

Chapter 1 Is It the Ghost?

It was the evening on which Monsieur* Debieenne and Monsieur Poligny, the managers of the Opera, were giving a last performance to mark their retirement. Suddenly, a half dozen young ladies of the ballet were in the dressing room of La Sorelli, one of the main dancers. Some were laughing unnaturally and some were screaming in terror. Sorelli, who wished to be alone for a moment to practice her speech to the departing managers, looked around angrily at the noisy crowd. It was Jammes who gave the explanation in a shaky voice: "It's the ghost!" And she locked the door.

Sorelli was superstitious. When she heard this, she called the fifteen-year-old Jammes a "silly little fool" but then asked for details. "Have you seen him?"

"As clearly as I see you now!" said Jammes.

Then little Giry added, "He's very ugly!"

"Oh, yes!" cried the other girls.

They all began to talk together. The ghost had appeared to them in the shape of a gentleman in fine clothes. He suddenly stood in front of them in the passage and seemed to have come straight through the wall.

"Oh, you see the ghost everywhere!" said one of them, who had remained more sensible.

And it was true. For several months, all the discussion at the Opera had been of this ghost in fine clothes who walked quietly and slowly around the building. He spoke to nobody and nobody dared speak to him. He disappeared as soon as he was seen. At first, everybody laughed about him, but the story of the ghost

* Monsieur: the French word for Mr.

soon swelled enormously among the *corps de ballet*.^{*} All the girls pretended that they met this phantom often. And those who laughed the loudest were the least comfortable.

And who had seen him? You meet so many men in fine clothes at the Opera who are not ghosts. But his suit covered a skeleton. At least, the ballet girls said so. And, it had the face of Death.

Was all this serious? In fact, the idea of the skeleton came from the description of the ghost given by Joseph Buquet, who was in charge of moving scenery. He had really seen the ghost—on the stairs that led to the cellars—for a second before the ghost ran away.

Buquet told his listeners, “He is extraordinarily thin and his coat hangs on his skeleton. His eyes are very deep—just two big, black holes. His nasty yellow skin is tightly stretched across his bones, and he has no nose, which is a horrible thing to look at.”

Joseph Buquet was a serious man, not one who imagines things. His words were received with interest and amazement; and soon other people claimed to have seen the ghost. And then, a series of curious events that nobody could explain made everybody feel uncomfortable.

But we must return to the evening when Jammes cried, “It’s a ghost!” After the first excitement, everything was quiet in the dressing room. Then, with real terror on her face, Jammes cried, “Listen!”

They could hear somebody outside the door. Sorelli went up to it and in a shaky voice asked, “Who’s there?” But nobody answered. Feeling all eyes on her, she asked loudly, “Is anyone behind the door?”

“Oh, yes. Of course there is!” cried little Meg Giry. She held Sorelli back by her skirt. “Whatever you do, don’t open the door!”

^{*} *corps de ballet*: the dancers in a ballet company.

But Sorelli turned the key and opened the door. She bravely looked into the passage. It was empty. The dancer closed the door again.

“No,” she said, “there is no one there. Now, girls, stop all this. No one has ever seen the ghost.”

“Yes, yes, we saw him—we saw him just now!” cried the girls. “He had his face of Death and his fine clothes, just as when he appeared to Joseph Buquet!”

“And Gabriel, the singing master, saw him, too!” said Jammes. “Gabriel was in the stage manager’s office and the Persian came in. Gabriel saw the ghost behind the Persian! He saw the ghost with the face of Death, just like Joseph Buquet’s description!”

Little Giry said, “Joseph Buquet should keep quiet.”

“Why?” somebody asked.

“That’s mother’s opinion,” replied Meg. She lowered her voice and looked around.

“And why is it your mother’s opinion?” asked another girl.

“Mother says the ghost doesn’t like being talked about.”

“And why does your mother say so?”

All the girls came closer. “Because . . . because . . . I swore not to tell!”

They promised to keep her secret and Meg was desperate to tell all she knew. With her eyes on the door, she began, “Well, it’s because of the private box.”

“What private box?”

“The ghost’s box!”

“Does the ghost have a box in the Opera?”

“Not so loud!” said Meg. “It’s Box Five.”

“Oh, nonsense!”

“I tell you it is. Mother’s in charge of it. No one has had it for over a month, except the ghost, and orders have been given at the box office that it must never be sold.”

“And does the ghost really come there?”

“Yes. The ghost comes, but nobody can see him.”

“Somebody must see him!”

“All that talk about his fine clothes and his face is nonsense. Mother has never seen him, but she has heard him.”

Sorelli grew impatient and little Giry began to cry.

“If mother learns that I have told you . . . But I was right—Joseph Buquet was wrong to talk about things that don’t concern him. It will bring bad luck—mother was saying that last night . . .”

There was a sound of hurried footsteps in the passage and a breathless voice cried, “Jammes! Jammes! Are you there?”

“It’s mother’s voice,” said Jammes. “What’s the matter?”

She opened the door. A respectable lady, large and strong, burst into the dressing room and dropped into an empty chair.

“What is it?” the girls cried.

“Joseph Buquet is dead!”

Everybody held their breath, then their shouts and questions filled the air.

“He was found hanging in the third cellar.”

“It’s the ghost!” cried little Giry, but at once she corrected herself and her little hands covered her mouth. “No, no! I didn’t say it!”

Her friends all said quietly, “Yes, it must be the ghost!”

Sorelli was very pale. “I will never be able to give my speech,” she said.

In fact, no one ever knew how Joseph Buquet met his death. In his book, *A Manager’s Memories*, Monsieur Moncharmin, one of the two managers who ran the Opera after Monsieur Debienne and Monsieur Poligny left, described what happened as follows:

A serious accident spoiled the little party which Monsieur Debienne and Monsieur Poligny gave to celebrate their retirement.

I was in the manager’s office when Mercier, the scenery manager,

suddenly came in. He seemed half mad and told me that the body of a man had been found hanging under the stage. By the time I rushed down the stairs, the man was no longer hanging from his rope!

So, a man hangs at the end of a rope; they go to cut him down; the rope has disappeared. Monsieur Moncharmin found a simple explanation:

It was just after the ballet, and the dancing girls knew they had to hurry and destroy the rope if they wanted to avoid any bad luck because they were very superstitious.

Imagine the *corps de ballet* hurrying down the stairs and dividing the rope among themselves! I think that somebody wanted that rope to disappear as soon as it had done its work.

Sorelli was on her way to give her speech, with all the girls following closely behind, when she ran into Count Chagny, who was coming upstairs.

"I was just going to you," he said, taking off his hat. "Sorelli, what an evening! And Christine Daaé: What a triumph!"

"Six months ago, she used to sing like a chicken," said Meg Giry. "But let us pass, my dear count. We are going to inquire about a poor man who was found hanging by the neck."

Just then Mercier came hurrying past and stopped when he heard this remark. "What?" he asked. "Have you girls heard already? Please, don't let Monsieur Debienne and Monsieur Poligny hear about it. It would upset them too much on their last day."

Count Chagny was right; no performance had ever equaled this one. Christine Daaé had shown her true talent for the first time to the surprised and enthusiastic audience. There were many famous pieces beautifully sung by the famous singers of the day, but Christine Daaé had been, without exaggeration, the best. Her voice produced divine sounds in the prison scene of

*Faust** when she sang in place of La Carlotta, who was sick. No one had ever heard or seen anything like it.

People wanted to know why Daaé, a real jewel, had been kept from them. Why was Daaé only allowed to perform this piece when La Carlotta was sick? Were Debienne and Poligny *trying* to keep this great talent hidden? Why? And why had *she* kept it hidden? The whole thing was a mystery.

Philippe Georges Marie, Count of Chagny, was forty-one, good-looking, and wealthy. Standing up in his box, he had listened to the enthusiastic audience and joined in by clapping loudly. Next to him was his brother, Raoul, who was twenty years younger. Their parents had died when Raoul was very young, so Philippe brought up the young viscount, who later joined the navy. Raoul had just come back from a trip around the world and was now home for six months before his next journey to the North Pole.

Philippe wanted Raoul to see Paris, so he took him everywhere and introduced him to the Opera. On that evening, Philippe was clapping loudly when he looked at his brother, who seemed quite pale. Christine Daaé had just been carried off after fainting at the end of her performance.

“You are not going to faint, too, are you?” Philippe asked.

But Raoul recovered and stood up. “Let’s go and see her,” he said. “She never sang like that before.”

Raoul led the way, feeling that his heart no longer belonged to him, his face a picture of burning desire. Count Philippe followed him through the crowd of gentlemen, scene movers, and ballet girls. When they arrived at Christine Daaé’s dressing room, the doctor was there with her—and with a great admiring crowd.

“Don’t you think, Doctor, that those gentlemen had better clear the room?” asked Raoul coolly. “She can’t breathe here.”

“You’re quite right,” said the doctor.

* *Faust*: an opera by Gounod.

And, thinking that the young man had a right to stay, he sent everyone away, except Raoul and a servant-woman. She did not know Raoul—in fact, she had never seen him before—but she did not dare to question him.

Christine Daaé turned, looked at the doctor, and smiled. Then, she saw Raoul and asked, “Monsieur, who are you?”

“Mademoiselle,”* replied the young man, kneeling on one knee and pressing a kiss on her hand, “I am the little boy who went into the sea to rescue your scarf.”

Christine again looked at the doctor and the servant-woman, and all three began to laugh.

Raoul turned very red and stood up. “Mademoiselle,” he said, “since you choose not to recognize me, I would like to say something to you in private, something very important.”

“When I am better, do you mind?”

“Yes, you must go,” said the doctor, with his pleasant smile. “Let me take care of mademoiselle.”

Suddenly, Christine stood up with strange and unexpected energy and asked all the men to leave. Outside her door, the doctor said to Raoul, “She is not herself tonight. She is usually so gentle.”

Raoul stood alone after the doctor left. This part of the theater was now empty. He felt a terrible pain in his heart, and this was what he wanted to speak to her about. The servant-woman came out and Raoul asked about Christine. The woman said that she was quite well, but that he must not bother her because she wished to be left alone. Only one idea filled Raoul’s burning brain: of course, she wanted to be left alone *for him!* He had told her that he wanted to speak to her privately.

He went to her door and prepared to knock. But his hand dropped. He heard *a man’s voice* in the dressing room, saying,

* Mademoiselle: the French word for Miss.

“Christine, you must love me!” And Christine’s sad voice replying, “How can you talk like that? *When I sing only for you!*”

Raoul’s heart beat so loudly that he was sure they would hear it inside. They would open the door and he would be sent away! What a position for a Chagny! To be caught listening behind a door! He put his hands on his heart to make it stop.

The man’s voice spoke again. “Are you very tired?”

“Tonight I gave you my soul, and I am dead!” Christine replied.

“Your soul is a beautiful thing, child,” replied the man, “and I thank you. No king ever received such a wonderful gift. *The angels in Heaven cried tonight.*”

Raoul heard nothing after that, but he did not go away. He decided to wait until the man left. To his great surprise, the door opened and Christine Daaé appeared, alone. She closed the door behind her, but she did not lock it. Raoul did not even watch her go. His eyes were on the door, but it did not open again.

Raoul let himself in and closed the door. The dressing room was dark. “There is someone here!” said Raoul. “What are you hiding for? You will not leave this room until I let you! If you don’t answer, you are a coward. And I will tell everyone!”

Raoul lit a match, and the flame lit up the room. There was no one! “Am I going mad?” he asked, aloud.

He went out, not knowing what he was doing or where he was going. He found himself at the bottom of some stairs and some workmen were coming down behind him, carrying a long board, covered with a white sheet.

“Which is the way out?” he asked one of the men.

“Straight in front of you. But let us pass.”

Pointing to the white sheet, he asked, “What’s that?”

A workman answered, “That is Joseph Buquet, who was found in the third cellar, hanging.”

Raoul took off his hat and let the workmen pass.