

Jean de La Hire: *The Cross of Blood*

PART ONE

CHAPTER I *An Atmosphere of Terror*

At 8:30 a.m. on the morning of Tuesday, January 20, checking the day's post at his residence in Paris, Léo Saint-Clair found the following letter:

*La Hêtraie*¹,
Saint-Christophe-sur-le-Nais (Indre-et-Loire)
19 January 1925
My dear friend,

Eight years ago, in the unforgettable circumstances of war, we swore to one another immediate and absolute assistance should a grave danger ever threaten one of us or a human being we love. Saint-Clair, by virtue of your oath, come to me—come to us, quickly! I will wait for you.

Jacques d'Hermont.

PS. Don't answer. Just come! Come with your men, for there is no doubt that you will need them. You can pay me a "surprise" visit at Beech Grove, to have lunch with me as I have often asked you to do. In case you are invited to hunt wild boars in the Périgord, have your guns and ammunition ready.

J. d'H.

After reading this, the Nyctalope did not hesitate a moment. He picked up the phone and said immediately:

"Vitto? Call Soca. Bring the car and the three Hammerless guns. We leave in half an hour."

At 9:00 a.m., the powerful gray roadster crossed the intersection of the old Porte d'Orléans and raced toward Chartres through Palaiseau, Orsay and Aby. From Paris to Saint-Christophe-sur-le-Nais, the most direct route was 240 kilometers. At 11:45 p.m. exactly, Saint-Clair arrived in front of the town hall of Saint-Christophe. At that moment, a man wearing leggings, a short leather jacket and a kepi with silver braid appeared; he was the county's game warden.

"Monsieur," said Saint-Clair, with a military salute, "would you point the way to Beech Grove?"

The Nyctalope had never visited his brother-in-arms before.

"You can see the castle from here," the game warden replied, stretching out his right arm. "Up there, on the hill, between the two woods."

The three men looked in the direction the game warden had indicated. To the east of the village, down the hill, there was a pretty valley through which a big stream wound its way; it was bordered by elm trees and a railway on the embankment. Beyond it rose a hill, its bare fields on a slope with a big forest on top. Through the gap, one could see a gray building with slate roofs, flanked by two dovetowers.

¹ Beech Grove.

“To get there,” the game warden continued, “go through the village, and, at the next crossroad, take the road that goes over the Nais and the railway. It will take you straight to the castle.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

Having slid five francs into the hand of the obliging man, Saint-Clair put his car back in motion.

That winter day was luminous and cold, with a strong wind from the northeast. The picturesque village, the valley planted with elms and poplars, and the hill of Beech Grove formed the center of a well-ordered landscape, agreeable to the eye and sweet to the spirit; the country between Tours and Le Mans offered many similarly pretty landscapes for tourists. The Nyctalope had to repeat to himself the pressing terms of the enigmatic letter of appeal he had received to imagine that any drama could take place in such a beautiful countryside, still charming despite the winter.

After a flat stretch, the road started climbing abruptly, becoming like a shallow trench through the fields. Then, quite suddenly, it turned into a beautiful path bordered by two rows of lime trees with branches cut short. Ahead, they spotted a metal gate open between two old walls.

The path went on, flanked by young pines. The roadster skirted a vast stretch of lawn, overhung by a magnificent grove of immense beeches with gray trunks and bare, almost rose-colored branches. The other side of the lawn was bordered by a similar canopy. This grove, stretching out over the high plain and projecting over the bastions of several parts of the castle, circled the main building on three sides.

The front entrance stood between two towers in the southwest and had big front steps, a tall door, eight balcony windows on the ground floor, nine windows on the upper floor and nine skylights in the attic. Certainly, Beech Grove must also have servants' quarters, but none could be seen. Saint-Clair thought they must be hidden behind the castle.

Just then, at the very moment the automobile stopped before the front steps, a smaller door opened within the monumental larger one, and a man appeared. Quickly he began to descend the twelve steps, each of his strides double their usual breadth.

Saint-Clair had jumped to the ground, which was covered thickly with gravel, as Vitto took the wheel and Soca prepared to carry the suitcases.

Now, seeing the man who came toward him, the Nyctalope had trouble recognizing the splendid captain of the Alpine Hunters from the Great War.

In his mind he cried out, stupefied: “Jacques d’Hermont, but a mere ghost of what he once was...” But nothing in his face, his look, his voice, betrayed his thoughts, and he remained distant from this friend, whom he had lost from view after the War, this friend who was now so different from the image he had kept in his mind.

All at once, the “comedy” planned in advance began, as plotted in the postscript in the letter.

“Ah! What a surprise! What a lovely surprise!” the chatelain explained in a shrill voice, taking and shaking the two hands that the Nyctalope held out to him. “My good friend Saint-Clair! At Beech Grove, at last! How is it possible? Why didn’t you warn me? The telegraph... the telephone... But it doesn’t matter! I am so happy to see you! You will explain everything. But first, let me shake the hands of our companions. They were our soldiers, Saint-Clair, among the very best. You had the power to keep them in your service and they had the pleasure of staying with you. Make yourselves at home, my friends.”

After the presentations, he turned back toward the Nyctalope, he added:

“Saint-Clair, you plan to stay for several days, I hope? At last, I have you here, after so many invitations in the past! No? What say you?”

Entering into the game, Saint-Clair laughed energetically, shaking his head. And with a full, deep voice that carried far, he declared:

“I’m going to hunt near Brantôme, in the Périgord, my dear friend! They are waiting for me there to begin hunting wild boars. So I don’t think I’ll be staying here for more than a few hours...”

“Oh!” exclaimed the chatelain, admirably feigning sorrow and indignation.

Saint-Clair thought: *Why is he playing this comedy so well? Does he know, or believe, that he is being watched? Let us continue this game.*

So, he went on, at once serious and polite:

“But I must say, d’Hermont, that it would be a great sorrow not to accept your very kind offer.”

“Yes, indeed!”

This was said with evident sincerity.

“Well then!” said Saint-Clair. “I’ll send a telegram. They can hunt the wild boars without me; at least for a few days.”

“Ah! Yes!” exclaimed the chatelaine, once again visibly reassured.

“Yes. I don’t know this part of the Touraine countryside. It seems very charming. And what sweetness in the air! In fact, a bit of balm for my nervous system is just what I need. The atmosphere, the landscape... and your friendship, my dear d’Hermont! It will be a great opportunity for me to rest a little, and such a contrast to those days and nights I spent with you in the trenches!”

“So you will stay, then?”

“Yes, I will.”

“For several days?”

“For a whole week if you like.”

“Ah! What pleasure you give me!”

This quick dialogue took place at the foot of the steps. Before taking the first walk with Saint-Clair, Jacques d’Hermont went on to add in a joyful tone:

“Vitto, take the car to the garage; you have to go around the castle. You will find my driver down there; he’ll be at your service. Soca, bring the bags.”

While climbing the steps, the chatelain continued:

“My dear Saint-Clair, today you will be treated to a late buffet lunch. Normally, we usually have lunch at 12:30 a.m., but my cook Amélie will have the time to prepare a meal worthy of you. I live here with my two daughters and my sister. Her husband—do you remember him? He was killed at Verdun. You will see them before we sit down at the table. They have gone to Saint-Christophe to attend the end-of-year service of a very dear friend.”

He sighed for a few seconds, and, with a voice that was very sad, such that his expressive face showed an infinite weariness, he added:

“I lost my wife two months ago. An illness unknown to the doctors, even the greatest ones brought from Paris. They could understand nothing, nothing... And ever since...”

He stopped then to let out a sort of sob, and with a shiver said:

“Excuse me, I still have a great deal of difficulty overcoming my pain... and my fear, yes! my fear... I will tell you everything, my dear friend... After lunch, we will go out, under the pretext of showing you the park... It’s remarkable, because my great-grandfather and my grandfather applied themselves with intelligence and happy boldness to enrich the number of trees of the most diverse varieties. Some are so exotic they have never been seen before in this region, although they are perfectly acclimatized. Winter doesn’t kill them, for the cold is never very harsh here...”

Saint-Clair didn’t say a word. They entered through the front hall of the castle, an immense space lit by two big windows looking onto a patio that prolonged the steps on each side. In the back, a large staircase led to the upper floors. To the right and left, there were tall double clapper doors. A handsome chandelier in wrought iron, garnished with electric light bulbs, hung from the ceiling. Around the edges of the room, there were wood armchairs upholstered with leather cushions. Several radiators spread throughout filled the space with pleasant warmth.

“It’s really lovely!” said Saint-Clair in sincere admiration.

“Yes!” said d’Hermont, without false modesty. “This used to be the living-room of the house. There was an enormous fireplace there. I had it replaced by a door that gives direct access to the library, which one can only reach through the front room. But in all other rooms except that one, I left the fireplaces. They still work, and I look after them with care. On gray, rainy, humid days, a wood fire is pleasant, even if we also have heaters... Let’s go to your room now, shall we?”

At that moment, a door opened in the back, to the right of the staircase, and a man appeared in shirtsleeves, a striped vest, black trousers and slippers.

“Firmin!” ordered d’Hermont. “Take some of the bags. We’re going to the Red Room.”

“Yes, Monsieur le Comte.”

And smiling with the evident satisfaction he felt, the chatelain said to Saint-Clair, as they went up the staircase:

“I have three guestrooms. In the one we call the Red Room you will always be attended to, as an honored guest. I know you well enough to be sure it will please you.”

What could have made Jacques d’Hermont send that terrified, almost desperate call? Perhaps I will learn the answer from him today? thought the Nyctalope. But he promised himself to do nothing to provoke the confidences of his friend, who seemed resolved not to do so right away. Saint-Clair thought: *It must be one of those secret dramas, which it is important not to force.*

The staircase gave onto a wide landing. D’Hermont walked toward a window overlooking the lawn, the access road and the valley. A few steps before reaching it, he stopped to open a door to his left. Crossing the threshold, he said:

“I will walk in front of you, my dear friend, for the room is dark back there. There is no lighting in the Red Room, except for a fanlight with a hanging curtain, which you can draw back and forth at your convenience.”

Saint-Clair said, simply:

“My dear friend, do not forget that, as a Nyctalope, darkness does not exist for me.”

“Ah! That’s right!” exclaimed d’Hermont. “Excuse me.”

The darkness was, in any case, only relative, for the afternoon light of the long hallway penetrated into the room through an open door. Walking side by side with his friend, Saint-Clair heard him whisper in his ear:

“Pardon me, I am prone to lapses. What makes this even more ridiculous is that it is precisely because you are the Nyctalope that I called you to my aid! But everything in its time, I say, everything in its time...”

And in his normal voice, he added:

“This way, my dear friend. Come.”

The Red Room was a vast square space, with two windows that also opened onto the front of the castle, the lawn, the entrance road, the valley and the rounded hill on which the houses and the church of Saint-Christophe stood. Everything was furnished in the purest Empire style, with beautiful carpets spread over the waxed floor. There was also a long, deep alcove with the bed, flanked by two tables. A chandelier garnished with electric lights hung in the middle, just over a very beautiful round table. In the fireplace, wood was heaped up on great andirons, ready to be set aflame. The walls were covered with garnet fabric and adorned with portrait paintings in the imperial neoclassical genre. There was also a library, full of books well arranged behind a glass.

“The bathroom is this way, my dear friend.”

Moving into the alcove to the left of the entrance door, Jacques d’Hermont pushed open a door on hinges that must have been well-maintained, as it opened without the slightest noise. Saint-Clair saw a room full of light, pierced by a window that also faced the front of the house. It was furnished with a bathtub, a shower, a washbasin, and a marble table of the kind referred to by the expression “modern comfort.”

“I admire the way you have modernized your house without damaging what was old and uniquely original about it,” said Saint-Clair with sincerity.

“It pleases me that you like it,” said the chatelain, satisfied.

Back in his room, he pointed out an open door between the alcove and the entrance, which led to a third room lit by an electric ceiling light. Soca and Vitto had already set down the two bags and hung up Saint-Clair’s rifle case.

“Here are the wardrobe and storage closet,” said d’Hermont. “Is Soca going to help you settle in, or would you like me to leave you my servant, Firmin, while I take Soca and Vitto to their rooms?”

“Leave me Firmin,” said Saint-Clair.

“It is just after noon. The lunch bell will ring when you please.”

“Didn’t you say that at Beech Grove you have lunch at 12:30 a.m.?”

“Yes, but...”

“My dear host, I won’t have Madame your sister and your daughters change the habits of the house because of me. A half-hour will be quite enough for Firmin to empty my bags and for me to freshen up.”

“Then I shall leave you, my dear friend.”

Followed by Soca and Vitto, the Comte went out. Knowing that his master did not like any doors near him to remain uselessly open, the Corsican took care to close those of the Red Room and dark backroom.

Something struck the Nyctalope right away when d’Hermont introduced him to his two daughters and his sister, Laure Dauzet, a little later in the dining-room. It was the rare quality of the eyes of the youngest of the two d’Hermont girls, who bore the uncommon name of Basilie. Her eyes, a very pale periwinkle blue, appeared immense under her long eyelids with painted eyelashes. At first sight, and even afterward, unless one had the penetrating gaze of the Nyctalope, these eyes gave an impression of angelic candor, an infantile and joyful wonder at all things. They seemed in perfect accord with her round face, haloed by warm blonde curls highlighted in copper and gold, as well as her clear and delicate, yet very healthy, complexion. The girl’s lips were bright red, owing nothing to artifice, and her body was at once slender and full, supple and lively. Everything in the young girl was the image of physical and moral health, naïveté and perfect happiness with life. Basilie must have been between eighteen and twenty years-old. But Saint-Clair had the strange thought—was it an intuition?—that those beautiful and splendidly candid eyes were a screen, an impenetrable screen stretched over a secret soul, with an enigmatic life in retreat from the apparent life on the surface. But this was no more than a quick thought, of which he was conscious for only a second or two.

At the same time, Saint-Clair was strongly attracted and intrigued by the entirely different figures of the widowed sister, Madame Dauzet, and the Comte’s older daughter, whose first name was Madeleine. Their poor health showed them to be in the same disturbing state as their brother and father, Jacques d’Hermont.

Like him, whom they resembled, their eyes were dark brown and their slim bodies were stiffened by a nervous tension that seemed to need relaxation. Madame Dauzet was in her forties and Madeleine was in her twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth year. They had yellowing, emaciated faces, with feverish circles under their eyelids and folds of bitterness at the corners of their mouths. The expression in their faces was at the same time anxious and yet full of hope and courage.

The identical look of Jacques, Laure and Madeleine, thought the Nyctalope, explains the call for help in the letter... But then, why doesn’t Basilie look like her father, aunt and sister?

Naturally, he looked again into the eyes of pale periwinkle. But after the introduction was made, the young girl grew distracted, and busied herself with the best arrangement of the beautiful red carnations in a vase on a nearby table. She must have felt the Saint-Clair’s look fixed on her face. Without turning and lifting her eyes, she said:

“These carnations are beautiful, aren’t they? I received them yesterday from a friend in Nice.”

Saint-Clair felt an indefinable awkwardness. Jacques d’Hermont put an end to it by saying in a falsely deliberate tone:

“Shall we go to the table now, my dear friend?”

“With pleasure,” said Saint-Clair, smiling. And he offered his arm to Madame Dauzet.

Ample, well-ordered and savory as it was, the meal was nevertheless relatively brief. The master of the house made an effort to animate it with accompanying conversation; Saint-Clair attempted to help. The two war comrades told anecdotes from their fraternity in arms; then, they spoke of the hunt for wild boars, the pretext for Saint-Clair’s visit. D’Hermont expanded on the particulars of the hunt in that wild part of the southern region.

“Here, my dear friend,” he concluded, “there is nothing to shoot but pheasant, rabbit, and, on rare occasions, hare or partridge...”

The woman and the two girls took part in the conversation, since each of them was a bit of a huntress. For all of the guests, however, it was a relief once the meal was over. Only Basilie had remained at ease and natural, even laughing occasionally, without having to force the brilliance of her gaiety.

Nonetheless, in her big blue eyes, the Nyctalope did not see the childishness that she superficially showed.

Is there anything hidden behind her face? he wondered. *Is this young girl anything more than an adolescent happy to live in magnificent health? Does she see that she is the only one well here, in this place touched by the anxiety of mystery? And what is this mystery?*

Saint-Clair declared that he never drank anything after a meal, not liquor or even coffee, without a glass of pure water, and he did not return to the living-room. Madame Dauzet did not insist. Just then, her brother said:

“Ah well! But my dear friend, certainly you will do me the pleasure of taking a walk with me on such a beautiful afternoon, with such bright skies and dry air. Would you like to go right away?”

“Yes, and we can stop by the post office at Saint-Christophe. I must send a postal money order I didn’t have the time to send in Paris yesterday. This morning, I left before the offices opened.”

Five minutes later, the two friends were outside. They left the castle by the entrance road and continued along the path that descended through the valley toward the village. After they had crossed the bridge over railway tracks and turned a corner, so that they were completely out of sight of the castle, Saint-Clair put his hand on d’Hermont’s arm. With the affectionate familiarity that had united the two men so tightly during wartime, he said:

“Jacques, the money order was nothing but a false pretext. Let’s stop here and sit on this tree trunk. Talk to me.”

To one side of the path, at the edge of the ditch, lay the trunk of an old beech tree knocked down by some storm. Sitting there, elbow to elbow, the two friends looked out over the valley. In the depths below, the narrow and calm Nais wound, blue and silvery between low banks irregularly interspersed with elms and pink-branched poplars. On these natural shores grazed cows, speckled white and red. On the hill opposite, the houses of Saint-Christophe stretched out amidst the gardens until the church bell tower, which pointed into a pale sky where the sun gently shone. All nature was motionless and silent, charmed by the sun’s calm serenity. The air was warm, and it almost felt like spring.

Choosing a cigar from a stiff leather case and lighting it with care, Saint-Clair expected Jacques d’Hermont to talk. But, after a few minutes had gone by, he saw that his friend was so tense that he would need to speak first and question him. Gently, he said:

“Jacques, you called me. Your call was pressing. Let’s not waste an hour. There is a start to everything. The simplest way is to start, together, at the beginning. So, I’m asking you: how and from what do you suffer, and when did it begin?”

Jacques d’Hermont suddenly seemed freed from a heavy burden. He raised his arms, waved them, lowered them, and, after setting his hands on his knees, spoke with feverish animation:

“That’s it, Léo, that’s it! The beginning... or rather the first brutal fact, significant in spite of its mystery, was the death of my wife... But wait! This death, sudden because it was unforeseen by us both, and which constitutes what I call the ‘brutal fact’ because of the terrifying shock it gave my sister, my eldest daughter and myself, this death was preceded for many months by things that no doubt produced this ‘beginning’ you asked me about. There were symptoms...”

“What symptoms?”

“It started towards the end of August,” continued d’Hermont.

Now his voice was firm and his tone energetic, such that his body, with its straight bust and supple gestures, once again took on the bearing of an officer of the Alpine Hunters. The powerfully charismatic influence of Saint-Clair finally had its usual effect: mental lucidity, physical force.

“Yes, it was towards the end of autumn... You know the constant health I am gifted with, from the time we spent together in the war. My wife, Lucile, came from a race of folks similar to mine, and was as solid as I am. I showed you her photograph, do you remember?”

“Yes,” said Saint-Clair. “A young Diana, a fine woman, with good features, a calm look, and a grave smile.”

“My eldest daughter Madeleine is like her. As for Basile...”

He hesitated and made an animated gesture as if clearing the air, then said with calm resolution:

“Let’s leave Basile for the moment. I will come back to her, since, by all evidence, she’s found and still finds herself outside the infernal and mysterious cycle of illness in which Lucile, Laure, Madeleine and I have been trapped for a month... I continue: it was one of the last days of the season. Summer had been brutal, without a single day of relief from the torrid, heavy weather and thunderstorms that stopped short of bringing rain to the region, always bursting far beyond the Loire valley, on Le Mans and Nogent-le-Rotrou. Here, the whole region suffered from drought, except for Beech Grove and the narrow valley that stretches before us, which, as you can see, is closed off to the north just before the village of Dissay-sous-Courcillon, by the old windmill with its feudal towers, half-hidden behind the oldest and most beautiful poplars in the region.”

D’Hermont became quiet, and did not speak for a few moments. Saint-Clair contented himself with nodding as he looked into the distance at the line of tall poplars.

“That was a very unhealthy summer,” d’Hermont went on. “Everyone in my house blamed it for the poor state of health we found ourselves in during the first days of September. My wife, my sister, my eldest daughter and myself were all in the same state, sickly without a defined illness, in a state of general weariness that increased from day to day, a lack of sleep and appetite, and a bizarre kind of fever that rose from night to morning, fell abruptly at sunrise to leave us exhausted, and began to rise again at nightfall... The doctor of Saint-Christophe, Doctor Luvier, is my friend. He visited us often. He examined us, observed us, tried to cure us, but in vain. The four of us were not affected to the same degree. More than me, more than my sister Laure, more than my daughter Madeleine, Lucile grew progressively weaker. By the end of September, she was no more than a skeleton. She could be fed only with liquids, which she mostly rejected. By the middle of October, her legs were incapable of carrying her. She was confined to bed definitively...”

Jacques d’Hermont stopped, and, with infinite distress in his feverish eyes, his whole yellowish and emaciated face, he looked at Saint-Clair, who observed him.

“Pernicious anemia?” speculated the Nyctalope.

“No. Luvier didn’t think so. Professor Render, visiting from Paris, confirmed his diagnosis, or rather his inability to diagnose. He advised a change of scenery, a change of air and habits, but my wife would not move. So we stayed and now she is dead. I asked for an autopsy to be performed. Her organs were all unharmed, without illness, only diminished in volume and shriveled. ‘I don’t understand,’ Professor Render confessed. And he understood even less, a few weeks later, when my sister, my eldest daughter and myself, after Lucile’s death, remained in a stable state—the one in which you see us now. There was one difference between September, October and November: our appetites returned. We began to eat normally again. But we still can’t sleep; during the nocturnal fevers that afflict us, we experience only brief periods of rest. We spend our nights plagued by nightmares that wake us with a start, drenched in sweat. Luvier refused to medicate us—what good would that do? All his pharmacopoeia has proved either useless, or had had typical harmful effects.”

“What about the change in scenery?” asked Saint-Clair.

“We tried. We all left for Menton. And here I have the strangest and most mysterious fact to report... the most anxiety-inducing, too, because it now seems to me as if the grip of death does not want to let us go, and plays with us as a ferocious tiger does with its powerless prey...”

He stopped again, breathing hard, with desperate panic in his eyes. Saint-Clair took one of his hands, clasped it, and said with irresistible authority:

“Jacques, courage! What is this fact?”

With a voice filled with anxiety, d’Hermont explained:

“The big car that was taking us to Menton had just come out of Tours, when my sister Laure, seated between my two daughters in the back, grabbed my arm. I was in one of the two seats in the front, next to Firmin, who was driving. Laure said to me with violence: ‘Jacques, let’s go back! Let’s return at once to Beech Grove!’ Now, my dear friend, after a few minutes, I, too, began to feel a growing repugnance for the journey, which had hardly begun since we were only about fifty kilometers from here. Yes! In my mind, growing minute by minute, was the notion of asking Firmin to take half the day off and bring us back home. This bizarre, unreasonable and crazy desire, motivated by nothing, took hold of me entirely. It

produced an irresistible physical need to grab my driver's arm, raise my voice with authority, and say exactly what Laure had just requested. When her cry had struck my brain, it was as if I had uttered it myself. And just as I was opening my mouth, about to give the order to turn back, Madeleine moaned: 'Oh! Yes, father! Yes! Let's go home!' Only then did I look at the two of them. Laure was tense, shivering, looking like a madwoman; Madeleine's eyes were turned upward and her teeth chattered. I was feeling crazed myself and confused, as if I was about to faint. So I grabbed Firmin's arm and shouted: 'Turn around! Turn around! Right away! Let's go back quickly to Beech Grove!' Firmin had the good sense and composure to immediately stop the car. His wife, Amélie, our cook, and her niece, Jeannette, our chambermaid, occupied the folding seats in the back. They were frightened, incapable of caring for Laure, who was in the midst of a nervous fit, and Madeleine, about to faint. Furiously, I ordered again: 'Firmin, let's go back, turn around, turn around!'"

Breaking off once more, Jacques d'Hermont gasped, wiped his sweating forehead with one hand, and, in a hoarse voice cut by nervous sobs, finished:

"Firmin obeyed. We returned to Tours, crossed the city, not stopping at any pharmacy or doctor's office. Less than five minutes after the car had turned around, Laure had calmed down, and Madeleine had recovered from her fainting fit. I myself had regained all my lucidity, and felt calm, euphoric even, better than I had felt since the first days of summer! It didn't last, however. At nightfall, fever took us again... Since then, our condition has not ceased to get worse from day to day. Every evening, as soon as the fever returns, it seems as if we're about to die... to be extinguished suddenly, just as Lucile was extinguished at the exact hour of sunrise..."

The Comte had a convulsion, his whole body shook; he took his face in his hands and surrendered to tears and sobs. Formerly so strong mentally and physically, he was now at the end of his resistance. Alone with his friend, Jacques d'Hermont at last allowed himself to cry freely.

Certainly, Léo Saint-Clair was profoundly moved. But he showed it in just the right amount in his words and tone, so that d'Hermont understood that the friend he had called to his aid sympathized with all his heart with his plight, but also kept a cool head. This he was soon again in a state to listen, understand, reflect and speak according to facts and reason.

The Nyctalope expressed the main idea that the confidences of his unfortunate friend had produced in him:

"Jacques," he said, "in my opinion, the most astonishing thing of all, based on your silence on the subject and my own observations, is that your younger daughter, Basilie, was not affected by this mysterious sickness, nor were Firmin, whom I saw looked well, or your niece Jeannette, who served us at the table, or your cook Amélie..."

Complete master of himself once more, his face dry of tears, his eyes clear, Jacques d'Hermont replied firmly:

"Yes! That is something lucky, at least! That mysterious epidemic affects only a limited number of people! It hasn't taken hold of them. Can I confess to you that, like many fathers feel towards their last born, I love Basilie the most? Her aunt and her sister also love her deeply. Our great joy is that she is unharmed. Our greatest fear was that she, so pretty, so beautiful, and so happy to live, with all her magnificent young vitality, might have been taken in turn! We don't hold it against her, of course! It is only human to remain healthy and strong, while we ourselves, on the contrary, pray to God that..."

"Understood!" said Saint-Clair gently. "But Basilie's health... your servants'... who all breathe the same air as you you, your late wife, your sister and your elder daughter... who all eat the same food and share the same daily habits... A question arises, inevitably. You realize it, and rejoice and fear, at the same time, but what did Doctor Luvier say? And Professor Render? For the same evidence must have struck them too, just as it did me the first few minutes after my arrival here."

"Yes, of course!" replied d'Hermont forcefully. "Luvier and Render agreed that the mysterious atavisms, of which we were the victims, did not affect Basilie. It seems that this is normal, that the atavistic process may skip some individuals, sometimes generations even—yes, generations! This must be so, for in the entire history of my family, going back to the Revolution, I have found nothing that compares to this."

His voice dropped as he continued:

“... and I fear we all shall die from it, just like Lucile.”

“I’m sorry!” said Saint-Clair, “but your wife didn’t share...”

“I know what you’re going to say, my dear friend, but your objection is irrelevant. Lucile was, in fact, my first cousin, the only daughter of my father’s brother. So we would have shared the same atavisms...”

“I see.”

After a gesture to clear the air, Saint-Clair went on with gentleness:

“I must tell you, my dear d’Hermont, that the theory of atavistic transmission by continuous or intermittent effects has never filled me with enthusiasm. It can all too easily be applied explain things that one does not understand. And it does not resolve our problem, which is, right now, how to heal your sister, your eldest daughter and yourself. As you know, I do not like the unknown. Will you allow me to ask you a few questions, which you must answer with absolute sincerity?”

Jacques d’Hermont, very tense but calm, looked at the Nyctalope with an expression of total confidence, and answered firmly:

“Go ahead, question me. And it goes without saying that my answers will be totally truthful.”

“Excellent! After the first manifestations of that mysterious sickness, particularly at the time of its most powerful effects... for example, when your wife passed away, or during the scene of the extraordinary return to Beech Tree, a return that seems dictated by some kind of occult power... yes, what was the attitude, what were the reactions, of Basilie and your servants? Firmin, Jeannette, Amélie?”

What appeared to be a genuine and sincere expression of astonishment illuminated the Comte’s face. After a moment, not hesitating but reflecting, he replied:

“My goodness! I never asked myself that question. And I don’t think that Laure or Madeleine have asked it either... As far as I can remember, Basilie’s attitude and reactions... and that of our servants... were what they quite naturally should be... What they are when circumstances produce an accident created by an inexplicable evil... Eagerness to take care of us, compassionate pity, fear even, before the mystery and suffering... Anger and instinctive disregard for the impotence of medicine... Yes, all this was in plain view. Naturally, life for them at home retains its normalcy, and they go on with their day in continued good health.”

“Very good,” said Saint-Clair. “Another question. What made you call me? More precisely, did you make that call after thinking about it for some time? Or did a sudden event inspire you to do it all at once?”

Once again, the mobile face of Comte d’Hermont expressed a sudden, violent emotion. To Saint-Clair’s attentive eyes, he seemed more irritated this time than pained.

“An abrupt event, indeed! Yesterday, I wrote to you. I knew from the newspapers that you had returned to Paris from Corsica. I remembered our friendship and your oath. I did not doubt for a second that you would come without delay. Thank you, my dear friend, for not having disappointed me. As for the event which inspired and decided me, it is one more mystery...”

Jacques d’Hermont concentrated, as if to relate the thing in the clearest way, in the fewest words possible. Then, in a resolute and rapid voice, he began. But his gaze was blurred as if he were hallucinating, as he looked into the calm and steady eyes of the Nyctalope:

“It happened two nights ago—the night of Sunday 18th to Monday 19th—a soft, dark night without moon or stars. This detail has its importance, as darkness is one of the elements of the mystery. I knew that the night was dark because, since the War, I haven’t been able to get used to sleeping in a closed room, so my window always remains half-opened at night, even in the deepest cold of winter.

“I could not sleep. Lying on my right side, eyes wide open, sweating and shivering from a rising fever, I saw through the half-opened window the night outside, darker than my room where only the tiny flame of an oil lamp burned in a corner under a pot of tisane. It often happens that my mouth and throat become dry to the point of being painful, and then a sip of the warm infusion...”

He stopped, little haggard, as if the thread of his thoughts had just broken.

“You were not sleeping and you had your eyes open,” encouraged the Nyctalope softly. “And then?”

Jacques d'Hermont shrugged, and, once again lucid and clear-minded, he continued:

"Suddenly, I heard a noise—not that noises are unusual in the silence of the night, in a house full of old furniture and antique woodwork like Beech Grove. No, it was an abnormal noise... I listened to it for a few minutes before I realized what it might be. I can't define it any better than by saying it was a sort of continuous whirring mingled with moaning. This came from the lawn that the window of my bedroom opens onto, as do all the windows in the main rooms and the large hallway on that floor.

"Having more or less determined the nature of the unusual noise and approximately located it, I stood still for a few minutes, listening, hesitating... But as the groans became stronger, even seeming to double in intensity, that is to say becoming different, sometimes together, sometimes alternating, I jumped out of bed. My suddenly galvanized nerves gave vigor back to my body, and after putting on a warm dressing gown over my pajamas, tied with a rope belt, I went to the window and opened it completely...

"I saw nothing. But now, I could situate the whirring and moaning better: the first occurred far away in the valley, and I thought that it was the windmill of the Nais turning. *In the middle of the night!* I thought. *That miller is truly horrible.* As for the moans, evidently human, they were uttered by two persons whom the dovetower in the north hid from my sight..."

Jacques d'Hermont stopped. Telling this story, he had become calmer, his eyes less crazed, as if he felt tranquility or a euphoria of hope in the presence of Saint-Clair, who listened and did not doubt his reason or veracity.

He breathed deeply, and without effort resumed:

"You may have noticed that the lawn in front of the castle is heart-shaped, its tip dividing the entry road in two, the rounded sides containing the two dovetowers. The human beings moaning were on the lawn at its extreme north edge, behind the northern dovetower. Quickly, I put on my leather slippers and left my room. I did not carry any weapon. My old unloaded Parabellum must have been in some drawer of my study. This part of the countryside is far from any main road and perfectly calm; its inhabitants are all from there, and they are the most honest and peaceful in the world..."

Saint-Clair cut in:

"Then why did you tell me to bring my rifle and buckshot?"

"I'm going to tell you! I went downstairs, lighting my way with a small electric flashlight, which I always keep on one of the bedside tables in case the night lamp goes out before dawn. Now, to my great surprise, I found the gate that led to the porch wide open, even though it's almost never open. I thought: *Who's gone out?* But all at once I had the intuition that it was my sister Laure and my daughter Madeleine... But why? Such a thing had never happened before. Or at least I had never had the smallest clue, or slightest suspicion..."

"These reflections tormented my spirit as my legs, extraordinarily strong and agile, carried my body. I ran. I followed the curve of the road that goes around the castle, and passed the bulge of the enormous old tower. Then I stopped short, nailed to the ground. I had to cry out, or at least make an effort. For what I saw... Oh! Saint-Clair, believe me! It was not a hallucination! Besides, Laure and Madeleine, when you question them, will tell you the same thing, exactly..."

He paused, panting, a pitiful supplication in his eyes. Saint-Clair clasped his hands and said with penetrating force:

"I believe you, my dear friend, do. What did you see?"

"Ah," exclaimed Jacques d'Hermont. "That is difficult to express, to define... The idea I have is that of an aurora borealis... I hope you understand. Yes, a kind of aurora borealis, but right there, before me, on the lawn, not in the sky... An aurora borealis in nimbus... Wrapped around two completely still human forms, standing side by side on a broad pedestal that had once supported a statue, but that had been empty since a lightning bolt had shattered it into a hundred pieces... Yes, on that pedestal, inside a great nimbus of light, stood two pale human forms... and it was from there that the moans came from... Oh! I can still hear them! They were moans of pain mixed with ecstasy, suffering mingling with voluptuousness! But I did not remain still and nailed to the ground for long, for I was aware that a force was attracting me

toward the luminous nimbus, toward the two moaning forms which—I was now certain—were those of Laure and Madeleine...

“I remember very well how I ran... But, when I was no more than two or three steps away from the stone pedestal, the nimbus was extinguished. It disappeared. It vanished. Despite the sudden, opaque night, I could still make out the two human forms. From them a double cry broke out and I saw them grasping one another, hugging, staggering, collapsing... I advanced. I opened my arms. I received them heavily on my chest and fell beneath them. But then, with as much skill as was in my power, I disengaged from them. I got down on my knees and, with my still-lit electric lamp, which I’d kept mechanically in my clenched hand, I illuminated the faces of Laure and Madeleine. They looked as if they were dead, their faces more emaciated than ever, their eyes closed. But their lips were frozen in a smile... a smile of unspeakable happiness!”

He went silent, and closed his eyes.

Looking at this man, whom he had known as one of the most balanced officers in the French army, Saint-Clair did not have the slightest doubt: Jacques d’Hermont was not mad. He had not dreamed the events of that night; what he had just told him was the living truth, which he had heard with his ears and seen with his eyes.

Given the exhaustion of one and the meditative observance of the other, the two men’s silence lasted for several minutes.

At last, Saint-Clair said:

“Did they remain passed out for a long time?”

“A little above an hour,” replied d’Hermont.

“But you took them to the castle right away?”

“Yes! One after the other, of course. Each one to her bed. They had gone out from their rooms, from the house, without putting on any clothes over their night dresses. They were frozen. I was strong, agile, lucid, although in a state of intense fever. I did not call either Amélie or Jeannette. I took care of my sister and daughter alone. Fortunately, the heater was working at its full. I quickly filled two hot water bottles and prepared a grog, using powerful English salts. Once revived, Laure and Madeleine passed instantly from their fainting state into normal sleep.

“In the morning, when they were awake, I called them to my room and told them what had happened, I questioned them and they remembered everything—yes, everything! It was summed up first by each one separately, then by the two of them together: they had woken up with the irresistible desire to go out, and had jumped out of bed. They had met each other in the hallway, and from there, taking each other by the hand, they had gone running onto the lawn toward the pedestal, above which they could see a beautiful halo of light twinkling and palpitating!

“Then they were seized with an exultation at once painful and pleasurable which had kept them there. This sort of conscious ecstasy had stopped abruptly once the inexplicable light had gone. They had felt themselves bathed in ecstasy, having the sensation of being penetrated and impregnated. The abrupt cessation of such a state had given them a kind of brutal trauma, which had thrown them into unconsciousness. There it is, my dear friend.”

D’Hermont gave a heavy sigh. Saint-Clair murmured, as if to himself:

“This is one of the strangest things I have even heard in my life—which has been so full of strange things.”

In another tone, he said:

“What happened afterward, Jacques?”

“That’s when I thought of you and wrote to you. Oddly, after this extraordinary nocturnal episode, my sister, my elder daughter and myself felt less exhausted, and were given a return of vitality and hope, which undoubtedly contributed to the letter I sent you. Saint-Clair, you are our only recourse! What we face is beyond the natural order of things, and I know that you see clearly not only through tangible darkness, but also through... How can I put it...?”

“The occult?” suggested Saint-Clair.

“Yes,” exclaimed Jacques d’Hermont, illuminated. “For it is from within the occult that the phenomena from which we suffer, from which my wife has died, from which we ourselves are in danger of dying, originates! Yes, in danger of dying, and soon! Because...”

He stopped, panting again.

“Because?” asked Saint-Clair, calmly.

“There is something else...”

“What is it?”

“I found out just this morning, after such an extraordinary night, that, for the first time in months, Laure, Madeleine and I have slept normally! It was just because of this beneficent, restful sleep that Laure and Madeleine were able to accompany Basile to the church of Saint-Christophe, to attend the yearly service of a friend...”

“Is there anything else?” asked Saint-Clair.

“Yes. This morning, Laure and Madeleine told me a secret. They betrayed an oath that my wife Lucile had demanded of them when she was bedridden. They thought this oath no longer held, and that I should know everything.”

“Well?”

“A few nights before the bed rest from which she would go to her tomb, Lucile had a night of painful and voluptuous ecstasy on the pedestal, trapped in the same luminous nimbus!. After that, she enjoyed a few days of the same vital renewal that Laure and Madeleine presently enjoy. And then, the relapse was brutal, complete, definitive... My dear Saint-Clair, if I hadn’t written to you yesterday, after that inexplicable night, I would surely have written to you this morning after that revelation. Do you understand what this means? If your intervention is ineffective, in a few days, my sister and my elder daughter will take to bed the same way that my wife did, and soon after... death!”

“Enough moping!” said the Nyctalope, almost violently. “Courage and calm, Captain d’Hermont! Do not fall again into despair. Listen to me, look at me! I do not know if I will be able to discover the cause of the abominable attack, but I am going to do everything in my power to find out the truth and to battle on behalf of you and your family—and win! Have you told me everything? Do I need to know anything else?”

“Thank you! Thank you!” answered d’Hermont, seized by enthusiasm.

“Do I know everything that Laure and Madeleine know told you

“Yes! I am sure of it.”

“I must insist! Did they hide anything from you?”

“No! They swore they told me everything, and know nothing else... Besides, you will speak to them and...”

“Today! Let’s go, Jacques, let’s move!”

Saint-Clair was already standing. His friend rose. They walked with a quick step, elbow to elbow, on their way down into the valley. Thinking, Saint-Clair contemplated the landscape, infinitely pleasant and sweet on that serene afternoon with so little winter in it. Suddenly, he said:

“Jacques, do you have any errand to run in the village or around there?”

Surprised, the chatelain hesitated, but then he said:

“No, not exactly. But I could go and talk to one of my farmers, who told me yesterday that some repairs were necessary in his stables. Why?”

“Because I would like to talk right away to Doctor Luvier, your physician and friend. And I would like to do so alone. Perhaps he will say some things to me alone that he would not tell you, even if they are only vague thoughts, hypotheses...”

“Yes, indeed...”

“Will I find him at home?” asked Saint-Clair.

“Today? Let’s see, what is day are we?”

“Tuesday.”

“Ah, yes! Precisely on Tuesday afternoons, Luvier stays home to give consultations.”

“Good. Point me toward his house. Can you walk a little faster?”

“Of course.”

“Let’s go there with our military march!”

At the bottom of the valley, the road took a curve, crossed the Nais over a little metal bridge and entered between the houses of the village. Turning several times, it climbed up to the church, then traveled left toward the square partly bordered by lindens. There stood the most beautiful and opulent houses of Saint-Christophe, with a large garage for cars at the entrance; there was also the habitation, nobly bourgeois, of the local physician.

“Here!” said Jacques d’Hermont, pointing to the house with a gesture. “As for me, I’ll take that road...”

He pointed to a road that wound upward, and continued:

“We should return together to Beech Grove. Where should we meet?”

“It’s a lovely day,” replied Saint-Clair, smiling. “The sun is still hitting the front of the hotel. This terrace is fine. It’s important that people see us together. I’m a friend who’s come to spend a few days with you. But let’s give me a false name: Dubois, Dupont or Durand, anything you like. I have the intuition that it’s better to leave everyone ignorant of the presence of the Nyctalope in your house. Without vanity, but with caution, I can say that I, too, am well known in the world not to attract attention and suspicions of which even I remain ignorant. In this respect, have you thought of giving an order at Beech Grove to say nothing about me to the outside world?”

“My goodness, no!”

“Ah! Please do so this evening. Let’s hope that my incognito has not already been betrayed.”

Jacques d’Hermont took the arm of his friend and said in an anxious, passionate tone:

“Do you have an idea? An intuition?”

“No. To tell the truth, none whatsoever!” said Saint-Clair, shaking his head a little. “But I sense that all precautions are necessary, and we must give no one outside Beech Grove the least suspicion that I’m here to investigate this mystery.”

“I understand. How about you being Charles Dumont, one of my brothers-in-arms from 1917?”

“Understood. I’ll be Charles Dumont, starting now.”

“Perfect!”

The two friends parted. From the threshold of the café-hotel, a man and a woman saw the Comte d’Hermont enter the Rue Haute, which five hundred meters farther turned into a dust road and filed along the plateau between the crops. They also saw the unknown gentleman go straight to the house of Doctor Luvier, push open the gate, climb the front steps, ring the doorbell and disappear behind the door, which had opened and then immediately closed.

In a very bourgeois drawing room, with a piano and a library, richly furnished and in good taste, Léo Saint- waited in the company of a young peasant woman nursing a child and a petty bourgeois in his Sunday best. To the rustic valet who had let him in, he had said:

“Please announce Monsieur Charles Dumont, passing through for a consultation.”

Well settled in an armchair, arms crossed and eyes vague, he waited, meditating on everything he had learned so far. It was so extraordinary that, despite his will, he suffered a little from the atmosphere of anxiety that seemed to surround Jacques d’Hermont.

The wait did not seem long. In fact, it lasted only a quarter of an hour. The peasant woman went in first, then the petty bourgeois. Finally, the voice of the doctor said:

“Monsieur Dumont?”

“Ah! Yes!” said Saint-Clair, half distracted. “Pardon me.”

He entered the consulting room and introduced himself under his real name, all the while observing the doctor. He was: a young man, stocky and of small size, his face at once powerful and fine-featured, his brown eyes clear and lively, his look decisive and with a sympathetic aspect.

“The Nyctalope! Of course, I’ve heard of you!” exclaimed Doctor Luvier with spontaneous joy. “My friend d’Hermont has often spoken about you! And your exploits all around the world! How you defeated that madman Lucifer! If you had taken the time to look at my bookshelves, you would have seen your two volumes on the exploration of Occult Tibet.”

Smiling, the Nyctalope nodded. Then the doctor said:

“But why are you here, in Saint-Christophe, in the guise of Charles Dumont?”

“I will explain,” said Saint-Clair. “But have your consultations ended?”

“Yes. Your predecessor was the last of my patients today.”

“Is it possible for you to close your doors for at least an hour? I must talk to you about some very serious things...”

“Oh!” said Doctor Luvier, who stopped smiling. “I think I can guess after all. The mystery of Beech Grove.”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Please take a seat. I will give the order that if someone asks for me, my valet will say I have gone out.”

He disappeared and was gone for two minutes. Then he returned and closed the door again, with care. After turning the lock, he said seriously but with the sort of spirit the Nyctalope appreciated:

“There we are. I am at your service for as many hours as you please.”

“I’m grateful.”

The conversation lasted for over an hour.

When, after enjoying an aperitif with Jacques d’Hermont and Doctor Luvier on the still sunny terrace of the café-hotel, Saint-Clair once again found himself alone in the company of his friend on the return path to Beech Grove, he said simply:

“Nothing, my dear Jacques. Doctor Luvier knows no more than you do, and he gave up after weeks without making even the slightest hypothesis about the mystery of the Beech Grove. He waited... He himself said to me: ‘I waited as if I were in an atmosphere of anxiety.’”

“I thought so,” said d’Hermont.

For several minutes, they continued to walk in silence. Suddenly, Saint-Clair stopped short, grabbed the arms of his friend and cried out:

“My goodness! We have forgotten to clarify something important. It totally slipped out of my mind.”

“What clarification?” asked d’Hermont, surprised.

“The reason why you asked me to bring my rifle! Hunting wild boars was only a pretext, I imagine.”

“Yes, of course. What you say is true: it slipped my mind, too. How odd...”

“Tell me quickly.”

“Well! Here it is... You know that often our senses of smell, hearing, sight and touch, register impressions and sensations in which our spirit does not participate. These later return at some point, as if from the depths of our being...”

“Yes,” said Saint-Clair.

Very animated, d’Hermont went on:

“Yesterday morning, after I received the confidences of Laure and Madeleine, and before I wrote to you, I went for a walk in the park to be alone and to reflect on my idea to ask you for help. Instinctively, I walked toward and around the pedestal, all my senses giving rise again in my thoughts to the episodes of that incomprehensible scene I had witnessed two nights earlier. Then, suddenly I remembered, yes, for the first time I remembered, or rather I became aware, that, as I was running toward the pedestal, just before the nimbus was extinguished, I had seen against beech trees, beyond the lawn, a shadow—a shadow cast by the luminous halo against the light gray trunks of the trees. My eyes had perceived an all-black human form for only a second! That human form had then leaped, running away no doubt, into the total darkness of Beech Grove!”

“Well! Well!” said Saint-Clair.

“As soon as that image resurfaced from the depths of my mind into the light of day, I ran to the place where I had seen that shadow. I inspected it well in the sun. At the foot of a tree, in the bare and humid soil, I found the footprints of shoes... And here, my dear friend, is the essential thing! In this same place, I found an object, which I immediately picked up and examined. Here it is!”

D'Hermont buried his right hand deep in the pocket of his jacket and withdrew it. Between his thumb and forefinger was a small shiny object of nickel and copper, which he presented to the Nyctalope. It was the ball-cartridge of a pistol.

With his usual composure, Saint-Clair pronounced:

“Browning 9mm HP 35.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Jacques d’Hermont. “I, too, recognized it at once. Note: a cartridge intact, not shot. Now look here, Saint-Clair. My German Parabellum is not of this caliber. No one at Beech Grove, or in the immediate dependencies, possesses a Browning 9mm. So I thought to myself: During the phenomenon of the luminous nimbus, a man stood there who observed the two women. He must have been protecting himself against a possible risk of attack, for he was carrying a gun. No doubt he was absorbed entirely by the task that had brought him there, because while loading the Browning, he had to do it twice instead of once, mechanically passing the cartridge of the magazine over the barrel, in a dry movement of the cylinder head. The first cartridge was ejected, and fell to the ground. This is why in my letter to you, I wrote: *Have your guns and ammunition ready!* That’s all!”

“That, my dear friend, is tremendous news!” exclaimed Saint-Clair. “These footprints and this cartridge are not supernatural elements, but very tangible evidence! They constitute the first knot of the thread of Ariadne that will lead us to the solution to our problem, the explanation of the enigma at the bottom of this mystery.”

Saying this, the Nyctalope took up his march again. D’Hermont followed his example. And without saying a word, the two friends returned to Beech Grove.