

THE NYCTALOPE AND THE MASTER OF LIFE

PART ONE: EIGHTEEN DEATHS

Prologue

“Very curious!” said Leo Saint-Clair.

Dumont-Warren, director of the Universal News Agency, or UNA for short, smiled and took a cigarette from the box open in front of him. He lit it and took two drags, placidly making a small, round cloud of smoke over his head.

“Yes, very curious,” the Nyctalope repeated gravely. And after a moment of silence, he added: “Of course, you have a secretary or a stenographer on whom you can count for absolute discretion?”

“Indeed,” Dumont-Warren said, “and, mind you, experience has proven to me that contrary to the prejudices propagated by that fable of La Fontaine, certain women are able to keep secrets better than most men.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” the Nyctalope confessed. Then, in a different tone, he continued: “Would you be kind enough, my friend, to call in the secretary you’re talking about? I would like to dictate the essentials of what you just told me. If I forget anything important or add anything useless, you can stop me.”

“That would surprise me.”

“But it’s quite possible, since I have to admit that your story has stirred up a bunch of ideas in my mind that are a little confused... and emotionally charged. I’d like to get it down right away, short and sweet, but very precisely.”

“I understand,” the UNA director agreed. He picked up one of the telephones lined up on the left side of his huge desk and spoke quietly. “Hello, Mademoiselle Blancat? Please come into my office immediately.”

Less than a minute later, a young woman entered the office through a side door. Dressed severely but elegantly in black, she was short and slim, pale, with well-defined, thin lips and magnificent, dark eyes expressing both intelligence and reserve. She was holding a notepad and two pencils in her left hand.

“Sit down, please. Monsieur Saint-Clair is going to dictate a memo. May I remind you that this is all hush-hush, including the fact that he is here. We used the private entrance.”

“Certainly, Monsieur,” she said flatly.

She looked in awe and almost in fear at the famous Nyctalope and bowed ever so slightly as he passed by him to reach the other side of the desk and sit at a kind of school desk, obviously reserved for stenographers.

Saint-Clair started dictating right away in a calm and steady voice:

“Monsieur Dumont-Warren, Managing Director of the Universal News Agency, makes a monthly check of all the news arranged in summary reports by a service that he created here, called the Coordinated Archives. In this manner, he can have an overview of all the categories of world events that the agency communicates to the press, and that they use to varying degrees. This UNA department is unknown to the press, unknown even to the other departments within the agency, which feed it unknowingly. It has only one employee, a young and highly qualified archivist who receives all the news

every day from Monsieur Dumont-Warren personally. And this archivist, Monsieur Jean Palmade, has no contact with anyone else, except the managing director and Mademoiselle Blancat, his secretary.”

When Saint-Clair paused briefly, Dumont-Warren spoke up:

“At least half of what you just said, I never told you.”

“A logical deduction based on what you did tell me,” the Nyctalope smiled back at him. Then he added, “I will continue. Now, some news over the past three months, January, February and March of the present year, up to April 7, the day I am dictating this memo, appear to show a strange confluence of events.”

He stopped and looked at the secretary, “Mademoiselle, would you please underline the next part on the hard copy?”

“Yes, Monsieur.”

A little more slowly now, Saint-Clair continued, “Here it is: *Fourteen men sentenced to death, being held in fourteen prisons spread around eight different countries in Europe and the United States, one by one, in January, February and March, died suddenly in their cells in front of their guards. There is no possibility of suicide. Moreover, the fourteen investigations and the subsequent autopsies gave the same results, reported in detail by the witnesses and doctors—results that can be summed up in the following diagnosis: sudden death due to a cerebral hemorrhage coupled with a violent, apoplectic seizure.*”

After a short pause, the Nyctalope continued, “Add this, Mademoiselle, but without underlining: No newspaper in the world seems to have noticed this mysterious oddity, the bizarre enigma of the identical circumstances in the fourteen cases, in pretty rapid succession, of victims who were all legally sentenced to death, all expiring from a violent cerebral hemorrhaging. But for anyone thinking about these fourteen different news stories, pulled out of thousands of the daily items that feed the press around the world, there is a problem that needs solving. A problem, moreover, that is likely, logically, to grow deeper, with more stories soon to occur in this gloomy, pathological and quite unusual setting.”

There was a silence before Saint-Cloud concluded, “That’s all, Mademoiselle. Thank you.”

“I imagine you’d like a hard copy right away?” Dumont-Warren asked.

“Yes, in duplicate.”

“Yes, Monsieur,” said the secretary.

Ten minutes later, Mademoiselle Blancat was back and handed the Nyctalope two copies and the shorthand text.

“Perfect. Thank you.”

After the secretary had left, Saint-Clair stood up, immediately imitated by Dumont-Warren. They exchanged a few pleasantries, set a date for lunch with two ministers, whom the director promised to invite, and the Nyctalope left.

On the Place de la Bourse, on this beautiful spring day, newsboys were hawking the afternoon edition of the papers. Saint-Clair bought one and froze on the sidewalk on seeing the front page.

“Ah-ha!” he said quietly with the furrowed brow and the pursed lips of a schoolboy. He was reading the headline in bold letters: *Eduardo Prin, head of the POUM, was found dead in Barcelona in his locked room from a violent cerebral hemorrhage.*

CHAPTER I

14, 15, 16...

Saint-Clair was thinking: *I knew the man. He was around forty, physically strong and morally fearless. He led the utopian Worker's Party in Spain with as much diplomacy as sound judgment. But secretly, he was as determined and ambitious as a Caesar or Napoleon. He didn't drink or smoke and led a healthy life. Yet, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage too! This is strange. I need details—very precise details.*

The Nyctalope went back into the building he had just come out of and took the private staircase up to the second floor where he knocked at the door of Dumont-Warren's office.

Leo Saint-Clair was known as the Nyctalope because his eyes, like those of some animals, had the rare ability to see in the dark almost as clearly as in daylight.

After getting back from Morocco, where he had lived through some memorable adventures, Saint-Clair had settled back down in his house at Blingy, near Versailles. His son, Pierre, had been traveling in Asia for two years making frequent visits to Japan. But Saint-Clair was not alone at Blingy because he had his dear friend Gno Mitang, a Marquis and former minister of state, personal advisor to the Emperor of Japan, staying with him.

For thirty years Saint-Clair and Gno Mitang had been bound by the kind of friendship that makes two men share one mind and one heart.

When the illustrious Japanese was staying in France, he lived at Blingy, where he had his own room on the second floor, furnished and decorated to his liking, reserved for him alone, always available and separated from Saint-Clair's by only one, very big room, the study.

The two friends were served by Vitto and Soca, the Nyctalope's two Corsican assistants, and by Yori Koto, the Marquis' secretary; and indirectly by many old and faithful domestic servants, as good as they were honest, whom one would never willingly forsake.

On this Wednesday, April 7,¹ after Saint-Clair left the office of the UNA at the Place de la Bourse for the second time, he went straight to his car, a convertible in which Soca was sitting at the wheel, and told the Corsican, "Let's get home—fast."

In one minute, the clock of the Bourse would strike noon. It was not that Saint-Clair was in a hurry for lunch, because he did not eat at Blingy until 1 or 2 p.m., but he was impatient to talk to Gno Mitang about the extraordinary series of fifteen identical deaths. To shed some light on his currently clouded mind, he was counting on the profound, penetrating wisdom and the vast and varied knowledge of the noble Japanese. He was a little annoyed that the strange mystery presented by Dumont-Warren, now complicated by the news of Eduardo Prim's death, created only confused and contradictory thoughts in his mind—so flimsy that they just vanished when he tried to focus and examine them.

Saint-Clair entered the study at 12:30 p.m. He had gone there directly, hoping to find Gno who could spend hours reading in his spare time. He was not disappointed. The Japanese was sitting in a leather armchair in his white flannel pajamas, half-hidden by a large folio volume standing on his lap.

"Ah, my friend!" Saint-Clair said excitedly. "What a tale I have to tell you!"

Gno Mitang was the very picture of calm, absolute calm, usually listening politely with a smile on his thin lips and a sparkle in his dark eyes. He slowly lowered the volume and looked at his friend kindly but inquisitively.

Saint-Clair had left his hat and gloves in the entrance hall on the ground floor. He plopped down on a leather footstool in front of Gno and right away started in with no warning except the single word, "Listen". He told him everything about his two conversations with Dumont-Warren. Of course, Gno listened to everything without interrupting and without changing his expression. When Saint-Clair said, "And that's it," Gno put the book on the low table and closed his eyes.

¹ Which would place the story in 1937.

The Nyctalope was used to his friend's meditations since he never spoke impulsively, so he never disturbed these moments with a hasty word or impatient gesture. Two or three minutes went by before Gno slowly opened his eyes and spoke in a slightly hoarse but very clear and articulate voice.

"Strange indeed. But I believe that, except for mechanics and mechanical objects, nothing happens in nature that hasn't happened before, whether it be yesterday, last week, or twenty centuries ago. I was just wondering if I knew when and where... and, well, yes!"

"Yes?" Saint-Clair was on the edge of his seat.

Gno smiled. "It didn't happen yesterday or last week, but if I'm not mistaken, around the middle of the 15th century, in the year 1445 to be precise, in Tibet, around 120 miles north of Lhasa, the holy city, the secret city, right on the banks of the Tengri Nor, which is a big lake between the plains and the mountains. Of course, back then, no one knew anything about cerebral hemorrhages, but the way everyone died suddenly between the first and last day of March was more than astonishing. More than 10,000 warriors, lamas, servants, craftsmen, farmers, etc. passed away. If we were to make a modern scientific diagnosis with hindsight, using the documents in the great monastery of the Living Buddha, I would say that the way they died would be exactly the same as a violent cerebral hemorrhage."

And Gno Mitang's smile grew bigger. Saint-Clair was serious and frowned.

"Go on, Gno," he said quietly.

"Oh, just one more thing... I know very little about it—just this: in 1407, the lama Tsong Kha, a Tibetan reformer of Buddhism, founded the great monastery of Gal-Dan, four leagues east of Lhasa. He had a disciple, whom we know very little about—only that much later, it was supposed to be a female disciple who succeeded Tsong-Kha, but before she could, she had retreated to the Gobi Desert, on the shores of Lake Chong Koum."

"A woman!" Saint-Clair exclaimed.

"Yes—and what a woman! She liberated Tibet from the suzerainty of China, set herself up as Emperor and, at the same time, claimed to be the reincarnation of the Buddha... all this with great success. She was the first woman to be known as the living Buddha, who represents absolute spiritual and temporal power... Under her divinity, under her reign, which lasted 57 years..."

"57 years!" the Nyctalope muttered in awe.

"Yes, from 1417 to 1474. Under her reign, Tibet reached the height of its power, wealth, and art, with surprisingly loose morals in private life and no less surprising rectitude in public."

"Hypocrisy..."

"Hypocrisy raised to the level of state policy."

"And what was this extraordinary woman's name?"

"Her name is not very pretty to French ears, but no matter. She was Gedhun Grub."²

"And it was during her reign that...?"

"It was at the very start of her reign and by her will... I repeat *by her will*... that, on the shores of the Tengri Nor, more than 10,000 men died of cerebral hemorrhages, and also a few hundred nobles in the city of Lhasa. Who knows what secret she had discovered during her retreat at Lake Chong Koum—the lake that never freezes?"

Saint-Clair was disturbed. He jumped up.

"*By her will*?" he hammered out the words. "You say that, but how can you know for sure? The microbe for a cerebral hemorrhage doesn't..."

"Who's talking about a microbe?" Gno said calmly. "Isn't the word '*will*' enough?"

² La Hire drew his inspiration from the historical figure of Gedun Drupa, the first Dalai Lama. Gedun Drupa (1391-1474) was born in a cow-shed in Gyurmey Rupa near Sakya in the Tsang region of central Tibet. He was raised as a shepherd until the age of seven. Later he was placed in Narthang Monastery. In 1405, he took his *śrāmaṇera* (novitiate) vows from the abbot of Narthang, Khenchen Drupa Sherap. When he was 20, in about 1411, he received the name Gedun Drupa upon taking the vows of a *bhikṣu* (monk) from the abbot of Narthang Monastery. Also at this age he became a student of the scholar and reformer Je Tsongkhapa. Around this time, he also became the first abbot of Ganden Monastery, founded by Tsongkhapa himself in 1409. By the middle of his life, Gedun Drupa had become one of the most esteemed scholar-saints in the country.

“But...”

“But, my friend, you don’t realize that the immaterial will can achieve real results. The whole story of God’s creation of the world is nothing but a symbol of the unlimited power of the will.”

After a brief silence that a contemplative Saint-Clair did not interrupt, Gno Mitang nodded and continued:

“The trick is to have enough willpower in yourself... and know how to use it. The very ancient and occult science of sorcery, which the modern world has lost, but of which that Frenchman Colonel de Rochas³ found a few basic elements, is basically just based on the teleradiant power, so to speak, of the will.”

“But then,” Saint-Clair blurted out, “the cerebral hemorrhages of the fourteen dead men, as well as Eduardo Prim, would have been caused by the murderous will of a man...”

“Or a woman,” Gno said. “Yes... Or a woman, indeed. Why not?”

“My friend,” Saint-Clair was getting worked up, “a human being with knowledge of this power would truly be a Master of Death.”

“And therefore, of Life as well.”

“Exactly! If he wanted, he could be the absolute master, dictator, emperor of the world! But if he’s an idiot, then...”

“That is possible,” Gno nodded. “Thaumaturges have not always been shining examples of intelligence.”

“Or cult leaders.”

“Which would be even worse,” Gno murmured.

“He could use death, or the threat of death, to cripple and enslave entire nations, devastate the world, and terrorize it.”

Gno Mitang stood up and put his hands on Saint-Clair’s shoulders. Very serious and gently insistent he said:

“My dear friend, if the current mystery comes from the same sources as the autocratic actions of that living female Buddha, there is reason for humanity to fear. But, first we have to find out the truth. And for that, what is the Nyctalope going to do?”

Looking into those deep, dark eyes, full of affection and intelligence, Leo Saint-Clair calmed down, cleared his mind, and got back to his usual good mood. He smiled and put his left arm in Gno’s right. As they walked away, he said:

“First of all, the Nyctalope is going to have breakfast with his friend Gno Mitang. Then, after half a cigar and a cup of coffee, the Nyctalope will see.”

What they saw first, or rather what they heard, after “half a cigar and a cup of coffee,” enjoyed in a corner of the study between two sunlit windows, was the news over the wireless of a sixteenth strange death by cerebral hemorrhage.

The victim—since Saint-Clair and Gno were almost ready, without question, to admit that these deaths were premeditated murders—was a man of even greater importance: Lord William Stonewell, named Viceroy of India only two weeks prior. The speaker on the radio articulated clearly, and there was no interference in the mansion, so Saint-Clair and Gno heard the following:

“The announcement was made in London of the sudden death in Calcutta of His Excellency William Stonewell, Viceroy of India. While he was calmly signing some official papers, as he did every morning at the same time, he suddenly fell over, face first on the table. The doctors were called right away and diagnosed a violent cerebral hemorrhage. An autopsy was performed immediately and gave the same results. Lord William Stonewell was 51 years-old. In good health, lean and strong, of legendary sobriety,

³ Eugène Auguste Albert de Rochas d’Aiglun (1837-1914), a leading French parapsychologist, historian, translator, writer, and military engineer. He is now best known for his extensive parapsychological research and writing, in which he attempted to explore a scientific basis for occult phenomena. His first book on the subject, *Les Forces non définies* (1887), was followed by numerous books and articles over the course of nearly thirty years, on subjects such as hypnotism, telekinesis, magnetic emanations, reincarnation, spirit photography, etc.

moderate to a fault, clean of body and mind, so nothing could have signaled this threat which usually strikes men with a very different lifestyle. This is why an autopsy was performed, but no shred of doubt remains: the Viceroy died of a cerebral hemorrhage in the presence of his First Secretary and an Adjutant who were both friends as well as subordinates. Lord William Stonewell was born in Sussex...”

Leo Saint-Clair and Gno Mitang had stopped listening. They looked at each other worriedly. Saint-Clair spoke up without hesitation:

“Gno, my friend, is it possible for you to...?”

He did not finish his sentence. He clapped his hand to his forehead. But Gno Mitang was already answering:

“Ten thousand men died like this in three weeks on the banks of the Tengri Nor because a woman desired to be Emperor and god. And I have never heard of cerebral hemorrhages becoming an epidemic.”