



L'ENFANT PERDU

Jean de La Hire: *The Nyctalope Steps In*

Chapter One *The Eye Witnesses*

A powerful car, bearing both front and the rear plates with the letters “CD,” indicating that at least one of its occupants belonged to the Diplomatic Corps, was traveling from Paris to Orleans.

Built for high speed, it moved sedately, almost as if it was being driven by a tourist.

But how could it have gone any faster in that month of June, 1940? After finally making its way through Etampes, past the rush of vehicles of all kinds that crowded the roads, carrying people, animals and furniture in a desperate exodus, it continued to encounter, at regular intervals, further groups of survivors that formed, separated and formed again once more.

The vehicle was a stark contrast to all the others that it struggled past on the road. There were no suitcases crammed inside; its roof carried no excess luggage, nor was it topped with mattresses, haphazardly tied by a network of ropes.

Only two passengers were inside, both smartly dressed. The man behind the wheel was a short, stocky Japanese, with a strong and flexible body, and a wise Buddha-like face. His companion was a Frenchman whose athletic vigor was hidden inside a deceptively slim, elegant silhouette. Only his eyes, two extraordinary eyes with amazing power, covered by dark glasses, could have attracted any attention, and betrayed his identity as being Leo Saint-Clair, better known as the Nyctalope, whose exciting adventures had been widely reported in the newspapers around the world.

His companion was none other than his trusted friend and confidante, Gno Mitang, the famous Japanese diplomat and personal advisor to the Mikado himself.

They were, obviously, not fleeing. They took part in the Exodus as observers, with a secret purpose known only known to themselves.

Passing one group of cars after another on the road, they inspected each vehicle, their faces reflecting more compassion than curiosity.

Yet, one of the cars held a special interest for them, judging from the fact that they scrutinized it for several minutes.

It was an open vehicle, driven by a young, athletic-looking woman, accompanied by a 12-year-old boy. On the back seat, the usual heap of suitcases betrayed the sad purpose of the journey, for which the elegant sports car was clearly not made.

It was the child's face which had attracted Leo Saint-Clair's and Gno Mitang's attention. It was difficult to imagine a friendlier and more graceful countenance, or one as vivacious. This golden-haired boy's mobile features radiated an already powerful intelligence, expressed through his extraordinary dark eyes, full of thoughts and dreams, occasionally sparkling with humor or the simple, pure joy of childhood. The rapid succession of expressions had baffled the two observers. One moment, it was childishly carefree, candid and cheerful, then it was suddenly superseded by the serious and reflective face of an adult.

“A strange face,” murmured Gno Mitang.

“A strange child,” corrected the Nyctalope. “One can’t help but wonder what will become of him? Will he grow up to be a musical genius? A sublime poet? A philosopher? A scientist? He bears the mysterious mark of a genius on his forehead. I imagine that Mozart as a child, or the future Lord Byron, looked just like him.”

“He might also be destined for a life of suffering,” whispered the Japanese mysteriously.

“That, too,” replied Saint-Clair thoughtfully.

They remained silent, having noticed that the young woman was now looking at them. There was concern in her gaze, perhaps even fear... They took pity on her and, reading his friend’s thoughts, Gno Mitang stepped on the gas pedal and passed her vehicle.

The Nyctalope turned. He saw the young woman’s face again becoming reassured, but at the same time, he saw an expression of great weariness, that moved him powerfully.

“That young woman is falling asleep behind the wheel,” he said. “I wonder how many hours she has been driving without stopping... Her eyes are closing despite her will to stay awake. She should stop.”

The boy, however, remained awake. He had pulled a small notebook from his pocket and was writing something in it with concentration. His expression was serious, almost alight with inspiration.

The gap separating the two cars was increasing by the second. Saint-Clair stopped being able to study their faces, and soon lost sight of the other vehicle. Other cars appeared, which the Japanese passed one after the other. The Nyctalope looked at their passengers distractedly, but none held his attention the way the young woman and the boy had. For too many hours, he had seen too many identical faces, pale, frightened, drawn with fatigue and anxiety. The image of the strange child, however, remained fixed in his mind...

They passed a caravan of gypsies, sordid, rickety, crowded with ragged brats, escorted by men with dark faces and colorful clothes. In the look that the Bohemians gave them, the Nyctalope and his friend were surprised to discover a sinister, disturbing flame. It was the look of a predator watching its prey; looters following a rout and waiting for their chance to strip bare those who fell behind.

But the road was still not deserted. Cars preceded or followed the caravan, which was continuing its slow progress, drawn by an emaciated horse. All the drivers of the other cars exhibited the same concern, the same desire to pass the caravan and move away as quickly as possible.

One car, however, appeared to be an exception, obstinately deciding to remain behind the pathetic equipage. It was a two-seater sports car with a single occupant; its trunk was full of suitcases and travel bags.

Many women and children were traveling on foot and falling behind; they had probably begged its driver to take them in. He could easily have carried two or three people. But his hard face and his evil look had discouraged the would-be supplicants. Hunched over the steering wheel, his shoulders hunched up, his head down, the driver tried to conceal his face; it was the repulsive, ugly snout of a human hyena.

“That man certainly doesn’t appear to be in a hurry,” remarked Gno Mitang. “What pleasure can he get from breathing the dirt of that caravan?”

“He’s just a looter of another kind,” said Saint-Clair, whose keen eyes had had time to scan the character’s face.

After they passed that final group of travelers, the Japanese’s car sped up on the road. Towards the end of the day, they arrived at Orleans, taking the long avenue of Faubourg Bannier to go straight into the heart of the city, where Leo Saint-Clair had been asked to come on an important and mysterious mission.

The following day, returning to Paris along the same road, after passing the town of Cercottes, the Nyctalope and Gno Mitang were forced to slow down to avoid hitting a grotesque caravan which was preparing to leave the main highway to take one of the dirt roads that cut through the western portion of the Orleans forest.

Saint-Clair recognized it as the same one they had seen the day before.

“This is the wagon we saw yesterday,” he pointed out.

“When it comes to speed, a tortoise would be faster,” said the Japanese.

Just then, as if to contradict him, the gypsy who rode in front of the caravan whipped the horse. The vehicle sped up and soon disappeared into the trees.

“The route they follow is strange,” said Gno. “If they intend to cross the Loire river, they’re not on the right path.”

“My guess is that they’re trying to avoid the roadblocks around Orleans and the gendarmes,” said Leo Saint-Clair. “Their papers are probably no more in order with the Law than their consciences. They’re going to let the storm pass while hiding in these woods. They’ll add poaching to their list of offenses.”

The Nyctalope’s car continued on its way, soon leaving Chevilly beyond. Shortly before La Croix Briquet, Gno Mitang had to slow down again to let another cortege of refugees pass by. Suddenly, cries for help aroused their attention. On the other side of the road, a young woman stood next to a parked car, and was asking the many haggard people who filed past her for help, but they all ignoring her cries.

Listening to her, the two men heard bits of sentences, chopped words broken by sobs and cries. But the line of sad, dazed faces that walked by the woman had been rendered indifferent to all but their own misfortunes by excessive fatigue and despair. They moved past, flowing like a heavy, dark tide, carried by its own weight that no wind, no ripple, can disturb.

“My child... A little boy...” said the woman. “Have you seen my child?”

The Nyctalope and Gno Mitang exchanged the same look of concern and compassion. They had recognized the woman and the car.

“It’s the girl we saw yesterday!” murmured the Nyctalope. “The mother or the guardian of the little boy with the face of a genius!”

“But the boy is no longer with her,” said Gno Mitang.

“Stop!” ordered Saint-Clair. “We need to question her and learn what has happened to cause such distress.”

The flood of indifferent, dull people finished passing. One last car drove by, leaving the road empty. Opening the door, the Nyctalope jumped onto the road and walked across to talk to the woman. After parking their car, the Japanese followed him.

The woman, her arms tragically outstretched, called and gestured to them.

“Messieurs... Messieurs...” she cried in a shrill voice. “Have you seen a child, a handsome blond boy, bare-headed, with big dark eyes? He is wearing a little beige sport jacket, short brown pants and shoes of the same shade, but a little darker?...”

“Yes, Madame,” said Saint-Clair seriously. “We saw him yesterday, on the road, in that car parked behind you.”

“But what about today, Monsieur? He vanished last night, or at dawn, while I was asleep. I stopped the car last night. I was exhausted. I fell asleep at the wheel. Fearing an accident, I preferred to spend the night by the roadside. And, in the morning, Yves had disappeared...”

Her voice broke. The sentence ended in a whimper of pain.

“Is the child your son, Madame?” asked the Nyctalope.

“No, Monsieur, I’m only his guardian, but I love him as if I were his own mother—better than his mother. He is my life. He was entrusted to me on his deathbed by his grandfather, who was my benefactor. I swear...”

More sobbing interrupted her sentence.

“Calm yourself, Madame,” advised the Nyctalope gently. “We understand your concern, but you must try to control yourself and tell us exactly what you think happened. Under what conditions did the child disappear? Could he have gone for a stroll while you slept? Gotten lost? Might he have been caught in one of these waves of evacuees who were drifting by? My friend and I are only too happy to help you, if we can. Let me introduce myself: my name is Leo Saint-Clair and this gentleman is his Excellency Gno Mitang, Japanese diplomat.”

“Leo Saint-Clair! The Nyctalope!” she cried, while her eyes suddenly shone with a ray of hope. “Oh! Monsieur, you’ve been sent to me by Divine Providence! I’ve heard of you, of your superhuman powers, of your many exploits...”

“I am only a man, Madame,” said Saint-Clair modestly, “but whatever I can do to help, I will be honored to do. First, we need to know more. You said that you don’t know exactly when the boy left the car, nor the reason why?”

“That’s right. It was because I was weak, foolish enough to give in to the exhaustion that nearly overwhelmed me. Now, I’m reduced to making the most elaborate guesses... I suppose there could be a simple explanation... Yves—Yves Marécourt is his name and I’m Lise Andrézieux—Yves could have grown tired of sitting for so long, and might have wanted to merely stretch his legs. The surrounding woods, the silvery moonlight could have lured him and caught his fancy... He is such an extraordinary child, so smart, so advanced, too much so perhaps... While trying to satisfy his curiosity and his desire to learn, he might have gotten lost... He’s not just a dreamer, but already a researcher, an experimentalist... He has a prodigious imagination when it comes to science. I’ve always believed that he’ll grow up to become a great scientist, a discoverer of the unknown, perhaps a new Louis Pasteur... If you only knew what he means to me and what dreams I have for his future—wonderful dreams... But such gifts are not without danger. Once inside these woods—if that’s where he went—what discoveries might he have made? Where did his adventurous spirit take him? I fear the worst: an accident. But there are other possibilities. Retracing his steps, crossing the road, he might have been hit by a car... Injured, unconscious perhaps, he might have been picked up by the one who struck him and been taken to the next village to seek medical attention... What should I do? I dare not leave this place in case he returns. I still hope to see him come back, running towards me, apologizing for the distress he unwittingly caused me, as he knows how to do so well...”

“These are only theories,” interrupted Saint-Clair. “The first, an exploratory walk in the woods during which the child became lost, seems rather unlikely. I’m sure you’ve already gone and called for him...?”

“Of course!”

“Yves can’t have gone so far that he wouldn’t have heard you. As for the possibility of an accident, where the driver took the child away, if it’s not entirely out of the question, it still strikes me as at least doubtful. The driver would have noticed your car parked beside the road. Logically, he would have come and woken you up to ask about the boy... It’s true that we’re living in traumatic and unusual times. Panic seems to have taken hold of the crowd and that could upset the balance and distort the judgment of even the soundest minds... On the other hand, I admit that, right now, I can’t think of any other plausible explanation...”

The green eyes of Lise Andrézieux nevertheless detected a secret anguish hidden in the Nyctalope’s face.

“Yves means so much to me!” she murmured. “I fear the worst.”

She hesitated, seemingly afraid of blurting out ill-omened words, but finally felt reassured by the sagacious and penetrating glances of Leo Saint-Clair and Gno Mitang, full of compassion. She could read sincere concern on their faces. Now, what was needed was confidence.

“Yves isn’t just a child prodigy,” she said. “He is also worth ten million francs, bequeathed to him by his grandfather. As the child’s guardian, I have the use of this fortune, and employ it to develop his gifts and foster his future. Of course, some could believe that I derive more personal benefit from it...”

Serious and thoughtful, the Nyctalope listened to the woman without responding, trying not to let her read his secret thoughts. That attitude eventually discouraged her, and her voice began to tremble. Desperate to be understood and share her secret fears, she let her last words expire on her lips.

“That fortune, you see... It’s possible... I don’t know what to think...”

The Japanese diplomat had gone to inspect the woman’s car and its surroundings. Saint-Clair, from whom nothing escaped, had seen him bend down and pick up an object from the ground.

Gno Mitang returned and made an imperceptible sign to his friend, who immediately understood its meaning.

“Well, Madam, here is what we’re going to do,” he announced suddenly. “Assuming, as you yourself have suggested, that the child, injured or not, was taken by a motorist, we will follow that trail and try to catch the hypothetical car. Whatever the outcome of our investigation, we will return to inform you of its results.”

He bowed and cut short Madame Andrézieux’s expressions of gratitude. Ten seconds later, he and Gno Mitang were back in their car, again driving towards Orleans.

“Well?” Leo asked his friend. “What did you find?”

“Some kind of heavy vehicle—but not a car—was parked near that of Madame Andrézieux last night,” explained the Japanese. “I found its tracks on the road. It then drove towards Orleans. And I also found this on the ground near the door of her car...”

He presented a notebook, the first page of which contained a name and address: *Yves Marécourt, Manoir de Folembrey*. Its pages were filled with equations and chemical formulas. One unfinished last sentence, written in a hesitant hand, said: *Why is there the smell of chlo...*

The Nyctalope closed the notebook and pocketed it.

“Let’s look for those gypsies whom we saw going into the Orleans forest,” he suggested.

But several hours of fruitless searching proved the futility of their efforts.

“Let’s go back,” ordered Saint-Clair. “I have one more question for Madame Andrézieux.

But as they returned to the main highway, they saw two cars drive by at a breakneck speed, one of which seemed to be pursuing the other. Madame Andrézieux was driving the second car.

“Let’s follow them!” cried the Nyctalope.

The pursuit took them to Orleans, which they crossed from one end to the other. As they arrived near the river front, they saw Madame Andrézieux’s car take a bridge that crossed the Loire. Seconds later, the bridge exploded.

Horrified, the two friends saw the car and its driver sink into the river, amongst a rain of stones and debris from the explosion. The other car had disappeared.

“Now I’ll never get the answer to the question I wanted to ask her,” whispered Leo Saint-Clair, very pale.