Let's deliberate, then," said Saint-Clair, "and decide what to do next."

ⁱ Vercingetorix was the chieftain who attempted to rally the feuding Gaulish clans in united opposition to Julius Caesar's invasion, but accomplished too little too late; he was captured after a long and costly siege and the whole of what is now France was subsequently integrated into the Roman Empire.

ⁱⁱ When Leo Saint-Clair the Nyctalope was introduced in *Le mystère des XV* (1911), he was already 33 and, therefore, should now be ten years older; but La Hire likely sought to reintroduce the character from scratch in *Lucifer*, including rechristening him "Jean de Sainclair." What made him change his mind and revert to the original "Leo Saint-Clair" version in the next novel is unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ La Hire describes Saint-Clair's car—which is an open-topped "touring car", and is carefully contrasted with the numerous limousines and saloon cars featured in the plot—as a *torpedo*, which sounds much better than the Anglo-American "roadster," but I have resisted the temptation to retain the French term.