

ENTER THE NYCTALOPE

Part One: The End of Darkness

Chapter I: The Drama

When he woke up on the morning of March 3, 1912, the engineer Pierre Saint-Clair felt his heart gripped by an obscure anguish. It was a presentiment that the day would not pass without some misfortune befalling him.¹

He was reassured however, at 8 a.m., when Mélanie, his old cook-housekeeper, brought him a telegram announcing the arrival, before noon on that same day, of Madame Saint-Clair and their son Léon, whom they called Leo. On the previous day, Madame Saint-Clair and Leo had gone to Chartres by automobile, in order to deliver their birthday greetings to an old uncle. Monsieur Saint-Clair had not been able to accompany them because he had had to work late into the night on a very important laboratory experiment.

For more than a year, in fact, the engineer had devoted all his time and the greater part of the income from his fortune to the realization of an invention of immense potential. That invention consisted of an electromagnetic wave “captoprojector” capable of attracting and, so to speak, storing wireless telegraphy waves, and subsequently liberating them, authentically or in a falsified form. Result: absolute mastery of all the wireless telegraphy communications in the entire world, by means of a permanent control enabling censorship, transformation, delay and even suppression.

The science and applications of wireless telegraphy were then in their infancy, and the scientist anticipated their marvelous progress.

The Saint-Clairs lived in a fine family property between Paris and Bourg-la-Reine, comprising a comfortable house, grounds enclosed by high walls, and vast commons. The engineer had installed his laboratory—a workshop-shed and an experimental field—in the middle of the grounds, in a large clearing surrounded by tall trees. He worked alone, but his twenty-year-old son Leo, who was intelligent and devoted, sometimes served as his enthusiastic assistant. The young man had just been awarded a degree in science, but he was a combative and ambitious sportsman and was still hesitating over the choice of a career.

One the morning of March 3, 1912, therefore, Saint-Clair was reassured by the thought that his wife and son would be returning on that day, and not—as might have been the case—the following day. At 10 a.m., he was in his laboratory, hard at work, satisfied and triumphant. He had just completed the definitive experiment in the most fortunate manner when the private telephone connecting the laboratory to the house sounded its silvery bell.

Monsieur Saint-Clair uncoiled the receiver and said: “Hello?”

“Hello, Monsieur!” replied the easily-recognizable voice of Mélanie. “Antoine has asked me to tell you that there’s a gentleman asking to see you.” Antoine was the Saint-Clairs’ gardener, a faithful old retainer who lived in a little lodge beside the gate at the entrance to the property.

“The gentleman has given Antoine a card, which he has just handed to me,” Mélanie continued. “His name is Stanislas Vibrosky. He’s a chemist. He says that he has traveled from the depths of Poland for the express purpose of seeing you.”

Monsieur Saint-Clair knew the name Stanislas Vibrosky, of whom he had, indeed, heard mention as a very knowledgeable chemist. He had even seen his picture several times in illustrated periodicals. Furthermore, he often received visits from foreign scientists, for “the engineer Saint-Clair” was world-

¹ Both the year in which the story is supposed to take place and the first name of the Nyctalope’s father are discussed at some length in the afterword.

famous by virtue of several inventions related to electricity, radiography, radiophony, and wireless telegraphy in general. In consequence, the engineer's suspicions were not aroused.

As he always did in such cases, he replied; "That's all right, Mélanie. Tell Antoine to let Monsieur Vibrosky in, to take him to my study and ask him to wait for a few minutes."

He hung up the telephone and went back to work. In fact, he required nearly a quarter of an hour of material manipulations and note-taking to finish off the definitive experiment and to consign the final formula and its technical consequences to his "Radiant Z Journal." When that was done, he left the apparatus and the Journal where they were on the large steel laboratory table and went into the study.

The latter was a room of restricted dimensions, furnished as a library and smoking-room, and equipped with three good armchairs. Saint-Clair used it for resting, meditation and reading, and also for receiving visitors when he was in his "Workshops." The laboratory was connected to the study by a short corridor with two doors. Between the two doors the corridor served as a cloakroom for coats and hats. The study was entered from the outside by a separate door opening on to a wide pathway that led directly to the house.

On entering the study, however, Monsieur Saint-Clair experienced a sharp surprise. The man who was standing there waiting for him, whose face was clearly lit from the side by the room's only window, was not recognizable as the Stanislas Vibrosky of the printed portraits. Abruptly, with a vague chill running along his spine, the dark presentiment he had experienced on awakening came back. Instinctively, he took a step backwards, on his guard—but it was already too late!

Violent and terrible, the drama unfolded. It began with a gesture from the stranger and a rapid speech. The gesture consisted of the man raising his right hand and aiming the Browning with which it was armed at Monsieur Saint-Clair. As for the speech, it was as menacing as the gesture, and just as frightfully significant.

"Monsieur Saint-Clair," the false Vibrosky pronounced, in a harsh tone, with an accent that was certainly that of some Far-Eastern nation, "you will immediately give me the complete dossier of your Radiant Z, and you will follow me to the automobile that is waiting for you on the road outside the gate of the property. If not..."

Monsieur Saint-Clair stiffened, put his hand on the back of a chair that he thought might serve as a weapon, and said, courageously: "If not?"

The response was immediate. His green eyes shining with an evil gleam, the stranger said: "If not, whatever the consequences might be, I'll kill you."

Monsieur Saint-Clair was agile and vigorous. He thought quickly and acted promptly. He crouched down, while gripping the chair with both hands, and raised it in the air—but he was dealing with a coldly determined criminal aggressor. Before the raised chair could strike him, the stranger pulled the trigger of his weapon. Three detonations were heard, but they were soft and feeble, because the Browning was equipped with one of those so-called "silencers," which are little used although they are genuinely effective, considerably diminishing the sound of a rifle- or pistol-shot. Those three detonations would not even have been heard by anyone who happened to be in the neighboring laboratory.

The unfortunate Monsieur Saint-Clair collapsed, and the chair fell back upon his own body.

Without sparing his victim a glance, the criminal leapt forward and shoved the corridor door, which still stood ajar. He opened the door to the laboratory, ran to the steel table, set down his still-smoking Browning on a corner, and began riffling through Saint-Clair's "Radiant Z Journal" with both hands. His Mongoloid face, with slanting eyes and prominent cheek-bones, wore an expression of ferocious joy as he sniggered.

"This is it!" he growled. "It's all here. It's ours—and it will be ours alone, for my little time-bombs will destroy all this in a quarter of an hour. And in a quarter of an hour, I'll be far away, since the car will get me to the airplane in less than five minutes. Hup! Let's not waste any time."

The criminal was wearing a raglan overcoat with large, deep pockets. Into one of them he slid the bound notebook constituting the "Radiant Z Journal;" in the other he buried two items of apparatus, with disks and reels, which had also been on the table. Then he picked up the Browning in his right hand.

He took a small square box from the left-hand outside pocket of his raglan, and put it under a stool. He scraped a fingernail over one of its surfaces, thus exposing the head of a pin that had previously been hidden beneath a thin layer of plaster. He pulled out the pin, and threw it away.

He left the laboratory immediately by the back door and passed into a large work-room. There he placed four little boxes in different places and removed their pins. Finally, he went out on to the lawn, went around the buildings at a rapid pace, rejoined the wide pathway, went around the house and headed for the gate along a path slanting from the right.

As he came out of the bushes he saw that the gate was open and that Antoine, standing beside one of the batters, was waving to a red cabriolet that was going past him into the grounds, launching itself into the central pathway with the forceful acceleration that only first-class motors can achieve.

“Good!” muttered the fake Vibrosky. “Here’s Madame Saint-Clair and her son coming home. Our information was accurate. I’ve arrived just in time, and I’ll wager that it’s the perfect moment. There’s no time for delay.” And as Antoine, who was about to close the gate again, looked at him, the stranger said: “*Au revoir*, my good man.”

Bewildered by such rare generosity, Antoine contemplated the hundred-franc note that the visitor had just slipped into his hand. When he raised his head again and looked at the road, the stranger and his car had disappeared.