

THE NYCTALOPE vs. TITANIA

PART ONE: TITANIA

CHAPTER I

A Pile of Ashes and a Wooden Pedestal

“Don’t you think we can walk a little, Leo?”

Saint-Clair chuckled and raised his wife’s bare hand to his lips to give it a kiss.

“After a year of marriage, Sylvie, we love each other like the first day because we feel and think the same thing, in the same way. I was just about to say the exact same thing to you.”

“Darling,” she sighed.

He spoke into the ear trumpet, “Vitto, stop!”

Ten yards on the coupe pulled over to the curb. The driver jumped out, opened the door and the couple got out of the car.

“Go on ahead of us,” Saint-Clair told him. “We’re going back on foot.”

The driver got back in the car and took off right away.

On this calm, quiet, splendidly moonlit night in May the deserted avenue was perfect for a stroll, especially after a long night at the Opera.

Wrapped in her coat, Sylvie took her husband’s arm, squeezed it affectionately and they walked together in that light, smooth, steady pace of fit and healthy people.

In this sparsely populated neighborhood of Satory, southwest of Versailles, there were very few cars at one in the morning. But there was silence, such total silence that the two pedestrians did not even hear the muffled sounds of their slow footsteps.

All of a sudden a loud noise broke the silence. The loud noise of a human voice, a long, harrowing, terrifying cry that faded into a groan and was cut short by a shriek...

“Oh!” Saint-Clair said.

He had stopped with Sylvie beside him, whom he held with a protective arm. They were frozen in astonishment. But suddenly in a silence more profound and sinister, it seemed, in the clear night, a call for help rang out very nearby.

“Help! Help!” And with deep despair, “My God, it’s over! Oh, oh, help!”

“A woman,” Sylvie whispered.

“There, behind the trees.” A moment of hesitation and then: “Let’s go see.”

“Yes, let’s go,” Sylvie agreed bravely.

The “trees” were a garden surrounded by a low wall topped with an iron grill lined with metal in the inside. More than once, passing by here in their car, Saint-Clair and his wife had remarked about this property so well tucked away from all eyes and whose entrance must be through a forest path since the protected wall revealed no opening all along the avenue.

“Have to go around to find the entrance, it could be far,” Saint-Clair said. “Let’s climb. It looks like there are lots of trees so we won’t be seen.”

For Leo Saint-Clair, a.k.a. the Nyctalope, there might be obstacles difficult to get through but never impossible. And if one knew even a little of the athletic prowess of Sylvie Mac Duhl, one could guess that with the help, if needed, from the man who had been her husband for a year now, she would never stay behind when he was on the move.

Under the light fur, her shoulders were covered with a silk scarf. She took it off and twisted it longways to make a strong cord that she tied around her waist, cinching the coat that protected her shoulders, arms and thighs but left her limbs free to move nimbly.

"Do you have a weapon?" she asked.

"No, but it doesn't matter."

Sylvie, no less than Leo, could not resist the call to adventure, danger and mystery. Plus, it was a woman who had called for help.

Sixty seconds after the woeful, desperate call that had followed the heartrending shriek, Leo and Sylvie were climbing the wall, which was easy. The grill was ten feet tall. But its bars were huge. Leo climbed, one hand grabbing the horizontal bar that connected the perpendicular ones. Once on top he leaned over and held his hand out for Sylvie. She grabbed his wrist...

"Get a good grip on the crossbar. Perfect. Pull up. Watch out for the spikes, they're sharp. Got it? Good..." Words barely whispered, advising, accompanying and admiring the action.

An agile leap together and the bold couple was on the ground, the moist ground of a garden crowded with tall trees, a lot of pine trees. The spring foliage of the others was full enough not to block the pale light of the stars.

Leo and Sylvie took three steps to get away from the wall and were in darkness.

"Your hand, Sylvie."

Because he was the Nyctalope, for whom there was no night, for whom there was no blindness, whose eyes always saw. And he feared nothing because twenty years of adventures and war had taught him to have no fear, even primal fear, that his will knew how to control and conquer. As for Sylvie, she was the Nyctalope's wife and loved him.

Thus, then, without weapons and in the night, they walked through the private park towards a house whose windows were probably open and from where the awful shriek and urgent call for help most likely came. Unless it was from outside, in a clearing or an arbor, on a path, in a courtyard? No new clues. The call for help did not repeat.

"Watch out," Saint-Clair whispered. "A pavilion, a villa..."

But he did not stop.

A moment later Sylvie whispered, "I see... look, on the ground floor, an open window."

They were on the edge of an open lawn bordered by a narrow path of white gravel. Beyond the lawn, directly across from them, the path opened up into a little esplanade in front of a two-story villa. In the left-hand corner an overhanging turret. Then, from left to right, six windows upstairs, four on the ground floor with a front door. All the wooden shutters were closed, as well as the door. But on the right, downstairs, the last window was open, its shutters against the wall, panes invisible, meaning it was wide open.

The moon fully lit up the mysterious facade where the open window bore a black hole, tempting, menacing, sinister.

"We have to go through the window," Sylvie said softly.

"Yes," Saint-Clair agreed.

"But if there's someone armed in the room, they have every right to shoot us, being on private property..."

"My lord."

"I'm afraid for you, Leo."

"Me too, Sylvie, I'm afraid for you. We are indeed unarmed. What if you were to wait here, behind a tree? I could go around the lawn..."

"No, no, I'm following you. I'll go around with you."

"You're right. Come on."

It was crazy! Everything pointed to a tragedy happening in this mysterious house. But Saint-Clair could not resist the temptation of some madness. Besides, there might be someone he could save in this house. How could he step back now?

"Come on, Sylvie."

As light-footed as Mohicans on the hunt, the couple resumed their walk. Still under cover of the trees, in the dark, they got to the right corner of the house.

"Can you see into the darkness of the room?" Sylvie whispered in her husband's ear.

"Yes, I see," he answered. "Nothing strange. Looks like a reading room. Shelves of books cover the walls, a table, two armchairs. The window sill is too high from here for me to see if the floor is parquet or carpeted. The table's empty, polished wood. There's only one thing on it. What in the world is that? Weird! A kind of block that doesn't look like anything I've seen... A block or a stand, a little pedestal... all alone on the corner of the table. What's it doing there?"

"And nobody?"

"No, nobody I can see."

"Let's go, Leo. We can stay on the cobblestones around the courtyard, then along the wall there's cement strip. We won't make any noise and we'll stay out of the line of sight of anyone who might be hiding in the room."

"Right, let's go."

When, with their throats a little dry and their hands tingling, they were both against the moonlit wall next to the open window whose shudder they could touch, they stood there puzzled for a moment. A very brief moment. Because almost right away Saint-Clair leaned over to his wife and whispered:

"I'm going to jump in. If there's someone in there, they don't know that I'm out here. I'll take them by surprise. You, wait here until I call for you. It has to be like this, got it?"

"Yes, I'll wait."

He kissed her lightly on the corner of her mouth and slipped away, his back to the wall.

At the window he swung around, grabbed the sill, lifted himself up and jumped in.

He did not have to go far into the room to see that there was no one inside. The furniture was arranged so that no human being could have been hiding there. In the back of the room, two doors, one on the right of the wall, the other on the left, both closed. Locked? Quietly, deftly, Saint-Clair went to check. No, just closed. But both doors had locks. Saint-Clair pushed them open one by one.

He went back to the window and leaned out a little to call out softly, "Sylvie!"

She held up her arms and he helped her climb into the room.

"Well?"

"Nobody. Two doors back there. You can see a little, I think. Look at the thing on the table. What do you think it's for?"

She was leaning over the pedestal-shaped wooden block when a moan echoed through the house, grew louder, rose like through a musical scale and then suddenly broke into sobbing. Moaning and sobbing so sorrowful, so horribly heartrending that Leo and Sylvie both stiffened up, grabbed each other and stood there staring at the back wall.

Silence, laden with dark menace. Sylvie and Leo feared and desired, at the same time, to hear again the desperate, dolorous moan. But the silence loomed. Loomed so heavily that Saint-Clair felt an unbearable dread.

All of a sudden he scolded himself for doing nothing while in this very house the same voice had earlier called out for help. Someone was in trouble and they could still be saved. He shook his wife out of their embrace.

"Sylvie," he said, "I have to know."

"I'm not leaving you."

"Well then, let's go together."

They walked. They believed that they remembered the moan coming from the middle of the house. So, it was the left door they had to take. Saint-Clair turned the doorknob and pushed gently. The darkness of a hallway, but he could see. With his left hand he took Sylvie's right hand and they stepped into the gloom.

They moved forward and soon had the impression that the tragic mystery was moving away from them at every step. Unimpeded, without difficulty, without the slightest incident, they opened doors, stepped in and inspected the rooms. In a few minutes they had seen the whole ground floor of the mysterious house. Nothing out of the ordinary and not a living soul. Comfortably furnished in good taste. Everywhere showed clear signs that the house was inhabited. But nothing gave the slightest clue for the noise, the calls for help, the moaning and sobbing.

There was a small door under the stairs that led to the basement.

"We'll go down later if we don't find anything upstairs," Saint-Clair said. "Let's go and don't worry about me, I'm armed."

"How's that?" Sylvie asked.

"I found a loaded gun in a drawer."

She was reassured as they started climbing the stairs.

They had realized downstairs that the strange house had no electric lights. Therefore, they did not have to worry about a light suddenly turning on unless it was a lamp whose flame was quickly lit. But the Nyctalope would see the adversary before he could do anything, if, that is, the upstairs was not deserted like the ground floor.

But it was deserted, completely.

Four bedrooms lined the hallway that, like below, ran from one end of the house to the other. They were furnished, beds made—they had all been slept in. On the night stands were candles more or less burned down. On some tables were kerosene lamps ready for use.

In short, an inhabited house but with no inhabitants.

And that was all. No stairs, no ladder, no trapdoor to an attic. There must have been one up there but it was closed off and unused.

"Well now", Saint-Clair said aloud when their visit was over, "this makes no sense at all. I'm going to light a candle so you can see what I've seen, Sylvie."

From a pocket of his tuxedo jacket he pulled out a gold box full of matches. He struck one and lit a candle on the night stand. He kept the revolver in his right hand, took the candlestick in his left and very calmly, despite his gnawing anxiety, said softly:

"Sylvie, let's go back through everywhere. Stay on my left."

The young lady was quivering with curiosity. In the candlelight she eagerly devoured everything that her husband had seen with his Nyctalope eyes. They went from bedroom to bedroom. The idea flashed in them of a secret door, a hidden room. But reason prevailed.

He phrased it like this: "The house is a long, narrow rectangle flanked by a tower. The windows in the hallway look out on the paved courtyard. The bedroom windows face the lawn. The corner tower has got a staircase. We've seen the inside downstairs and up here, wall to wall. There's nothing else."

"There's the basement," Sylvie said.

"Yes, let's go there now. But the moaning and sobbing didn't come from a basement."

In the basement were three big cellars. One was empty of everything but dust; the second had some unused furniture and empty crates; the third was the proper cellar: rows of bottles, two casks, three demijohns.

"I wasn't expecting anything down here," Saint-Clair remarked. "Let's go back up. I noticed in the vestibule there was a door that must lead to the courtyard."

The key was in the door.

Saint-Clair blew out the candle, put the candlestick on a sideboard and pulled the door open.

Together the two explorers went out. Lit by the moonlight the paved courtyard was a big square between the mysterious house and an old, one-story building. Leo and Sylvie walked quickly to the door. A big, old prison lock bolted it closed. Saint-Clair slid the bolt and the heavy door creaked on its hinges.

"Yes, a big garage. And a beautiful car, I say!"

"Oh, Leo," Sylvie said, "the radiator's hot."

"Huh?"

He touched it. The radiator was indeed hot. Saint-Clair put his hand on one of the front tires.

"The tire's warm."

He tried the others and all were still warm from a speedy drive.

Sylvie added, "Plus, it smells like a car that's just been driven."

"My word, there's no doubt about it. This car was on the road less than thirty minutes ago. It got back here right before we heard the call for help. Whoever was driving and the woman who cried out and the person moaning and sobbing when we were in the reading room... where are they? By God, I intend to find out. Let's go, Sylvie."

"Let's go."

Saint-Clair, revolver in hand, led the way. Sylvie followed him with the candle lit again as they revisited the house. But nothing unusual or suspicious. Nobody.

Leo and Sylvie went out into the garden on the opposite side that ran parallel to the street. It was separated by a very high wall without a grill from the forest road beyond which the Satory woods stretched silent and deserted. To the right and left, far from the mysterious house, the walls abutted the

property of a summer home that Saint-Clair remembered having seen closed up and therefore uninhabited since he had moved here a month ago with Sylvie, their child and their domestic help into the Bligny chateau, which is at the west end of Avenue Bois-Robert.

"I'm totally stumped about this night," he grumbled after half an hour of investigation with Sylvie found them once again in front of the window of the reading room.

But then he thought of the block of wood, the pedestal.

"Let's go back in, Sylvie."

The moon had dipped in the sky so that its light, still bright on this clear May night, shined directly on the bare table whose polished wood glistened. On the corner of this table the wooden block was still there.

Leo and Sylvie examined it.

It was pedestal made of ebony wood, round, in the shape of an upside-down Doric capital whose largest diameter measured barely eight inches. So, a small pedestal and nothing more...

One detail, however: its entablature was pierced by four screw holes equidistant apart.

"And that's it," Saint-Clair said. "This pedestal must have held a vase, a cup or maybe a statuette that was screwed in here." And he swore angrily. Then he growled, "Leaving here without knowing anything about this woman who screamed, cried out for help, moaned and sobbed... from this crazy house... that car... Oh, what's going on here?"

Head down, grumbling under his breath he had walked into the middle of the room. And he suddenly stopped in front of something new. Sylvie jumped to his side. Her eyes followed his hand, still holding the gun, and bewildered she saw...

She saw a pile of ashes. It was on the carpet in the middle of a somewhat light-colored rosette, making a gray spot with irregular black streaks. A perfect cone but a little truncated, maybe ten to twelve inches in diameter at the base and half that in height. Right around it the carpet was heavily singed, proof that the object was burned there and the ashes had not been brought from somewhere else.

Saint-Clair rushed over to the fireplace and lifted the mantel. Inside was clean except for a little soot that had fallen from the flue.

"These ashes didn't come from the fireplace," he said, "because they haven't had a fire in here for a long time. Odd."

He went back, squatted down and with his left hand took two handfuls of the inexplicable ashes, which he dropped into his coat pocket.

"Why that?" Sylvie asked.

"To get it analyzed."

"And the pedestal?"

"I'm taking it too."

On saying this he grabbed the ebony block.

"We're leaving, Sylvie, but let's go out the back that leads to the forest road. I noticed the key is in the lock."

Therefore, bringing with them the ashes, the pedestal and the revolver Leo and Sylvie crossed the garden using the only usable path between the wild, dense trees, a path that led to the paved courtyard, a very winding path whose every turn was a blind corner.

Once through the small door in the back wall they were on a narrow forest road.

"This road," the Nyctalope said, "should connect up to the avenue by some alleyway."

"Surely," Sylvie agreed.

They walked quickly without talking. The tension from the dramatic mystery was gripping them physically and tyrannizing their minds. They were thinking of the outrageous situation they had stumbled into on this astounding adventure. But while Saint-Clair was becoming more and more determined to know and understand everything, Sylvie was starting to get more and more worried, feeling deep down an awful foreboding of a disaster that she and the love of her life might fall victim to.

Back at Bligny everything was normal. Leo and Sylvie went up to their bedroom and got into their pajamas and sending their domestics straight to bed. After taking a loving look at the crib where their son, Pierre, an adorable three-month old baby, was sleeping and seeing that the nanny was next to him, sleeping with one eye open, they went back to their room, smoked, talked and did not go to sleep until dawn.

But Saint-Clair was up the next day, Wednesday, May 25, at 9 a.m. An hour later he was in Paris, in the laboratory of his old friend, the renowned chemist Charles Noissan, to whom he handed a box right away and said:

“My friend, here are some ashes. I’d like to know what was burned to make them. It’s serious and urgent.”

“Have you got some shopping to do until noon, my dear Nyctalope?” the scientist asked with his usual good humor.

“No.”

“Then sit down and you can have breakfast with me.”

“If you’d like.”

“Of course. I’ll do the analysis and then after washing my hands we can eat. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds good.”

“Very well.”

An hour and a half later, having just finished the analysis, but also having heard the whole story of the Nyctalope’s nocturnal adventure, Charles Noissan, as conclusive as he was confident, gave it to him straight:

“My friend, the pile of ashes from the mysterious house is the residue produced by the combustion, strangely but without a doubt instantaneous, on the carpet, of a human body, *standing up!*”