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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was translated from French into English and simplified using ChatGPT for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera [Le Fantôme de l'Opéra]* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified from French by ChatGPT)

Part 1

The Opera Ghost was real. Many people had laughed at the idea, and many others had whispered about it in fear, but I say again that he truly lived. He was not only a dream of artists, not only a foolish story told by dancers and old servants in dark halls. He had flesh and blood, though he knew very well how to move like a shadow. For a long time, people called him only a ghost because that was easier than facing the truth.

I began to study the old records of the Paris Opera, and very soon I saw a strange pattern. Every rumor about the ghost seemed to stand near some terrible event, as if a black thread joined them all together. I heard again of Christine Daaé, of her sudden disappearance, of the Vicomte de Chagny, and of the death of his elder brother near the underground lake below the Opera. Old people still remembered these things clearly, and when they spoke, their voices changed. "It was a dark time," one of them told me. "We did not understand what we were seeing."

At first, I doubted everything. More than once, I wanted to stop my work and leave the mystery behind me. Then chance helped me. One evening, as I was leaving the library, the administrator of the Opera said to me, "Come, I want you to meet someone," and he introduced me to a small, lively old man. That man was M. Faure, the judge who had once investigated the Chagny case. He told me what he had believed then, and though he laughed when I spoke of the ghost, he admitted that strange things had happened in the Opera.

But the greatest help came later, when I found the man everyone had once called the Persian. I visited him in his apartment in the Rue de Rivoli, and he spoke to me with the simple honesty of a child. He gave me papers, memories, and letters tied to Christine Daaé, and little by little the truth grew clear before me. "No," I said to myself when I left him, "this is not a myth." At last I even found

proof connected with a dead body discovered under the Opera, and from that day I was certain that the ghost had truly existed. So now, with all these witnesses behind me, I begin the story.

On the evening when our story opens, the old directors of the Opera, Debienne and Poligny, were giving their last grand gala before leaving their posts. At that same moment, Sorelli, one of the leading dancers, had gone back to her dressing room so that she could quietly prepare the little speech she would soon make in their honor. She wanted silence, a mirror, and a few peaceful minutes. Instead, her room burst open and half a dozen young ballet girls rushed inside together. Some were laughing too loudly, as frightened people often do, and some were almost crying.

Sorelli turned sharply and frowned at them. “What is this noise?” she asked. “Why do you all come running in here like this?” Little Jammes, pale and shaking, locked the door with quick fingers and leaned against it. “It is the ghost,” she whispered. At once the room changed. Sorelli herself believed in signs, spirits, and secret powers, so even she felt a cold touch run through her body.

“You saw him?” Sorelli asked. Jammes nodded hard and said, “Yes, as clearly as I see you now.” Another girl, little Meg Giry, spoke in her dry little voice and added, “He is ugly. Very ugly.” Then all the girls began speaking at once. They said that in the corridor a man in black had suddenly stood before them, so suddenly that he seemed to have stepped out of the wall itself.

It had been like that in the Opera for months. People laughed, but they still watched over their shoulders when they walked alone. A black figure was seen on stairways, in corridors, in corners where the light was poor, and no one knew where he came from or how he left. He made almost no sound when he walked, and he never stayed long enough for anyone to feel brave. If something went wrong, a lost powder puff, a trick among the dancers, an accident in the theater, somebody would say, “The ghost did it.”

Yet there was one man whose story had given real shape to the fear. That man was Joseph Buquet, the chief scene-hand, a serious fellow who was not known as a liar or a drunk. He said that he had seen the figure in a little stairway

leading down below the stage. He had only seen him for a moment, but that moment had been enough. “He was terribly thin,” Joseph had said. “His black coat hung on him like cloth on a skeleton. His eyes were deep holes, and there was hardly any nose at all.” When Joseph finished that description, the whole Opera began to imagine a living skull dressed in evening clothes.

Then came another story, and it made the fear worse. A fire officer named Papin had gone below the stage on his rounds and had come back pale, trembling, and half fainting with shock. “What did you see?” people asked him. He answered, “A head of fire. Only a head. No body.” A fire officer is not supposed to fear fire, and that made his words more powerful. Soon the dancers decided that the Opera was full of evil signs, and to protect themselves they even placed a horseshoe near the entrance so that anyone who entered by the administration side could touch it for luck.

So when Jammes cried again in Sorelli’s room, “It is the ghost,” no one laughed for long. The girls pressed close together, and suddenly they all heard a soft sound at the door, like silk brushing against wood. No footsteps followed. Sorelli took a small knife she always carried, forced herself to walk to the door, and called, “Who is there?” No one answered. “Is someone there?” she asked again, louder this time, while Meg pulled at her dress and begged, “Do not open it, please, do not.”

But Sorelli opened the door. The corridor outside was empty, and only a small flame behind glass shone red in the dark. “There is no one,” she said as she shut the door again, though she herself looked less certain now. Jammes came nearer and whispered, “He is somewhere close. Let us go down together and come back together.” Then, after a little silence, the girls began to speak again, and this time Meg Giry let out a secret she had tried hard to keep.

“The ghost has a box,” she said. “Box Five. My mother knows.” The others stared at her. Meg went on in a hushed voice, “No one is to rent it. The ghost comes there. You do not see him, but he is there, and my mother gives him his program.” Sorelli told her not to be foolish, but Meg’s fear was real. She added, “Joseph Buquet should stop talking about him. Mother says the ghost does not

like to be troubled."

At that very moment heavy steps sounded in the corridor, and Jammes's mother hurried in, breathing hard and looking wild with fear. "What has happened?" the girls cried. The woman pressed a hand against her chest and answered, "Joseph Buquet is dead." The room broke into frightened voices. "Dead?" "How?" "Where?" Then she said, "They found him hanging in the third cellar under the stage, and the men who found him say they heard a strange sound near the body, like the singing of the dead."

"It was the ghost," little Meg cried before she could stop herself, and at once she covered her mouth with both hands. No one tried to comfort her, because all the girls were thinking the same thing. Sorelli had turned white, and even she could say only, "I shall never be able to give my speech now." Later, people would call Joseph Buquet's death a simple suicide, but the matter was never truly explained. By then the terrible news had already spread through the whole Opera, and the frightened little dancers left Sorelli's room together, hurrying through the dark corridors like a flock of sheep following one another into the night.

Part 2

As the frightened little dancers hurried downstairs, they met the Count de Chagny on the landing. He was usually calm, but that night he looked excited. "I was coming to see you," he said to Sorelli with a graceful bow. "What a splendid evening! And Christine Daaé! What a triumph!" Little Meg Giry made a face and answered at once, "That cannot be true. Six months ago she sang like a nail." Then, with a quick little curtsey, she added, "Please let us pass, my dear count. We are going to hear about a poor man who has just been found hanging."

At that moment the administrator came by in a great hurry, heard those words, and stopped short. "You know already?" he asked sharply. "Then say nothing about it. Above all, do not let Debienne and Poligny hear of it on their last evening here." With that warning, everyone moved on toward the foyer of the ballet, which was already crowded. Yet the count's first words were true, for that gala was one

of the most famous in the history of the Opera, and people spoke of it for years afterward.

Great musicians had come, one after another, to conduct their own works. The audience heard famous singers, rich orchestral pieces, and all the bright display that Paris loved. But the deepest memory of that night did not belong to any one of those celebrated names. It belonged to Christine Daaé, who suddenly rose above them all and left the whole theater astonished. People who had come expecting a pleasant evening found themselves face to face with something they could not explain.

Christine first sang passages from *Romeo and Juliet*, and even that would have been enough to make people speak of her. Her voice was pure, soft, and full of feeling, and when she sang, it seemed to lift the listeners out of the theater. Then came the greater wonder. Carlotta was absent, and Christine stepped in to sing the prison scene and the final trio from *Faust*. What happened then was not only success. It was revelation.

The audience cried out, clapped, and called for her as if they had suddenly discovered a star that had been shining over their heads without their seeing it. Christine, overcome by emotion, was carried to her dressing room nearly fainting, and people said she had sung not only with her skill, but with her whole heart. A critic later wrote that such a change could come only from love. “Where has this greatness come from?” he asked. “If it does not come from heaven on the wings of love, then perhaps it rises from hell.” That was the sort of language her singing called forth.

Yet many subscribers were angry as well as amazed. “How could they hide such a voice from us?” they asked. “Did the directors know what she could do? Did Christine know it herself? And if so, why was she silent?” Until then she had seemed only a suitable secondary singer beside the splendid Carlotta. Now, in a single evening, she had become the new Marguerite. The mystery around her grew greater because no one could clearly say who was training her, and Christine herself had often claimed that she was working alone.

In his box, the Count de Chagny had applauded with real warmth, but when

he turned toward his younger brother, he was startled. Raoul de Chagny was very pale. The count was a handsome man of forty-one, serious and polished, the head of an old and noble family, rich, respected, and used to command. Raoul, born many years after him, was young, fair, shy, and almost delicate in appearance, though he had already chosen a life in the navy. Philippe loved him deeply and had guided him almost like a son.

Raoul had grown up among women, under the care of his sisters and an old aunt, and he had kept something innocent in his face and manners. He was just past twenty-one, but looked younger. Philippe was proud of him and happy to show him Paris during his leave. He took him everywhere, even into the world behind the Opera, where a young man could see dancers, hear music, and learn the pleasures of the capital. The count had noticed, however, that Raoul often brought the conversation back to the Opera, and that he listened with unusual attention whenever Christine Daaé's name appeared.

After Christine's great scene, Philippe looked at his brother and saw his agitation plainly. "Do you not see," Raoul said, his voice shaking, "that she is fainting?" On the stage, they were indeed supporting Christine. "You are the one who looks ready to faint," the count replied, leaning closer. "What is this, Raoul?" But Raoul had already risen and answered only, "Come. Let us go to her."

Philippe followed with a smile that was half amusement and half understanding. At the entrance to the backstage passage, Raoul tore his gloves without noticing it. The count said nothing, but now he knew. He understood why the young man had seemed distracted for days, and why the Opera had become so important to him. "Ah," he thought, "so that is the secret." Then the two brothers passed onto the stage, where the noise and disorder of the interval were at their height.

There were workmen shouting, stage pieces moving, costumes brushing past, and excited groups hurrying in every direction. For a newcomer, it would have been confusing and almost frightening, but Raoul no longer cared what happened around him. He pushed forward wherever there was room, thinking only of Christine. He had known her as a child, and when he had seen her again, he had

tried to master the sweet feeling she had awakened in him. Now that feeling had become something stronger and harsher, like pain. “This is love,” he would have said, if he had been able to speak calmly, but at that moment it felt more like a wound.

At the back of the stage he was delayed by a group of little ballet girls, who laughed and threw playful words at him, but he barely heard them. Soon he entered the corridor leading toward Christine’s room, and behind him the count thought with surprise, “The rascal knows the way.” Philippe himself had never taken him there. All the same, Raoul went on as if drawn by a force stronger than thought, and the name “Daaé” sounded all around him from groups of excited admirers.

The doctor of the theater arrived at that same time, and Raoul went in with him. Christine lay weak and pale, just returning from that great storm of song and feeling. The room was crowded, and Raoul, with sudden boldness, said, “Doctor, should not these gentlemen leave? There is no air here.” “You are quite right,” the doctor replied. He drove everyone out except Raoul and the maid, and so it happened that the young viscount remained near Christine while even the directors had to stay in the corridor outside.

At the door the Count de Chagny laughed to himself. “Ah, the little rogue,” he thought. “So this is how timid young men behave.” Inside, Christine gave a deep sigh, opened her eyes, and saw first the doctor, then her maid, and then Raoul. “Sir,” she asked softly, “who are you?” Raoul fell to one knee, kissed her hand, and answered with emotion, “Mademoiselle, I am the little boy who went to fetch your scarf from the sea.” Christine looked from one face to another, and then all three laughed gently, while Raoul rose crimson with embarrassment.

He gathered his courage again and said, “Mademoiselle, since you do not know me, let me at least speak to you alone. I have something very important to say.” Christine answered in a faint but kind voice, “When I am better, if you please. You are very good.” Then the doctor smiled and told him it was time to go. But at once Christine rose with a strange burst of energy. “I am not ill,” she said. “Thank you, doctor. I wish to be alone now. Please go. All of you. I am very nervous

tonight."

The doctor decided not to oppose her, and he left with Raoul, saying in the corridor, "I do not know her tonight. She is usually so gentle." Raoul stayed behind. That part of the theater had grown quiet because everyone had gone to the farewell ceremony. He hid near a doorway and waited, sure that Christine would soon call for him or come out to meet him. Then her maid appeared carrying packages. Raoul stopped her and asked, "How is your mistress?" The girl laughed and said, "Very well, monsieur, but she wishes to be alone. Do not disturb her."

That answer set Raoul's heart beating wildly. "She wishes to be alone for me," he thought at once. He crept toward the door, lifted his hand to knock, and then froze. From within the dressing room he heard a man's voice, clear and commanding. "Christine," it said, "you must love me." Raoul could hardly breathe. Then Christine answered in a trembling voice full of tears, "How can you say that? I sing only for you."

He leaned against the door, shaking. Again the man spoke. "You must be very tired." Christine replied, "Tonight I gave you my soul, and I am dead." Then came the grave answer, calm and terrible: "Your soul is very beautiful, my child, and I thank you. No emperor has ever received such a gift. The angels wept tonight." After that Raoul heard nothing more. He stepped back into the shadows, burning now not only with love, but with jealousy and hatred. "Who is this man?" he asked himself. "Who hides there with her?"

Soon the door opened, and Christine came out alone, wrapped in furs, her face hidden by lace. She closed the door behind her, but she did not lock it. She passed him without seeing him. Raoul watched the door, waiting for the unknown man to appear, but no one came. At last he crossed the corridor, entered the dressing room, and shut the door behind him. The room was in complete darkness. "There is someone here," he cried. "Why do you hide? You shall not leave until I permit it." He lit a match, then every lamp in the room, searched the dressing room, the cupboards, and the walls. There was no one there.

"Am I going mad?" he whispered. After several long minutes he left the empty room and wandered away like a man in a dream. Then, at the foot of a

narrow stair, a cold current of air struck his face. Workmen were coming down past him, carrying a covered stretcher. “The exit, please,” he said to one of them. “There,” the man answered. “But let us pass.” Raoul moved aside and asked without thinking, “Who is that?” The workman said, “Joseph Buquet. They found him hanging below the stage.” Raoul saluted them automatically and went out into the night.

Part 3

While Raoul wandered out into the night in pain and confusion, the farewell ceremony was still going on inside the Opera. Debienne and Poligny had wished to leave in glory, and they had prepared a splendid evening for that very purpose. All that Paris most admired in music and society had helped them. In the foyer of the ballet, Sorelli still stood with a glass of champagne in her hand and her little speech ready on her lips, while the dancers pressed behind her and the guests crowded around the supper tables.

Some of the dancers had already changed into their street clothes, but most still wore their light stage skirts. They all tried to look serious for the occasion. Only little Jammes seemed to have forgotten both the ghost and the death of Joseph Buquet. She laughed, jumped, whispered, and played tricks as usual, until the two departing directors appeared on the steps and Sorelli called her back to order with an impatient look.

Everyone noticed at once that Debienne and Poligny seemed cheerful. In Paris such behavior was considered elegant, even when a man’s real feelings were quite different. They smiled at Sorelli and bent toward her as if they were ready to listen to her little speech with perfect calm. Then, before she could finish it, little Jammes suddenly cried out in a voice full of terror, “The Opera ghost!” That cry broke the scene in two and tore the smiling mask from every face.

Jammes was pointing into the crowd of black coats, and all eyes turned in the same direction. There, for a brief moment, people saw a pale and dreadful face with deep dark hollows where the eyes seemed to sink back into death itself. The

sight caused a kind of wild excitement. “The Opera ghost! The Opera ghost!” people shouted, half laughing and half afraid. Several men pushed forward as if they wished to offer the ghost a drink, but he was already gone.

He slipped through the crowd and vanished before anyone could stop him. Two elderly gentlemen tried to calm little Jammes, while little Meg Giry gave cries like a frightened bird. Sorelli was furious because her speech had been ruined. Debienne and Poligny kissed her, thanked her quickly, and escaped almost as fast as the ghost himself. No one thought this strange, because they were expected elsewhere in the building for more farewells, more smiles, and a last private supper with their closest friends.

It was in the great vestibule of the directors’ offices that the old and new rulers of the Opera sat down together. There were warm handshakes, polite speeches, and many compliments. Guests who had feared a cold evening were soon reassured, and the supper became almost merry. Toasts were made, the government official spoke well, and the future of the Opera was praised in shining words. The transfer of authority had already been completed the day before, and the four directors all wore bright expressions, as if the business of the house had passed from one hand to another without the smallest shadow.

Debienne and Poligny had even placed in the hands of Armand Moncharmin and Firmin Richard the little master keys that opened the many doors of the Opera. Those tiny keys passed from hand to hand among the guests, exciting great interest, when suddenly attention shifted to the far end of the table. There sat the same terrible figure seen earlier in the foyer. He was seated among the guests as naturally as any invited man, except that he neither ate nor drank. He said nothing, and no one could say exactly when he had taken his place there.

At first some people smiled, but the sight of him soon stopped their smiles. His face was so deathlike that even careless men lowered their eyes. The friends of the old directors imagined he must belong to the circle of the new ones, and the friends of the new directors assumed the opposite. In this way everyone avoided the need to ask questions, and the strange guest remained in silence at the edge of the supper like some unwelcome messenger from the grave. A few who knew the

story of the ghost thought at once of Joseph Buquet's description, though they noticed that this man seemed to have a nose, if only a very thin and unnatural one.

Then, all at once, the figure spoke. "The rats are right," he said calmly. "The death of poor Buquet may not be as natural as people think." At those words Debienne and Poligny started violently. "Buquet is dead?" they cried together. "Yes," the man answered in the same quiet tone. "He was found hanging tonight in the third cellar, between a stage frame and a setting from *The King of Lahore*."

The two former directors rose at once and stared at him. Their agitation was greater than such news alone seemed to require. They looked at one another, and their faces turned as white as the tablecloth. Then Debienne made a sign to Moncharmin and Richard, while Poligny murmured a few words of excuse to the guests. All four men left the table and went into the directors' office, closing the door behind them.

Once inside, Debienne and Poligny seemed embarrassed and deeply disturbed. First they asked whether Moncharmin and Richard knew the man who had spoken at the table. When both answered no, the older directors became even more uneasy. They took back the master keys for a moment, looked at them with care, and then advised the new directors to have certain locks changed in complete secrecy. "Changed?" Richard repeated with amusement. "Are there thieves in the Opera?" "Worse than thieves," they answered. "There is the ghost."

Richard and Moncharmin laughed, believing that this was only the last joke of the evening, but the others asked them to be serious. "We would never have spoken of him," Debienne said, "if he himself had not ordered us to do so." Poligny added, "He wishes you to be polite to him. He wishes you to give him what he asks. We were glad to leave this house and be rid of him, but the death of Joseph Buquet has reminded us that whenever we refused the ghost, something strange or terrible soon happened." The new directors tried to keep solemn faces, but their amusement kept rising in spite of them.

Richard at last asked, half mocking and half curious, "What does this ghost want?" Poligny went to his desk, returned with a copy of the regulations, and opened it. The printed text was ordinary enough, but at the end there was an added

line written in red ink, in a strange childish hand. Poligny put his finger on it and said, “Read.” The line declared that if a director delayed for more than fifteen days the monthly payment owed to the Opera ghost, fixed at twenty thousand francs, he would be in breach of duty.

Richard raised his brows but still kept his composure. “Is that all?” he asked. “Does he want nothing else?” “He does,” Poligny replied. He turned more pages and pointed to another red addition beside the rules about reserved boxes. There it stood in clear words: Box Five, the first box on the left, must be placed at the disposal of the Opera ghost for every performance. This time Moncharmin and Richard stood up laughing, shook the hands of their predecessors warmly, and congratulated them on such an excellent joke.

“Now we understand why you are leaving,” Richard said. “Business cannot be easy with a ghost who costs so much.” “Exactly,” Poligny answered without smiling. “Two hundred and forty thousand francs a year do not appear by magic, and then there is the loss from keeping Box Five empty at every performance. We have even had to repay the subscription on it. No, gentlemen, we do not work merely to support a ghost. We prefer to go.” “Yes,” Debienne repeated, rising. “We prefer to go.”

Richard was still amused. “You are too kind to him,” he said. “If I had such an inconvenient ghost, I would have him arrested.” At once the two older men cried together, “But where? But how? We have never seen him!” Richard replied, “Then catch him when he comes to his box.” “We have never seen him in his box,” they answered. “Then rent the box,” said Richard. “Rent Box Five, if you dare,” Debienne replied. On that note the interview ended, and when the four men left the office, Richard and Moncharmin were laughing harder than ever.

Part 4

The joke, as the two new directors still called it, did not stop the next day. Each of them received a letter signed by the Opera Ghost. The writer spoke in a familiar and offended tone. He complained that Christine Daaé was being kept in

a small role while Carlotta continued to dominate the stage. He mocked the voices and talents of several performers with cruel freedom, and then, after these remarks, he returned to the matter that concerned him most. “Do not dispose of my box,” he wrote. “If you wish us to live in peace, do not begin by taking away my box.”

The letter also said that Debienne and Poligny had informed the new directors of his “little habits,” and that the new management was therefore insulting him knowingly. It was not an anonymous threat in the common style. It was cool, exact, and oddly polite. There was even a short note from the theatrical press attached to it, as if others had already warned Richard and Moncharmin that the ghost had rights of a sort. When the two men compared their letters, they burst out laughing again.

“This is still their work,” Richard said. “They are amusing themselves at our expense.” Moncharmin agreed at once. The letters had been posted near the Boulevard des Capucines, and that small detail only seemed to confirm their suspicion that Debienne and Poligny were behind everything. “Very well,” Richard said at last. “If they want Box Five so much, let them have it.” He ordered that the first Box Five be sent to the two former directors at once, provided it had not already been rented.

The box was free, and the tickets were immediately dispatched. Then the new directors joked about the matter again, especially the harsh words the ghost had used about Carlotta, Sorelli, and little Jammes. “They are jealous,” Richard said. “That is all. They cannot forgive us for taking the house from them.” Moncharmin, who loved a small scandal as long as it remained harmless, added, “And they seem very interested in Christine Daaé.” Richard shrugged and answered, “Christine is said to be a good girl.” After that the business of the Opera swallowed them up for the rest of the day.

Contracts had to be renewed or broken, artists had to be praised, controlled, dismissed, or promised new chances, and by evening both men were too tired to think of Box Five again. They did not even go to see whether their predecessors were enjoying the performance. But the next morning their laughter was tested once more. Along with the ordinary pile of papers, they found a little card from

the ghost himself. “Thank you,” it said. “A charming evening. Daaé exquisite. Carlotta magnificent and banal. I shall soon write to you about the two hundred and forty thousand francs.”

The note even corrected the amount with care and added that Debienne and Poligny had already paid the first part of the year’s pension before leaving office. That was unpleasant enough, but another letter followed it, this time truly from Debienne and Poligny. In that letter the former directors thanked Richard and Moncharmin for their attention, but explained that they could not accept Box Five because it belonged exclusively to the being of whom they had already spoken. Richard crushed that letter in his hand. “Now they are beginning to annoy me,” he said.

That same evening the new management rented Box Five to ordinary spectators. The next morning they found on their desks a report from an inspector. The report said that he had been forced to clear Box Five twice during the performance because the occupants had caused a scandal by laughing loudly and making absurd remarks. People in the neighboring boxes and in the hall had hissed and demanded silence. When the inspector first warned them, the troublemakers only laughed more. When he returned with a municipal guard, they protested that they would not leave unless their money was returned.

“Bring the inspector here,” Richard said at once. The man came in looking uneasy. “Now tell us exactly what happened,” said Moncharmin. The inspector began in a weak, nervous voice and explained that the visitors in the box had not behaved like music lovers at all. “As soon as they entered,” he said, “they came out again and called the usher. They asked her to look inside and tell them if there was anyone there. She said no. Then they answered, ‘That is impossible. When we entered, we heard a voice say that someone was already here.’”

Moncharmin could not help smiling, but Richard did not smile at all. He had lived too long in the theater not to recognize the signs of a practical joke, and practical jokes amused him only until they touched his authority. “When these people entered,” he asked heavily, “there was really no one in the box?” “No one, monsieur,” the inspector answered. “No one in that box, and no one in the boxes

on either side." "And what did the usher say?" Richard asked. The inspector hesitated, then gave a foolish little laugh and said, "She said it was the Opera Ghost."

Richard's face changed at once. "Fetch the usher," he said. "At once. And clear out everyone else." The inspector tried to speak, but Richard cut him short with a terrible "Be silent." Then, after a pause, he demanded, "What is this Opera Ghost?" The inspector twisted his hands and made it clear that he neither knew nor wished to know. "Have you seen him?" Richard asked. The man shook his head. "Too bad for you," Richard replied coldly. "Since he is said to be everywhere, I do not see why my employees never manage to see him anywhere."

A few moments later the usher was brought in. It was old Mme Giry, a dry and self-important woman who at once took the floor like an actress entering her best scene. She explained that in Box Five on the previous night there had been M. Maniera, his wife Julie, and their friend Isidore Saack. During the performance, said Mme Giry, M. Maniera had heard a voice whisper wicked little truths in his right ear. The voice mocked his wife's behavior and hinted that Isidore was kissing her hand behind his back. "Well?" asked Moncharmin, amused. "Well," replied Mme Giry, "M. Maniera turned around and saw it was true. Then there were blows, cries, scandal, and at last poor Isidore broke his leg on the grand staircase while trying to flee."

The directors laughed outright, but Mme Giry grew offended. "Instead of laughing," she said sharply, "you should do as M. Poligny did and understand for yourselves." They asked what she meant, and she told them how Poligny had once sat alone in the ghost's box during *La Juive*. At a certain moment, she said, he had suddenly risen, pale as death, and walked out like a sleepwalker, unable even to find his way in the building he was paid to know. "He left like a statue that had come to life," she said. "I called after him, but he did not answer."

"All this is very well," Moncharmin replied, "but how did the ghost ask you for a little footstool?" Mme Giry grew solemn. From that evening on, she said, they had stopped troubling the ghost and had left him his box. Whenever he came, he knocked three small times. The first time she opened the door and saw nobody,

a gentle male voice said, “Mame Jules, a little stool, please.” She nearly died of fright, but the voice added kindly, “Do not be afraid, Mame Jules. It is I, the Opera Ghost.” “And where was this voice?” Richard asked. “On the first chair in the front row, to the right,” she answered. “There was no body, but the voice sat there like a polite gentleman.”

The directors asked what she had done then. “I brought the stool,” she said simply. “It was not for him. It was for his lady.” At that the two men stared at her. The inspector, standing behind her, tapped his forehead in misery to show that she was mad, but Richard already knew he had chosen his staff badly. Mme Giry went on, not noticing the signs behind her. The ghost, she said, always left payment for her on the edge of the box: sometimes two francs, sometimes five, sometimes even ten if he had stayed away for several days. Once he had even forgotten an elegant fan, and when she returned it the next time, she found a box of English sweets in its place.

“That is enough,” said Richard at last. He dismissed Mme Giry with formality and the inspector with less kindness. The old woman left proud and offended, the inspector frightened and humiliated. When both had gone, the directors looked at one another. Their laughter was not quite so free now. They had not become believers, but the story had grown too troublesome to leave alone. “Let us go ourselves,” said Moncharmin. “Yes,” Richard answered after a pause. “Let us go and see Box Five.”

Part 5

That same evening Richard and Moncharmin went to inspect Box Five with their own eyes. They chose an hour when the hall was almost dark and the house nearly empty, for they did not wish to become a new joke for the whole Opera. They climbed and crossed in silence, passing through narrow places high above the seats, until at last they found a point from which they could watch the box without being seen. Neither man wished to confess it, but both were more troubled than before.

The great painted figures above them seemed to look down and laugh at them from the shadows. The silence of the theater was deep, and the red shape of Box Five stood out before them like a waiting mouth. Then, almost at the same moment, each of the two directors saw something there. Richard saw one form, Moncharmin another, and both men instinctively caught each other's hands. They kept staring, not daring to speak, until the form vanished.

In the corridor they compared what they had seen and discovered at once that they had not seen the same thing at all. Moncharmin said he had glimpsed something like a death's head on the edge of the box. Richard said he had seen the shape of an old woman who looked rather like Mother Giry. At once their courage returned, for they decided they had been victims of the dark, the silence, and their own excited minds. Laughing too loudly, they hurried down and entered Box Five itself.

Inside, it was only a box like any other. There were red chairs, red velvet, a carpet, a rail for the hands, and nothing more. They lifted the chairs, pulled at the coverings, and examined most carefully the seat where the mysterious voice was said to sit. They even went below to the box underneath and searched there too, but they found no hidden machine, no opening, and no trick worth naming. At last Richard cried, "They are all making fools of us. Very well, then. On Saturday, when they play *Faust*, we shall sit in Box Five ourselves."

While the two directors prepared their little challenge, Christine Daaé seemed to move farther and farther away from the ordinary life of the theater. After her triumph at the gala, she did not at once return to that same height at the Opera. She sang once in society, at the house of the Duchess of Zurich, and astonished everyone there as she had astonished the Opera. After that, however, she refused invitations, turned away fees, and even withdrew from a charity event to which she had already promised her voice.

People asked why she behaved so strangely. Some called it pride, and others called it modesty, but neither word truly explained her. It was as if she feared success itself, as if each fresh triumph drew her nearer to some invisible danger. The Count de Chagny, wishing to please his brother, tried more than once to speak

for her to Richard. Christine wrote to thank him, but in the same letter she begged him not to mention her name again to the directors.

What fear was this? To answer that question, one must go back to the days when Christine was a child in Brittany and when Raoul knew her as a little playmate. In those days Christine's father, old Daaé, the violinist, filled her head with stories of the Angel of Music. He said that great artists are sometimes visited by a heavenly voice that comes when the heart is pure and the soul is ready. "You do not see the Angel," he would say. "You hear him, and when he has once spoken to you, your song is never the same again."

Christine listened with all the faith of a child. She asked again and again, "Father, have you heard him?" Old Daaé would shake his head sadly, for illness was already growing in him, and then he would look at her with shining eyes. "You will hear him one day, my child," he told her. "When I am in heaven, I will send him to you." These words sank deep into Christine's heart and stayed there long after the father himself had gone.

Time passed, and Raoul and Christine met again at Perros after some years apart. They were no longer children, and both felt that something had changed, though neither knew how to speak of it. Christine entered carrying tea, recognized him, and blushed. Raoul kissed her, and she did not draw back, but afterward she fled into the garden and sat alone on a bench until he came to find her. They spent the evening speaking with great care and saying almost nothing that touched the feelings between them.

When they parted by the roadside, Raoul kissed her trembling hand and said, "Mademoiselle, I shall never forget you." Christine later tried to tell herself that she no longer cared for him, but she could not wholly do so. Then her father died, and with him something seemed to die in her as well. She kept enough strength to continue her studies and to win a prize at the Conservatory, but her art lost its warmth for a time, and she lived quietly with old Mme Valérius, the gentle woman who had long protected her.

Later, when Raoul went to see Mme Valérius in Paris, he found the old lady in a dim room, weak in body but bright in eye and spirit. She welcomed him

warmly, held out both hands, and said at once, “Heaven has sent you to me. Now we may speak of her.” Raoul, hearing that tone, felt a chill move through him. “Madame,” he asked quickly, “where is Christine?” Mme Valérius answered as simply as a child, “She is with her good genius.”

Raoul stared at her. “What good genius?” he asked. “Why, the Angel of Music,” she replied. Then she put a finger to her lips and added with a smile, “You must not repeat that to anyone.” The young man sat down like a man struck on the head, for in that instant many confused memories moved together in him: Christine’s strange words, the hidden voice in her dressing room, the death’s-head face he thought he had once glimpsed in Brittany, and now this innocent old lady speaking calmly of an angel who visited dressing rooms at the Opera.

Mme Valérius, pleased with his silence, drew him closer and said, “I like you very much, Monsieur Raoul, and Christine likes you very much too.” Raoul answered in a low voice, “She likes me?” “Every day she spoke of you,” said the old woman. Then, with a sudden laugh, she added, “She even told me that you once made her a declaration.” Raoul rose in pain and shame, but she begged him to sit again and forgive her laughter, for, she said, the matter was not his fault. “You are young,” she told him. “You believed Christine was free.”

“Is Christine engaged?” Raoul asked in a strangled voice. “No, no,” replied Mme Valérius, “but she cannot marry.” “Cannot marry?” he repeated. “And why not?” The old woman answered with complete seriousness, “Because of the genius of music. He forbids it.” Raoul bent toward her with burning eyes, but she went on peacefully, “He does not exactly forbid it. He only says that if she marries, she will hear him no more, and he will go away forever. So, you understand, she does not wish to lose the Angel of Music.”

Raoul forced himself to whisper, “Yes. That is very natural.” Then Mme Valérius told him still more. She said Christine had once gone to Perros at the call of this same good genius, who had promised to play *The Resurrection of Lazarus* on her dead father’s violin beside old Daaé’s grave. That was too much for Raoul. He rose and said with sudden authority, “Madame, you must tell me where this genius lives.” Mme Valérius lifted her clear, innocent eyes toward heaven and

answered, “In the sky.”

Part 6

Raoul left Mme Valérius more troubled than before, but also more determined. He could not accept the old lady’s faith in angels and heavenly visitors, yet he now understood something important. Christine was not playing with him. She had been touched, guided, and perhaps captured through music itself. “Someone knows her heart,” he said to himself. “Someone has learned her father’s old story and is using it against her.”

On his way back through Paris, he kept turning the matter over in his mind. Christine had loved her father deeply, had lived on legends from childhood, and had passed through grief and loneliness after his death. A voice that came in the dark, a hidden master who seemed to know her soul, a singer who could awaken her art when all joy had died in her, such a person could indeed rule her without chains. “This is no spirit,” Raoul told himself. “It is a man. But what sort of man can act like this?” The thought made him both cold and furious.

He went again to the Opera to ask for news of Christine, but the answer he received was short and unpleasant. She had taken leave for reasons of health, and no one could say when she would return. “Is she ill?” he asked. “We do not know,” they replied. “Then why has no doctor been sent to her?” Raoul cried. “Because she did not ask for one,” came the answer. He walked out with a dark face, more than ever convinced that some human hand was moving the whole affair from the shadows.

Meanwhile, Firmin Richard and Armand Moncharmin were preparing their own answer to the ghost. They had inspected Box Five and found nothing. They had heard old stories, received insolent letters, and listened to foolish employees tremble before an invisible gentleman, but none of that was enough to break their confidence. “We shall see plainly on Saturday,” Richard said. “If this ghost exists, he may come and sit with us during *Faust*.” Moncharmin laughed and answered, “Yes. We shall receive him politely.”

Saturday came. Before the performance, another letter from the ghost reached the directors. It repeated two demands with the same cool certainty as before: Box Five must remain at his disposal, and Christine Daaé must sing the role of Marguerite that night. Richard read the letter aloud with a curled lip and laid it aside. “Carlotta sings tonight,” he said. “And we sit in Box Five.” Moncharmin, who was beginning to enjoy the challenge as if it were a private game, answered, “Let the ghost do his worst.”

At almost that same hour, Carlotta, in her house in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, received an anonymous warning written in red ink. It told her that if she sang that night, a terrible misfortune would strike her at the very moment she sang. This was not the first threatening letter she had received, and she believed she had secret enemies among jealous rivals, but the violence of this one shook her more than usual. Still, Carlotta was not the woman to retreat. She had no heart, perhaps, and little soul, but she had pride, ambition, and a voice that had never failed her.

She had also not forgiven Christine. Since the night when the younger singer had triumphed in her absence, Carlotta had done everything she could to crush her rival. She had used influence, gossip, and the theater’s hidden cruelties. “The little Daaé shall wait,” she had said more than once in one form or another, and many people had obeyed her. So when she finished reading the threat, she pushed away her breakfast, stared into space for a few moments, and then rose with anger instead of fear. “I shall sing,” she said aloud. “We shall see who dares touch me.”

That evening Box Five was full. Richard and Moncharmin took their places there, quite openly and in excellent spirits. With them sat the Commissaire Mifroid, whom they had brought so that the evening might end once and for all in a triumph of common sense. The box seemed perfectly ordinary. The audience filled the hall, the lights shone warmly, and the first acts passed without visible disturbance. The directors exchanged smiles, and Richard murmured, “A most peaceful haunting.”

Then, in the middle of the performance, something happened that erased those smiles. The men distinctly heard a voice in the box. It was not loud, but it was clear, gentle, and entirely masculine. It came from the right side, near the

front chair where old Mme Giry had always insisted the ghost sat. “Christine Daaé should sing tonight,” the voice said. “If Carlotta sings, there will be disaster.” Mifroid jumped, Richard turned white with rage, and Moncharmin stared at the empty air before him.

“Who is there?” Richard demanded. No one answered in bodily form. The box remained empty except for the three men themselves. Yet the voice had been heard by all. “This is some trick,” Mifroid muttered, though his own mouth had gone dry. Richard leaned forward and said between his teeth, “We do not change the cast in the middle of *Faust* because an invisible fool commands it.” Then the performance moved on, and they were forced to sit still, though none of them was still at heart.

On the stage, Carlotta appeared magnificent and confident. Her voice came out rich, trained, and strong, and for a time it seemed that the ghost had failed. The audience listened with satisfaction, and the directors slowly recovered some of their pride. Then came the moment when Carlotta had to sing the line about the solitary voice that sings in the heart. She opened her golden throat to send the phrase through the hall, and instead of the expected note there burst from her mouth a hideous sound, flat, wet, and monstrous. It was like the croak of a great toad.

The whole house recoiled. Carlotta herself stood frozen for a second, unable to believe what had happened. Then she tried again, and again the terrible croak came out, louder and even more shameful than before. Laughter, horror, pity, and superstition raced together through the audience. Some people thought of illness, some of nerves, and some at once whispered of witchcraft. “The ghost!” voices cried here and there, while Carlotta, white with rage and disgrace, seemed ready to fall.

In Box Five, the directors sat as if struck. Then the unseen voice spoke again, and this time its irony was cruel. It remarked that Madame Carlotta was singing that evening “to bring down the chandelier.” The words had scarcely died away when the hall was torn by a vast crash above. Something gave way in the great chandelier, and a heavy piece fell into the audience with frightful force. There

were screams, confusion, people rising in panic, and then a dreadful certainty spreading from row to row that someone had been killed.

The victim was the wife of the concierge, a poor woman who had come to enjoy the performance and found death instead. The beauty of the evening vanished at once into terror. People pushed toward the exits, called to one another, wept, and crossed themselves. On the stage and behind it, the same cry ran everywhere: “It is the ghost! It is the ghost!” Richard and Moncharmin no longer laughed. They left Box Five shaken to the core, and though neither wished to confess it, both knew that the ghost had spoken, had warned them, and had not been ignored without punishment.

Part 7

The tragic night of the falling chandelier was followed by a quieter mystery. Carlotta fell ill, and Christine Daaé disappeared from the Opera for fifteen days. This was not yet the great public abduction that would later shock all Paris. It was a first disappearance, silent and almost hidden, but it troubled Raoul more than anyone else. He wrote to her at Mme Valérius’s address and received no answer.

At first he tried not to despair, because he already knew that Christine had been pulling away from him. She had seemed to fear him almost as much as she feared the unknown voice that surrounded her. Yet her silence hurt him deeply, and he could not forget the voice in her dressing room or the strange power that seemed to stand between them. Then, one morning, a letter from Christine arrived. In it she said that she had not forgotten the little boy who once fetched her scarf from the sea, and that she was leaving that day for Perros because the next day was the anniversary of her father’s death.

That letter was enough. Raoul rushed to the railway guide, dressed in haste, left a note for his brother, and threw himself into a carriage. He missed the train he had hoped to catch, and so he had to wait in misery until evening. Once at last he was seated in his railway compartment, he read Christine’s letter again and again. He breathed its perfume, remembered the soft scenes of their childhood,

and passed the whole bitter night in a feverish dream that began and ended with her name.

At dawn he arrived at Lannion and hurried to the coach for Perros-Guirec. He was its only traveler, and he questioned the driver at once. Yes, the man said, a young woman from Paris had come the evening before and had gone to the inn called the Setting Sun. It could only be Christine. As the coach rolled slowly along the cold road, Raoul watched the familiar country return around him: the moors, the low houses, the trees along the road, and at last the great curve that opened onto the sea.

When he entered the smoky old room of the inn, the first person he saw was Mother Tricard, who recognized him at once. She welcomed him warmly and asked what had brought him there. He blushed and answered awkwardly that he had business in Lannion and had wished to come farther only to say hello. She offered him breakfast, but he refused and stood waiting like a man listening for his fate. Then the door opened, and Christine came in.

She had not expected to see him. For a moment she stopped short, and he rose at once, all the blood running to his face. Their meeting was neither joyful nor easy. The old tenderness between them still lived, but it now had fear and secrecy around it. Christine spoke to him kindly, yet with restraint, and he felt that though she had written the letter that brought him there, she was already regretting that he had come.

Through that day he remained unhappy and unsettled. He learned that Christine had ordered a mass for her father's soul and had spent long hours in prayer in the little church and at the grave in the cemetery. Toward evening he could no longer bear to remain away from that place. He went up alone to the burial ground that surrounded the church and wandered among the graves until he found the corner where old Daaé lay buried. Flowers covered the stone in a bright mass of color against the cold Breton earth, and near them rose the fearful wall of skulls and bones built against the church itself.

Raoul hid himself and waited. The place was full of death, but also of memory, and every stone seemed to speak of Christine's father, of music, and of

their childhood. At last Christine came, silent and deeply moved, and knelt near the grave. Midnight drew close. Then, from the darkness, there rose the sound of a violin playing *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, the piece her father had loved in his sad and faithful hours. The music was so beautiful that Raoul, though full of suspicion, was shaken to the soul.

For a moment even he nearly believed in the impossible. The night, the churchyard, the tomb, and that heavenly violin all seemed made for a miracle. But then the music stopped, and his reason returned with violence. He heard a noise among the skulls near the ossuary and fixed his eyes there. Christine, absorbed by what she had heard, left the cemetery without noticing him, but Raoul stayed behind, determined to discover the musician hidden among the bones.

Suddenly several skulls rolled at his feet, one after another, as if death itself were playing a terrible game with him. At the same instant a shadow slipped across the bright wall of the sacristy. Raoul sprang after it. The shadow had already entered the church, wrapped in a cloak, but he was quick enough to catch part of the mantle. Then the figure turned under the pale light falling from the high stained glass, and Raoul saw before him a dreadful face like a living skull with burning eyes. His courage failed, and he remembered nothing more.

He woke later in his room at the inn, weak, shaken, and humiliated by what he had seen. Yet even then his trouble was not ended. Christine seemed once more beyond his reach, and his mind moved in circles of love, anger, pride, and despair. He could not tell whether he had touched a ghost, a madman, or some monstrous human rival. He only knew that the invisible power surrounding Christine was real, and that it had shown him its face.

That night he wandered again under the cold sky, his heart torn in two. Then he heard the sound of wheels and saw a fine carriage coming along the white road. At once he drew back and watched it approach. If Christine was inside, he swore to himself that he would stop the horses and force the truth from the mysterious companion who held her. As the carriage came level with him, a woman’s head leaned near the window, and the moonlight fell softly on her face.

“Christine!” he cried. He had not meant to speak, but the name burst from

him like blood from a wound. At that cry the whole carriage leaped forward as if the horses had been waiting for the signal. The glass was pulled up, the face vanished, and before Raoul could throw himself at the team, the coupé was already racing away into the night. He ran after it, calling her again, but nothing answered him, and soon the dark carriage was only a black point on the pale road.

Then jealousy mastered him. Standing alone beneath the indifferent stars, he persuaded himself that he had loved an angel and found only an ordinary woman. “She passed and did not answer,” he thought. “She chose to go on.” He returned home broken, without even changing his clothes, and sat on his bed until morning with the face of a man ruined by grief. At dawn his servant entered with the letters, and Raoul seized them wildly, for among them he had already recognized one paper, one hand, one writing.

Part 8

The letter changed everything. A few moments before, Raoul had been ready to believe that Christine had passed forever out of his life and that his love had been nothing but a foolish dream. Now hope rose in him again with painful force. He read the note once, then twice, then a third time, until every word seemed cut into his heart: he was to come to the masked ball, at midnight, to the little room behind the great foyer, dressed in white, hidden, and silent. The message had no stamp and had plainly been dropped in the street so that some passer-by would bring it to the house.

That little fact alone told him much. Christine was watched. She could not safely send a letter in the ordinary way. She had found only this poor and uncertain means of reaching him, and even so she had ordered secrecy with desperate care. “On my life, do not let yourself be recognized,” she had written. Raoul pressed the paper to his lips and whispered, “I will come. Whatever waits for me there, I will come.”

For the next two days he lived in fever. He thought of Christine as he had first wanted to think of her: not false, not cold, not faithless, but trapped in some

hidden net. He asked himself again and again who held her, how far her captivity went, and whether she still had enough freedom left to call for help. In his mind the face from Perros, the voice from the dressing room, and the dreadful power inside the Opera all came together in one single name. “Erik,” he said to himself. “It is Erik.”

When the night of the masked ball arrived, the Opera seemed to have forgotten death, scandal, and the fall of the chandelier. The whole building burned with light and pleasure. Everywhere there were colors, laughing mouths, jewels, costumes, masks, bare shoulders, bright fabrics, and that kind of gaiety that grows reckless because it knows it is only for a few hours. The great staircase was like a river of silk and gold, and the great foyer glittered as if no dark thing had ever walked in it.

Raoul came in a white domino, exactly as Christine had commanded, and kept his face well hidden. He made his way to the little room behind the fireplace in the great foyer and stood near the door leading toward the Rotunda. At first he waited with patience, or tried to. Then the minutes began to pass more heavily. White dominos, black dominos, laughing masks, women dressed as queens, shepherdesses, gypsies, nuns, and goddesses drifted past in groups, yet none stopped for him, and none gave the sign he awaited.

Midnight came and still Christine did not appear. Raoul’s heart began to beat with anger as much as fear. “Has she been prevented?” he asked himself. “Has she changed her mind? Has she been forced to write that note by the very hand that wishes to trap me?” He did not leave his place, but his eyes searched every moving figure with growing impatience. Then the whole movement of the crowd changed at once, as if a cold wind had entered the hall.

People were drawing back. Laughter broke off. A path was opening through the dancers and guests, and along that path came the most terrible costume of the night. It was the Red Death. The figure was wrapped from head to foot in scarlet, and above the red clothes there rose a face like a skull, but worse than a skull, for it seemed alive. It did not merely represent death. It walked like death in person, certain of its right to pass anywhere.

“The Red Death! The Red Death!” people cried, but no one moved to stop it. Then the red figure lifted itself proudly and spoke. “I am the Red Death that passes!” The words ran through the hall like iron over glass. A bold man tried to touch the strange masker, perhaps to prove that all this was still only a game, but from the red sleeve came a hand so dry, so hard, and so awful in its grip that the man gave a cry of pain and terror. When the figure released him, he fled amid nervous laughter and frightened jokes.

At that very instant Raoul recognized the death’s-head face from Perros. All the blood rushed from his own face. “It is he!” he almost cried aloud. He was already moving to spring forward when a black domino suddenly seized his arm. “Come,” a low voice whispered. “Come at once.” He turned, and though the face was masked, he knew the voice. It was Christine. She did not pause long enough for him to speak. She drew him away from the crowd with such haste that he felt she too was fleeing from the Red Death.

She climbed one staircase, then another, and still she looked back in fear. The upper passages were almost empty now. At last she opened the door of a box and pulled him inside. “Stay in the back,” she said softly. “Do not show yourself.” Raoul removed his mask, but Christine kept hers on. He was about to beg her to uncover her face when he saw that she was listening with all her strength against the wall itself, as if the plaster had ears and might answer her.

Then she opened the door a little and glanced into the corridor. “He must have gone up,” she murmured. “To the box of the blind men.” Suddenly she gave a faint cry. “No. He is coming down.” Raoul looked past her and saw, on the stair above, a red foot, then another, and then the whole slow descent of the Red Death. The scarlet figure came downward with horrible majesty. “It is he,” Raoul said through his teeth. “This time he shall not escape me.”

But Christine shut the door in front of him with desperate strength. “No!” she whispered. “No, Raoul.” Then, in the silence that followed, they heard the red figure pass by outside. Neither spoke until the last sound of that passing had died away. At length Christine let go of the door and leaned against the wall as if all her strength had run out through her hands. Raoul went toward her and said, “Now

you must tell me everything. I have seen him. I know he exists. Who is he to you?"

For a few moments she did not answer. Then she removed her mask, and he saw how pale and tired she was. "Raoul," she said, "you must not ask me that tonight." "But I do ask it," he answered. "And I have the right. I have suffered too much not to ask it." Christine looked at him with sorrow. "You have suffered?" she repeated. "And do you think I have not suffered?" Her voice trembled, and in spite of himself his anger softened. He took her hands and said more gently, "Then trust me."

They left the box together by a safer way, and later that night, when the madness of the ball had fallen behind them, they spoke more freely. Christine began to explain the belief that had ruled her since childhood. She reminded him of her father's old stories of the Angel of Music and of the promise that after death he would send that angel to guide her. "It came," she said. "At least I believed it came. In my dressing room, in the dark, from nowhere and everywhere at once. It taught me. It raised my voice. It knew my father's heart, and it spoke to mine."

Raoul listened, and though he loved her, his reason revolted. "I heard that voice," he said. "I know it is a man's voice." Christine drew herself up and answered, "Do not say that. Do not call it that." "But it is true," he insisted. "No creature on earth sings or teaches as you sang that night without some strange help, yes, but help can come from a man as well as from heaven. Someone is deceiving you." At once her face changed, and the old gentle Christine disappeared behind offended pride and fear.

"You laugh at me," she said. "You think I shut myself in my dressing room with some hidden lover. Is that it?" "No," Raoul answered quickly, "not that. Never that. But when I entered your dressing room, there was no one there, and yet I had heard him. So I say again: someone is playing a cruel trick on you." Christine gave a low cry and moved away from him. "Leave me," she said. "You do not understand anything."

He caught up with her and begged forgiveness. His voice, his face, and his tears at last reached her, for she loved him too deeply not to be moved. They were in a quieter place now, and her resistance slowly broke. "Very well," she said at

last. “You shall know a little more. But not all. Not yet.” Then, in a voice full of pity, fear, and weariness, she spoke words that struck him to the heart. “Poor Erik,” she murmured.

Raoul seized on the name at once. “Erik!” he cried. “So that is his name.” Christine saw at once that she had betrayed too much, and she turned white with terror. “Who told you?” she asked. “You did,” he said. “Just now. And before this, on the night of the masked ball, I heard you pity him.” Christine covered her face for a moment, then lowered her hands and looked at him with pleading eyes. “Raoul,” she said, “you must forget the voice of the man. You must forget even the name. Do not try to know. Do not try to see. There is no secret on earth more terrible.”

“Then it is a secret,” he said. “Yes,” she answered, “and if you love me, you will not force it.” There was a long silence between them. He wanted to cry out that love itself forced him, that every danger to her forced him, but her distress held him back. “Swear to me,” she said, “that you will not enter my dressing room again unless I call you. Swear that you will not try to discover anything by yourself.” “Will you call me?” he asked. “Tomorrow,” she replied. “I promise.” Then, because he could refuse her nothing, he gave her the promise she asked, and they parted.

Part 9

The next day came, and with it the hour Christine had named. Raoul went to the Opera with a heart divided between joy and dread. He feared that she might fail him again, and he feared even more that she might keep her promise and reveal some truth too terrible to bear. Yet he went, because love no longer allowed him to choose. The whole building seemed different to him now. Corridors, stairways, dressing rooms, and passages were no longer only parts of a theater. They were the roads of a hidden war.

Christine met him in secret and led him away at once. She spoke little at first, not because she had nothing to say, but because she was listening. Every few

moments she stopped, raised her head, and turned her eyes toward some dark passage or empty stair, as if she feared an invisible watcher. Raoul, who had once been troubled by her mystery, was now troubled still more by her terror. “You are afraid,” he said quietly. “Yes,” she answered. “But come. We shall be safer higher up.”

She led him through more than one narrow way, then up again, then through a little door, and at last out onto the vast lead roof of the Opera. Night lay over Paris. The air was cold and open after the closeness of the building below, and around them rose the great statues and ornaments of the roof like silent guardians carved against the sky. From that height the noise of the city seemed far away. One could almost believe that no human hand could reach them there.

They sat near one of the high groups of sculpture, half hidden in the shadow of Apollo’s lyre. For a while neither spoke. Christine seemed to be gathering strength, and Raoul did not wish to force her. Then at last she turned to him and said in a low voice, “You must not laugh at me, Raoul. You knew my father. You knew how he used to speak to us when we were children.” “I will not laugh,” he answered. “Tell me everything.”

Christine folded her hands tightly together and began. She reminded him of the old days in Brittany, of her father’s violin, of his simple faith, and of the stories he had told them both about the Angel of Music. “He said he would send the Angel to me when he was dead,” she whispered. “When he died, I was still weak enough, foolish enough, to wait for that promise. I had lost him, and I had almost lost my courage too. Then one day, in my dressing room, when I was alone, I heard a voice singing near me, close beside me, and yet no one was there.”

Raoul listened without moving. Christine went on more rapidly now, as if once the gate had opened the words could no longer be held back. At first, she said, she thought a singer must be practicing in the next room. She searched, but every corridor was empty, while the voice remained faithful to her own room. It sang, then spoke, and answered her questions like a man’s voice, only more beautiful than any human voice she had ever heard. “I was frightened,” she said, “but I was happy too. I thought at once of my father’s promise.”

She told him that she had spoken to Mme Valérius about the strange experience, and the old lady, simple and tender as always, had encouraged her in the belief she most wished to hold. “She said, ‘Perhaps it is the Angel. Ask it.’ So I asked. And the voice answered that it was indeed the Angel of Music sent to me by my father.” Christine lowered her eyes and added with shame and sadness, “I believed it. I believed it with all my soul.”

After that, she said, a great intimacy had grown between her and the unseen voice. It came at fixed hours when the part of the Opera near her dressing room was empty, and it offered to teach her. “Do you understand, Raoul?” she said. “It asked permission, and I gave it gladly. I thought heaven itself had bent down to help me. I missed none of the lessons. Never.” “And you never saw anyone?” Raoul asked. “No one,” Christine replied. “Only the wall, the room, the darkness, and the music that came from behind the wall with a truth and purity I cannot describe.”

She told him how the voice had seemed to know exactly what her father had taught her, where her skill ended, where her weakness began, how far her breath could carry, where her lower tones failed, where the middle voice was still veiled, where the high notes hardened. “It knew everything,” she said. “It took up my father’s work as if it had stood beside him all my life. Under that teaching I made progress that should have taken years. Sometimes I felt as if my own body remembered old lessons before my mind did.”

Raoul could not deny the wonder of this. He had heard her sing. He had heard the impossible change in her voice. Yet he still fought against the conclusion Christine had once accepted. “Then the teacher was a man,” he said. “A man hidden somewhere near your room, a master musician, perhaps a genius, but still a man.” Christine gave a pained movement, and her whole face clouded. “There,” she said softly, “you see? You do not understand. I told you not to force that thought on me.”

“I do not force it on you because I wish to hurt you,” Raoul answered. “I force it on you because I fear for you. A true angel would not need to hide behind walls. A true angel would not creep through corridors, frighten men to death, and

make women tremble in dressing rooms." Christine shivered. "Do not say such things here," she whispered. "Do not speak against him here. Even when he is not beside me, my ears are still full of his sighs."

At that moment Raoul himself thought he heard something. It was very faint, like pain carried on the wind, a sound between a sigh and a moan. He looked quickly about the roof. "Did you hear that?" he asked. Christine listened, but then shook her head. "I hear him too often," she said. "Sometimes I no longer know whether the sound is outside me or within me." Still, both rose and searched the dark roof with their eyes. There was no one there, only the statues, the broad sheets of lead, and the cold heaven above them.

They sat again, and now Raoul spoke more gently. "Tell me," he said, "when did you see him for the first time?" Christine was silent so long that he thought she would refuse to answer. At last she said, "Only after three months of hearing him and never seeing him. It was on the evening of my triumph." Raoul leaned closer. Christine continued in a low trembling voice. That night, after the great performance, the voice had spoken to her with extraordinary sweetness and had told her that she must come if she wished to thank the Angel properly.

She had returned to her dressing room alone. The voice spoke from the wall again and asked whether she truly wished to see the power that had guided her. "I said yes," Christine whispered. "I said yes because I was grateful, because I was full of joy, because I was half mad with music and with tears. Then the glass in my room, the great mirror, seemed to turn. A hand appeared, or perhaps not a hand, perhaps only a movement in the darkness, and I was drawn forward before I understood." Raoul caught her wrist tightly. "The mirror opened?" he said. "Yes," she answered. "The mirror opened."

She would not yet tell him all that followed. She covered her face and shook with the memory. "No, not tonight," she said when he begged her to continue. "I cannot tell you everything at once. I have not the courage." "But you must," Raoul cried. "How can I protect you if you leave me in the dark?" Christine looked at him with tears. "Protect me?" she repeated. "Who can protect me? Not you. Not anyone. I tell you again, forget the name of the voice of the man. Forget that I ever

spoke it."

He drew closer and tried to take her in his arms, but she moved away with sudden fear. "No," she said. "If he saw—if he knew—" Then she stopped and listened again to the night around them. Raoul, maddened now by pity, jealousy, and love together, answered, "Let him know. Let him come. I am not afraid of him." Christine gave him a look so full of sorrow that his bold words died on his lips. "You are wrong," she said. "You should be afraid."

Part 10

The words had scarcely left Christine's lips when the night itself seemed to answer them. From above their heads, from the darkness around the great group of Apollo, there came a long, torn sigh, like the sound of a heart breaking in secret. Both Christine and Raoul sprang up at once. "Did you hear it now?" Raoul whispered. Christine pressed both hands against her breast and nodded. "Yes," she said. "That was no dream. He is there. He has heard us." Raoul stepped in front of her as if his body alone could protect her from the whole roof and the sky above it.

Then they looked up together and saw, high above them, two burning points fixed in the darkness. They shone through the strings of Apollo's great lyre like cruel stars caught in a metal net. For one terrible second, Raoul could not move. He knew that gaze. It was the same dreadful fire he had once seen in Brittany beside the church, the same unnatural life shining through a face that seemed no longer fully human. "Erik!" he cried. "If you are there, come down and face me." But the eyes did not move, and that stillness was more fearful than any leap or answer would have been.

Christine gave a low cry and caught at Raoul's arm. "No, no," she whispered. "Do not call him. Do not challenge him. Let us go." Raoul was trembling with anger now, and for a moment love itself nearly drove him into madness. "I should climb to him," he said. "I should drag him down from that place." Christine shook her head desperately. "You could not. And if you could, it would be worse. Come

away, I beg you. Tonight he is listening. Tonight he is suffering. That makes him more dangerous." Raoul saw that she was no longer merely afraid for herself. She was afraid for him.

They moved quickly from the place, passing among the vast bronze shapes on the roof, and the lead under their feet seemed cold as a tomb. Once Raoul turned his head and thought he still saw the eyes behind them, though now they seemed farther off and almost unreal. "It is impossible," he muttered. "No man could stand there." Christine, hurrying beside him, answered in a voice hardly above her breath, "Do not try to measure him by other men. He has lived too long in darkness and too long among secret ways. What is impossible for others is easy for him." Then she added, with sudden pain, "Poor Erik. Poor unhappy Erik."

They had reached a lower passage when a strange figure appeared before them in the half-dark and stretched out an arm to stop them. Raoul drew back at once, ready to fight, but Christine caught his hand. The man wore a long dark garment and a pointed cap, and his beard and eyes gave him an air at once noble and secret. "Not that way," he said quickly. "You must go by the other corridor. Go down, and go fast." Raoul stared at him in astonishment. "Who are you?" he demanded. Christine answered before the man himself could speak. "It is the Persian," she said. "Do as he says."

There was no time for more questions. The man made another urgent sign and vanished into the shadows as strangely as he had come. "Why should I obey him?" Raoul asked as Christine pulled him onward. "Because he knows," she answered. "He is always in the Opera, and he knows." "Knows what?" Raoul insisted. "Too much," she said. "Too much for any honest man to know, perhaps, and yet I am glad he was there tonight." Raoul followed, though unwillingly. "This is hard for me," he said bitterly. "You make me flee. It is the first time in my life." Christine, already breathing more calmly, tried to smile. "Perhaps," she said, "we are only fleeing the shadow of our own fear."

"No," Raoul answered at once. "If that was truly Erik above the lyre, then I should have nailed him there like an owl on a barn door in our Breton country, and the matter would have ended." Christine almost laughed, though her face still

showed the marks of fear. “My dear Raoul,” she said, “you would first have had to climb up to Apollo’s lyre, and that is no easy road.” “His eyes were there,” Raoul replied stubbornly. “That I know.” “And now,” Christine said, “you are becoming like me. You see him everywhere. Tomorrow, in daylight, you will tell yourself that those burning eyes were only two gilded stars shining through the strings.” Raoul shook his head. “No. I know what I saw.”

They descended another flight. The Opera seemed endless around them, full of stairs, turns, doors, and dark corners where one could imagine listeners hidden in the walls. Raoul spoke again, more urgently now. “Since you have truly decided to leave, why wait until tomorrow? Let us go this instant. He may have heard everything on the roof. Every minute we remain here is madness.” Christine stopped and turned toward him. “No,” she said. “He is working. I have told you. He is busy with his *Don Juan Triumphant*, and when he works, he forgets the whole world.” Raoul looked at her sadly. “And yet you keep glancing behind you.” She lowered her eyes. “Because I am afraid by habit now,” she answered.

At last they reached her dressing room. Once inside, Christine closed the door with care and stood listening before she spoke. The familiar room, with its mirror, chairs, and little table, looked peaceful enough, but to Raoul it still seemed full of invisible danger. “Now tell me plainly,” he said. “Will you come away with me?” Christine gave him a long and serious look. “Yes,” she said at last. “Tomorrow. I have promised.” “Promised whom?” Raoul asked, though he already knew the answer. “Erik,” she replied. “I promised him that until the very minute of our flight I would see no one but here, in the Opera. If I broke that promise, I believe misfortune would fall on us at once.”

Raoul could not hide the bitterness that rose in him. “It is fortunate for me,” he said, “that he at least allows you this much. You have even had the boldness to permit our little game of being engaged.” Christine looked at him with a sad gentleness that only made his pain sharper. “He knows all about it,” she said. “He told me, ‘I trust you, Christine. Monsieur Raoul de Chagny loves you, and he must soon go away. Before he goes, let him be as unhappy as I am.’” Raoul gave a short, wounded laugh. “And what does that mean?” he asked. Christine tilted her head

and looked at him with innocent seriousness. “I might ask you the same thing. Does love always make men unhappy?” “Yes,” Raoul said quietly, “when they love and are not sure they are loved in return.”

Christine’s eyes softened then, and for a moment the whole dark world around them seemed to fall away. “Is it for Erik that you say that?” she asked. “For Erik and for myself,” he answered. “For him, because he suffers. For myself, because I suffer too.” She moved a step nearer and laid her hand for an instant on his sleeve. “Then listen to me,” she said. “Tomorrow you must be ready. You must not fail me. If I call, you come at once. If I tell you to wait, you wait without question. If I tell you to run, you run with me and do not look back.” “I swear it,” Raoul said. “And you?” “I swear I will go,” she replied, though her voice shook as she said it.

They stood for a little while in silence, close together, listening to the strange breathing of the Opera around them. Then Raoul bent over her hand and kissed it with all the tenderness and despair of his heart. Christine did not draw it away. “Until tomorrow,” she whispered. “Until tomorrow,” he answered. Yet even as he left her room, he felt that the promise of tomorrow was hanging over an abyss. Somewhere in the darkness of the Opera, Erik was working, listening, suffering, and waiting.

Part 11

During the days that followed, Christine and Raoul tried to keep their promise of courage, but their happiness had already become thin and trembling like a flame in a draft. She still came to him, still spoke kindly, and still let him believe that escape was near. Yet he saw plainly that her strength rose and fell according to some hidden law that did not belong to him. Sometimes she was almost playful, and sometimes she grew pale in the middle of a smile and listened to the walls as if a command might come through them at any instant.

They still wandered through the vast body of the Opera as if it were a strange kingdom half real and half painted. One afternoon she led him across the stage

and made him sit beside a false fountain in a set prepared for some future work. Another day she took him through a garden made of canvas leaves and wooden bowers, where the flowers had been cut by skillful hands and all beauty was only an arrangement for the eye. “You see,” she said sadly, “our love lives well in such places. It is beautiful, and it is not allowed to be true.” Raoul pressed her hand and did not answer, because any answer would have hurt them both.

At times she tried to give joy to these dark walks by turning them into a game. She showed him old store rooms full of armor, faded costumes, spears, shields, and the broken glory of forgotten spectacles. She greeted old workmen and their wives who had lived so long inside the Opera that they seemed to belong to it more than to the world outside. “This is my country,” she said once with a little smile that was more pitiful than pride. “I know its corners, its dust, its lights, its voices. I know where the old people hide, where the children dance, and where the sewing women sit and complain.”

Yet whenever they came too near an opening in the stage or to any stair that led below, the change in her was immediate. She would cling to him and draw him away, or else she would laugh too quickly and speak of other things. Once he stopped by an open trap and looked down into the blackness. “You have shown me the upper world of your empire,” he said. “Will you not show me the lower one?” Christine caught him with both hands and answered in a whisper full of terror, “Never. I forbid it. Everything under the earth belongs to him.”

“Then he really lives there?” Raoul asked. Christine shook her head violently, as if words themselves were dangerous. “I did not say that. Come away.” At that very moment the trap closed with sudden force, though neither of them had seen any hand move it. Both started back. “It was perhaps he,” Raoul said under his breath. “No,” Christine answered quickly. “Only the men who open and close the traps. They do such things all day.” But while she spoke she listened, and her fingers had turned cold in his hand.

On another afternoon she was later than usual and so pale that Raoul felt his patience break at last. “I shall not leave France,” he said suddenly, “unless you tell me the whole truth about the voice and the man.” Christine looked wildly

around them before she answered. “Do not speak so loud,” she whispered. “If he heard you—” “I want him to hear,” Raoul replied. “I shall take you away from him. I swear it.” She looked at him then with something like hope and something like pity. “Is that possible?” she asked, and in those four words he heard both her longing and her despair.

She drew him upward again, higher and higher, through beams, narrow paths, and hidden passages until they reached the roof once more. The evening sky was burning, and the whole city lay below them like a great silent map of stone and smoke. There, under the vast bronze protection of Apollo and his lyre, she seemed at once more free and more haunted than ever. “Soon you will go farther than the clouds,” she said. “Then you will leave me. But when the hour comes for you to carry me away, if I refuse, you must take me all the same.” Raoul stared at her. “Do you fear that you will change your mind?” he asked. She nodded strangely and said, “I do not know. He is like a demon.”

Then, little by little, her self-control broke. She pressed herself against him and spoke of the life below the ground, of the dreadful room by the underground lake, of the tears that came into the black hollows of Erik’s death’s-head face when he begged for love. “I cannot bear those tears any longer,” she cried. “He is horrible, and yet one must pity him. That is the worst of all.” Raoul answered only with action. “Then come now,” he said. “Come this minute. Let us go while the sun is still up.” But Christine pulled back and shook her head.

“Not now,” she said. “It would be too cruel. Let him hear me sing one last time tomorrow night. Then, at midnight, you will come to my dressing room. He will be waiting for me in the room by the lake, and while he waits, we shall be gone.” She spoke these words with a trembling certainty that frightened him, as if she were looking already at the exact line where fate would divide. “You must swear,” she added. “Even if I resist, even if I hesitate, you must carry me away.” Raoul swore it with all his heart.

While they still sat there in that high solitude, they both heard again a faint sound behind them, like the long suffering breath of some wounded creature hidden among the bronze and stone. Christine shivered and looked back. “Did you

hear that?" she whispered. "Yes," Raoul answered. They rose and searched the empty roof, but no one was visible. Yet the unseen presence remained with them so strongly that even the air seemed full of listening. "When he works," Christine murmured at last, "he sees nothing, eats nothing, drinks nothing. He becomes like one dead. But when he leaves his work, he hears everything."

The next evening at the Opera, while Christine and Raoul waited for the fatal performance that was to end their secret misery, another drama was unfolding in a different part of the house. Richard and Moncharmin had not forgotten the ghost's letters, the box, the voice, or the warning. Worst of all, they had not forgotten the twenty thousand francs demanded each month. They had decided at last to set a trap of their own and to prove that the Opera Ghost was only a clever thief who could be caught like any other thief.

Their plan was simple. They would prepare an envelope filled to the proper weight, and they would watch Box Five while the false payment was laid there. One of them would remain in the hall; the other would take hidden positions and observe every movement that might explain the trick. They trusted no one fully now, not even each other. The ghost had already made fools of them in public, and ridicule was something neither man could bear. "This time," Richard said, "we catch the hand itself."

The evening came. The false envelope was placed as usual, and both directors watched with all the nervous care of gamblers staking the last of their pride. Yet the result was the same as before. At the end of the performance, the envelope had vanished, and no one could say how. Richard was furious. Moncharmin was pale with suspicion. Each believed that the other must somehow be hiding part of the truth, and their forced politeness became almost unbearable. "It is impossible," Richard muttered. "Impossible things are becoming the custom here," Moncharmin replied.

At last old Mme Giry was brought in and questioned again, for there was no one in the Opera who moved so quietly or knew so much while pretending to know little. This time her answer was practical enough to make even the directors listen without laughter. She showed them that she herself had once slipped the real

envelope into Richard's coat pocket with such speed and skill that he had not felt her touch at all. If she could do that, then the ghost could do more. Richard turned pale when he understood the elegance of the trick. "So that is how he takes the money," he said. "Directly from my pocket, after I myself have carried it for him."

This discovery solved one mystery only to deepen another. If the ghost could approach them so closely without being seen, then all the stories of hidden corridors, turning panels, secret hands, and watching eyes became more believable than before. The directors argued, accused, defended themselves, and nearly came to open quarrel. Meanwhile the performance that was to matter most that night was already moving toward its dark conclusion. On the stage Christine was to sing once more, and in her dressing room the clothes for flight were waiting. Above and below, behind curtains and within walls, the whole Opera seemed to hold its breath.

Part 12

The fatal evening came at last. Christine was on the stage, dressed in white, and all the strange beauty of her voice seemed to rise higher than ever because it was so near the edge of loss. Raoul, hidden and burning with impatience, watched every movement with the feeling that each minute must be the last one before either freedom or disaster. He had promised to wait for her, to obey her sign, to help her flee at the right moment. But under that promise there beat another certainty in him: Erik knew more than they wished to believe.

The performance moved forward, and yet Raoul could not truly follow it. The painted prison, the music, the lights, the crowd, and the solemn progress of the scene all seemed only a cover laid over a trap. Christine sang as if she were already half beyond the earth, and the white cloth around her gave her the look of someone prepared for burial as much as for triumph. Several times Raoul pressed forward a little, then forced himself back, reminding himself that one false movement could ruin everything. "Not yet," he said to himself. "Not yet. Wait for her sign."

Then the impossible happened with such speed that no one could later say exactly how it had been done. One instant Christine was there, lifted by song and light before the eyes of the whole hall. The next instant she was gone. Not hidden by another actor, not covered by some stage movement, not merely lost in the shifting crowd of a final scene, but gone as if the earth itself had opened beneath her and swallowed her whole. A cry ran through the theater, first uncertain, then louder, and then full of panic.

In the hall, many thought at once that this too must be part of the performance. Some even clapped for a second, imagining a bold theatrical trick. But behind the scenes there was no applause, only disorder. Workmen, singers, dressers, managers, and girls from the ballet all spoke at once. “Where is she?” “Who saw her?” “Was there a trap open?” “Did she faint?” “Was she taken?” The noise spread in all directions, but no clear answer came back. The very confusion of the building seemed to help the mystery.

Raoul had no doubts. In the first shock of the moment he saw only one hand behind the act, only one mind cunning enough, mad enough, and secret enough to seize a woman from the stage itself in the middle of divine music. “Erik!” he thought. “It is Erik.” Then thought ended, and love became pure movement. He threw himself onto the stage in a frenzy that made even the busiest men turn and stare at him. “Christine! Christine!” he cried, as if his voice alone could follow her into the dark.

He ran over the boards like a man mad with grief. Again and again he bent down, listening against the stage as if he might hear her beneath it, calling from some pit or passage under the planks. To him those boards seemed no longer wood, but the thin lid over an abyss. He stamped, knelt, pressed his ear down, and called her once more with such pain in his voice that even the roughest stage hands fell silent for a moment. “Christine! Christine!” But the Opera gave him back no answer.

When he tried to rush toward the stairs leading below, he found them blocked. Doors were shut, passages were watched, and men who did not understand his despair pushed him back with laughter or irritation. To them he looked like a

young lover who had lost his head. “The poor fiancé has gone mad,” one said. Another caught him by the arm and told him not to make a scene. Raoul shook them off, but the delay was enough. Every ordinary road downward had been closed, and the invisible road Erik had taken belonged only to Erik.

In another part of the building, while Christine had vanished and Raoul was tearing himself with useless cries, Secretary Rémy and Administrator Mercier were trying to force their way into the directors’ office. Richard and Moncharmin had locked themselves in there with old Mme Giry, still burning with the matter of the missing money and the ghost’s tricks. Rémy beat at the door and shouted that something unheard of had happened on the stage. From within came only rage and confusion. Moncharmin, wild with suspicion and stubbornness, kept crying for a safety pin as if the whole fate of the Opera depended on that one object.

A clerk at last brought the much desired pin, and the door was slammed again. Rémy returned furious and humiliated. “I could not get in a word,” he said. “He shouted at me for the pin as if he were deaf and blind to all the rest.” Gabriel, who feared the ghost in his own foolish and helpless way, muttered that this too was another blow from F. de l’O. Mercier, growing more anxious with every passing minute, said that if no one else would act, he would go himself and force the news upon them. Gabriel tried to stop him, but Mercier would not be stopped.

He went, knocked, shouted his name, and after some delay the door was opened just a little. Moncharmin stood there pale and distracted. “What do you want?” he demanded. “Christine Daaé has been carried off,” Mercier answered. “They have taken her.” To this Moncharmin, in the mood of a man driven out of his reason by a different terror, replied only, “So much the better for her,” and shut the door again, leaving in Mercier’s hand the safety pin itself. When Mercier returned with that strange proof of the directors’ madness, all who saw it felt the evening sink still farther out of the natural world.

It was at that moment, while they were all staring at the little piece of metal, that a voice asked with heartbreaking simplicity, “Gentlemen, could you tell me where Christine Daaé is?” They turned and saw Raoul de Chagny. Whatever

laughter the question might once have caused died at once on their lips when they saw his face. He looked like a man who had already followed someone to the edge of the grave and had found only emptiness there. No one answered him. No one could. Then, without waiting longer, he was gone again.

He returned to the stage and called for Christine with such desperate tenderness that some thought he truly heard her answer below. He himself believed it. In the fever of his grief, he imagined that her cries were rising faintly through the boards at his feet and that if he could only tear open the stage with his hands he might still reach her. He wandered from one point to another like a man searching the floor of a prison for a trapdoor. Every sound beneath the Opera became to him a sign. Every hollow echo seemed the promise of her voice.

Then, in the middle of this torment, he felt a hand fall lightly on his shoulder. He turned in violent anger, ready to strike. But the same hand rose at once and pressed against silent lips, commanding secrecy. Before him stood a man with dark skin, strange bright eyes, and a fur cap pulled low over his head. It was the Persian. Raoul stared in astonishment, for he knew the figure by sight, as did many in the Opera, though few knew anything of his life. The Persian did not speak. He only held Raoul with his eyes and repeated the sign for silence.

Raoul was about to demand an explanation, but in that very instant the Persian bowed slightly, stepped back, and vanished among the shadows and passages with the speed of one who knew a hundred secret roads. The young man remained alone on the stage, shaken now by a new certainty. If the Persian had come to silence him, then the old man knew something. If he knew something, then the path to Christine was not wholly lost. That small, dark figure disappearing into the mystery of the Opera was the first real sign that despair had not yet won.

Part 13

After the Persian vanished, Raoul did not lose another second. He went straight to the police commissioner, who had just entered the directors' office through the crowd of officers, employees, and curious witnesses. The room itself

was already full of confusion. Richard and Moncharmin, shaken by the disappearance of the twenty thousand francs and by the mystery of the safety pin still fixed in the same place, were in no condition to understand a new disaster. When the commissioner asked, “Is Christine Daaé here?” Richard answered blankly, “No. Why should she be here?”

The commissioner looked from one director to the other with open astonishment. “Because she must be found,” he said in a solemn voice. “She disappeared in the middle of the performance.” Richard repeated the words like a man in a dream. “Disappeared? In the middle of the performance?” Around them the crowd kept a strange silence. Moncharmin, who had gone farther than Richard into terror, said nothing at all, for he had already reached that state in which a man no longer fears one event, but the unknown itself.

Then everyone began talking at once. “How could she disappear?” “Was there a trap?” “Did anyone see her leave?” “Was she carried off?” The commissioner raised his hand and demanded order. He was a practical man, and he had no love for theater panic, but even he could not hide that the case was extraordinary. “Tell me what happened on the stage,” he said. “Tell me who was nearest to her.” Yet before any useful answer could be gathered, Raoul pushed forward with a face so white and desperate that even the officers made way for him.

“Monsieur,” he said to the commissioner, “the man who took Christine Daaé is the Angel of Music, whom they call the Opera Ghost.” Several people gave nervous little laughs, but Raoul went on with complete seriousness. “That is what they call him here, but his true name is—” He got no farther. At that very instant, from somewhere behind him, a dry hand fell again upon his shoulder, and a quiet authority stronger than force commanded him to be still. Raoul turned and saw the Persian’s eyes fixed on him in warning.

A second later the Persian had already drawn back into the crowd. Raoul fought to follow him, but the movement of people between them almost hid him from sight. The commissioner, who had heard only the first wild words, frowned and asked, “Do you really expect me to write in my report that a ghost has stolen

a singer from the stage?" Some of the men around him smiled openly now, and that smile was almost more than Raoul could bear. "Believe what you like," he said. "But if you do not act quickly, you will never see her again."

The commissioner studied him for a moment and then said in a cooler tone, "Monsieur, grief may excuse much, but it does not excuse madness. We shall search the building." Raoul would have answered with anger, but once more he caught sight of the Persian at the edge of the corridor. This time the old man did not merely raise a hand. He made a small movement of the head that clearly meant, "Come now, and come silently." Raoul understood that if any real help was to come, it would not come from the police.

He slipped away from the crowded office and followed the Persian into passages he had never seen before, though he had already wandered widely through the Opera. They moved fast, and yet the Persian made almost no noise. More than once he stopped suddenly, bent his head as if listening to the walls, and then changed direction without a word. At last Raoul could not endure the silence any longer. "Where are you taking me?" he whispered. "To her," the Persian answered. "Or at least as near to her as living men may hope to go."

They crossed a deserted open space deep inside the building, badly lit by one miserable little flame. There the Persian paused and turned to him. "What did you tell the commissioner?" he asked in a very low voice. "I told him that Christine's thief was the Angel of Music, the Opera Ghost, and that his real name was—" "Silence," the Persian cut in sharply. "And did the commissioner believe you?" "No," said Raoul bitterly. "He thought me mad." At that the Persian breathed more freely and answered, "So much the better."

Raoul stared at him. "Better? How can that be better?" "Because," said the Persian, already moving again, "if the police believed too much, they would only make noise, and noise would kill us before we had taken ten steps. We are dealing with a man who hears through doors, through walls, through floors, through ceilings. For all we know, he is listening to us even now." These words, spoken without excitement and almost without emotion, chilled Raoul more deeply than any cry of terror could have done. "Then you know him," he said. "Yes," the

Persian answered. “I know him.”

After more stairs, more turns, and more narrow ways, they reached at last a door that the Persian opened with a small key taken from his waistcoat pocket. Beyond it lay a short passage, and directly opposite was Christine’s dressing room. Raoul stopped in surprise. He had not known there was any way to reach it except the corridor he usually used. “You know the Opera well,” he whispered. The Persian gave a short sad smile and answered, “Less well than he does.”

He pushed Raoul into the dressing room and closed the door behind them. Everything there was exactly as it had been a little before: the little table, the chairs, the costumes, the great mirror, and the silent air of a room that had seen too much. The Persian went at once to the thin panel that separated the dressing room from a storage room behind it. He listened, then coughed strongly. A sound answered from the other side. A few moments later someone knocked softly, and at the Persian’s invitation a man entered dressed much like his master, in a long cloak and an astrakhan cap.

The servant bowed, placed a richly worked box upon the table, and withdrew as silently as he had come. “No one saw you?” the Persian asked him before he left. “No one, master,” the man answered. When he was gone, the Persian opened the box. Inside lay two long pistols of beautiful work, old-fashioned and deadly. “Immediately after the abduction,” he said calmly, “I sent for these.” Raoul took one at once and cried, “At last! At last we do something.” “We shall do all that is humanly possible,” the Persian replied, “but remember that he may stop us before the first steps have ended.”

“Then he is master here?” Raoul asked. “He commands the walls, the doors, the trapdoors, the stones,” the Persian said. “In my country we had a name for him that means the trap-lover, the master of hidden doors.” Raoul looked around the dressing room with new eyes. “Christine used a phrase like that,” he said slowly. “She spoke of him as if the house itself obeyed him.” The Persian nodded. “Because in a sense it does. And because, in another sense, he built what he needed with his own hands.”

Raoul turned sharply toward him. “Built it? Then all that lies below is really

his?" "Enough of it," the Persian answered, "enough to make every honest man hesitate before entering." He then went to the great mirror and pressed upon the wall beside it exactly as Christine had once described. Both men watched. Nothing happened. He pressed again in a different place, and for one trembling instant the mirror seemed to ripple like water. Then it stood still once more. "It does not turn," Raoul whispered. "No," said the Persian, and for the first time a shadow of real anxiety crossed his face.

He listened again, then tried another hidden spring. The mirror trembled faintly and stopped. "It is blocked," he said. "Or else he has changed the mechanism." Raoul stepped closer, pistol in hand, and said, "Break it open." "And warn him that we are here before we have even begun?" the Persian replied. "No. If the mirror does not turn freely, then the direct way is dangerous or closed. We must use another." Raoul's impatience was almost unbearable now. "Every moment may cost Christine her life," he said. "Or save it," the Persian answered. "If he is still speaking with her, all may not yet be lost. If we rush blindly, all is lost."

Then the Persian drew Raoul very close and spoke almost into his ear. "From this instant, silence as much as possible. Be ready to shoot. If I stop, you stop. If I kneel, you kneel. If I throw myself flat, you do the same. And above all, if you feel your courage failing, remember only one thing: we are going into his house." Raoul's hand closed harder around the pistol. He looked once more at the motionless mirror, behind which Christine had disappeared into that other world, and answered in a low steady voice, "Lead on."

Part 14

The Persian took one of the pistols from the box and held it out to Raoul, then closed the lid softly and set it aside. "These are weapons I trust," he said. "But do not imagine that steel or powder will save us unless we also obey his laws." Raoul, who cared for no law now except the need to reach Christine, slipped the pistol into his pocket at once. "Tell me only where to go," he answered.

“That is exactly what I am doing,” said the Persian. “And if you wish to live long enough to see her again, you will listen without arguing.”

He looked at Raoul’s tall hat and shook his head. “That will trouble you in the passages below. Leave it here.” “Below?” Raoul repeated. “So we truly go down under the Opera?” The Persian gave him a grave look. “Where else do you think she is?” he asked. Then, pointing across the hidden passage toward Christine’s dressing room, he added, “Leave the hat in there. It is safer not to carry anything foolish into a place where one may have to creep like an animal.”

Raoul obeyed, though impatiently, and when he came back the Persian had already gone to the door and was listening with his whole body, not only with his ear. At last he opened it a finger’s width and motioned Raoul forward. “From now on,” he whispered, “make as little sound as possible. Do not trust any wall, any floor, any ceiling, or any darkness. He may be in none of them, and yet he may hear from all of them.” Raoul felt his anger rise again at such talk, but the Persian’s face was too serious to laugh at.

They went out and crossed the little passage in silence. The Persian moved with a strange mixture of age and skill. He was not young, and yet he seemed to know exactly how to place each step so that the building itself would not hear him. More than once Raoul thought they must surely be going in circles, for they climbed, turned, descended, and passed through doors that seemed to open into other doors. At last they reached a great deserted space, badly lit by a miserable little lamp burning behind glass.

There the Persian stopped and bent toward him again. “One thing more,” he said. “Keep one hand raised as if you were about to fire, with the arm bent and the hand near the level of the eye.” Raoul stared at him. “What use is that? If I am to shoot, I want the pistol in my hand.” “The pistol may remain in your pocket if you like,” replied the Persian. “But the hand must stay in position.” Raoul almost protested aloud, then checked himself and asked only, “Why?” The Persian answered, “Because it is a question of life and death, and that is enough.”

They continued, and after many unknown stairs and passages they entered the region under the stage itself. Raoul saw little of it except broken lines, vast

shadows, and here and there the weak light of small lamps in glass. Yet even in that poor light he understood that he was moving through a monstrous machine. There were beams, posts, wheels, ropes, platforms, frames, rails, counterweights, drums, and strange wooden and iron shapes ready to lift palaces, swallow princes, reveal gods, or make demons rise laughing out of the earth. The place was childish and terrible at the same time, like a toy made for giants.

The Persian went first and often paused to listen. Raoul did not dare speak, but he could not help wondering how any man could know such a labyrinth well enough to cross it at night. At one point the old man climbed back a few steps, listened hard, then returned and murmured, “We have been foolish. Soon we shall be rid of the shadows with lanterns. They are only the firemen making their rounds.” The words brought Raoul some comfort, but only for a moment, because at once the Persian’s hand ordered him to stop again.

They waited a long time in complete silence. Then the Persian suddenly breathed, “Flat on the floor.” Both men threw themselves down at once, and not a second too soon. A shadow without any lantern passed close beside them, a mere darker thing moving within the dark, wrapped from head to foot in a cloak, with a soft felt hat pulled low. It came so near that they felt the warm air stirred by its clothing against their faces. The shadow went on hugging the wall and sometimes striking the corners with its foot as if testing them.

When it had gone, the Persian let out a long breath. “We escaped narrowly,” he whispered. “That shadow knows me and has twice brought me back to the directors’ office.” Raoul asked, “Is it someone from the theater police?” “Someone worse,” replied the Persian. “Worse?” Raoul repeated. “Then is it he?” The Persian shook his head. “No. If he comes toward us, we shall usually see his golden eyes first. That is one of the few strengths we have in the dark.”

They went on again, deeper this time, until the whole air seemed to change. The Persian lit his shaded lantern for a moment and showed two enormous corridors crossing each other under low vaults that disappeared into black distance. “We must be in the part used by the water service,” he said. “I do not see any glow from the furnaces.” He moved ahead with care, hiding the light whenever he

feared the approach of one of the underground workers, and once they had to step aside from the dying glare of a kind of subterranean forge. Raoul remembered then that Christine had once spoken of demons she had seen during her first terrible journey below, and he understood how easily workers in half darkness, red fire, and sweat could become demons in the mind of a frightened girl.

The Persian finally laid a hand on a wall and stopped. “If I am not mistaken,” he said, “this wall belongs to the house by the lake.” Raoul felt a cold shock. “Then we are near him?” “Near one of his outer shells,” answered the Persian. He struck lightly on the wall and listened, then struck again, not as a man knocking at a door, but as a man who knows that a house may hide another house behind it. “The builders had to protect the Opera from the water here,” he whispered. “So the whole thing was made with double envelopes, one wall behind another. That has served honest men poorly and him very well.”

He went on tracing the surface with his fingers, then suddenly stiffened and listened. No answer came except far-off steps somewhere high above them in the theater. At once he shaded the lantern again and whispered, “Attention. Guard the hand. We are going to try once more to get into his home.” They turned back and climbed part of the way they had descended until they reached, by slow and careful stages, the third level below the stage. There the Persian made Raoul kneel, and both advanced on their knees and one hand, while the other hand remained in that absurd and exhausting posture the old man had ordered.

Soon they came to a rear wall partly hidden by an abandoned scene from *The King of Lahore*. Near it stood a great frame, and between the canvas and the frame there was just enough room for a body to slip through. Raoul recognized the place with horror when the Persian murmured, “Here.” It was there that Joseph Buquet had once been found hanging. The memory of the dead stage-hand, his vanished rope, and all the ghost stories around his death came back with dreadful force, but the Persian had already dropped to both knees and was entering the narrow space.

Raoul followed close behind. The Persian felt along the wall as he had once done at Christine’s mirror. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then Raoul saw him press more strongly in one spot, and a stone turned inward without a sound.

A black opening appeared in the wall. This time the Persian drew his pistol fully from his pocket, cocked it, and motioned Raoul to do the same. Then, still on his knees, he entered the hole in the wall, and Raoul, though he wished to go first, had no choice but to follow.

The passage was narrow, tight, and rough. Very soon the Persian stopped. Raoul heard him feeling the stone around him in the dark, then saw a brief ray from the shaded lantern. The old man bent forward, examined something below, and put the light out again at once. “We must let ourselves drop several feet without making a sound,” he whispered. “Take off your shoes.” He was already removing his own. In that cramped black place, with stone against his shoulders and an unseen depth before him, Raoul obeyed silently. The Persian passed his shoes back to him and added, “Set them on the other side of the wall. We shall find them again when we return.”

Part 15

After placing the shoes beyond the wall, Raoul waited in the narrow black opening while the Persian listened one last time below them. Then the old man whispered, “Now,” and let himself drop. Raoul heard only the faintest sound, like cloth touching dust. A second later he followed, landing badly on one foot but recovering without a cry. They were now in complete darkness again, in a hidden place that smelled of old wood, stone, and long-buried misery.

The Persian touched his sleeve and guided him forward by the arm. Step by step, feeling with their bare feet and hands, they crossed a cramped secret chamber whose walls seemed close and rough. Raoul understood only gradually that this was no ordinary passage but one of those forgotten cells used in the evil days of civil war, a place where men had once been shut away and left to wait in fear. Even without seeing the walls, he felt the weight of that memory pressing in upon them. Yet the Persian gave him no time to think, for they had already reached another hidden exit and another descent into the lower body of the Opera.

Once more the old man insisted on the same strange rule. “The hand,” he

breathed. “Always the hand high, near the eye.” Raoul obeyed, though the position wearied him and seemed more foolish than ever now that they were barefoot, armed, and moving through underground blackness like thieves or hunted men. “This is madness,” he whispered. “No,” the Persian answered. “It is caution. With him, caution is the last form of reason.” Then they moved on again, bent low under stone and beam, and the Opera opened beneath them like a second city built for shadows.

Soon they heard a voice above them, loud and official, calling men to the stage. After that came the sound of old feet and dragging steps, and the Persian pulled Raoul behind a standing frame to hide. Through cracks and darkness they saw ancient workmen passing, bent by years and by the long burden of theater labor. These were the old door-closers, the poor tired men who spent their last useful strength hunting drafts for the sake of singers’ throats. Their presence saved Raoul and the Persian from being discovered by idle sleepers hidden below, but the safety did not last long.

Other shadows appeared almost at once, descending where the old men had climbed. These new figures carried little lanterns and moved them sharply to right and left, searching walls, stairs, corners, and hollows. “They are looking for someone,” the Persian murmured. “And if they look well enough, they may find us.” Then his tone changed from low caution to urgent command. “Quickly. Downward. The hand high, monsieur, always high. Leave the pistol where it is if you must, but keep the arm ready as I told you.” Without waiting for argument, he drew Raoul down toward the fourth level and then farther still.

At the fifth level they paused, and for a moment the Persian seemed to breathe more freely. Even there, however, he did not lower his arm from that odd half-dueling posture, and Raoul began once more to wonder whether the old man had lost some part of his reason in the service of terrible knowledge. Yet there was no time even for inward mockery. The Persian went back up a few steps, listened, then returned and whispered, “We are fools. Those lanterns will soon be gone. They are only the firemen on their rounds.” They waited again in silence, and the underground dark seemed to thicken around them like water.

Suddenly the Persian froze and threw out his hand. “Flat,” he breathed. Both men dropped full length onto the ground, and none too soon. An unlit shadow passed close over them, so close that they felt the warm movement of its cloak upon their faces. It wore a soft hat and kept to the walls, touching them now and then with its foot as if testing the corners. When at last it moved away, the Persian let out a long breath and whispered, “We escaped well there. That shadow knows me. Twice it has brought me back to the directors’ office.”

“Is it one of the theater police?” Raoul asked. “Something worse,” the Persian replied. “Worse than the police?” Raoul repeated. “Then was it he?” The Persian shook his head in the dark. “No. If he comes toward us, we usually have one advantage. We see the gold of his eyes first.” That answer gave little comfort. It only reminded Raoul that in such darkness a man might think himself alone while a terrible watcher stood already within reach of his throat.

They went on again until the air changed and the whole underground seemed to widen around them. Once the Persian uncovered his dark lantern for an instant, and in that weak beam Raoul saw long vaulted corridors crossing one another at right angles and vanishing into endless shadow. Here and there came signs of hidden labor: pipes, damp walls, the smell of machinery, and farther off the dying red of a subterranean fire. Near one such glow Raoul recognized the same infernal workers Christine had once described from her first journey below. “The demons,” he whispered before he could stop himself. “Only men,” said the Persian, “but I understand why she believed otherwise.”

Step by step they crossed this depth where the very foundations of the Opera seemed to rest upon darkness and water. The Persian explained in a few quiet words that the building had been made with double walls below, because the earth there was full of underground water that could not be fully conquered. “They drained oceans to raise this monument,” he murmured, touching one wall as he spoke. “And yet they had to leave a lake.” At that word Raoul felt his heart strike hard against his ribs, for now they were truly near the hidden kingdom of Erik. The Persian tapped the wall with the back of his fingers and whispered, “If I am not mistaken, this belongs to the outer shell of the house by the lake.”

But before either man could go farther, a new horror appeared in the passage before them. It came first as a strange brightness moving in the dark at the level of a human head. Then the brightness shaped itself into a face, or into something that mocked a face, red and burning and without any body beneath it. The eyes were round and fixed, the mouth large and hanging, the nose crooked, and the whole thing floated forward like a flame taught to wear human features. “God help us,” the Persian whispered between his teeth. “So the fire officer had spoken the truth.”

Even then the old man thought first of defense. “Your hand,” he hissed. “Higher, higher, near the eye. Do not forget it now.” The fiery face kept coming toward them without support, without body, without visible means of movement, and behind it rose a dreadful noise that seemed at first like one sound and then like hundreds. It was a scraping, scratching, shrieking sound, as if a thousand dry claws were dragging themselves over stone and iron at once. “This is not he,” said the Persian, though fear shook even his whisper. “But he may be using it. He may attack from behind while we stare at this.”

They fled. There was nothing heroic in that retreat, only instinct and terror and the wish to escape an incomprehensible thing. Down the corridor they ran barefoot, their breaths tearing in their throats, while behind them the red face glided and the scratching multitude followed with growing speed. After some moments that seemed far longer than time itself, they dared to stop and turn. The head of fire had followed them and had come nearer. The grotesque face was clearer now, and the horrible noise beneath it sounded less like one creature than like a whole living swarm.

At last they could retreat no farther and flattened themselves against the wall. The fiery head advanced still, and with it came the crawling, crowded rustle of many little bodies. Then the truth showed itself in a single dreadful wave. Under the burning face, running together in the dark, came a mass of rats, hundreds of them, perhaps more, driven forward by the light and terror above them. The head of fire itself was some monstrous lantern or mask set to move at a man’s height, but the rats were real, and they swarmed past so thickly that Raoul felt the brush

of fur and tails against his bare feet and nearly cried aloud in disgust.

The whole infernal procession swept by them at last, red face first, then the living black flood, then the fading shriek and scrape of their passage. For some moments neither Raoul nor the Persian moved. Then the old man straightened slowly and said in a dry voice, “Another of his jokes, perhaps, or another of his guards. In this house one does not always know which is worse.” Raoul, shuddering from head to foot, looked again toward the wall the Persian had named. Somewhere beyond it lay the lake, the hidden house, Christine, and Erik. “Then let us finish with his jokes,” he said. “Let us go on.”

Part 16

The Persian dropped first, and a moment later Raoul followed him into the darkness below. He had scarcely reached the ground when a pair of arms caught him and held him fast for an instant. “It is I,” whispered the Persian into his ear. “Silence.” Raoul listened with all his strength, hoping, fearing, begging inwardly to hear Christine call out from somewhere near them. But there was nothing, not a cry, not a moan, not even the weak sound of a struggle.

That silence was more terrible to him than noise would have been. “Are we too late?” he thought, and the thought struck him like a knife. The Persian still held him by the sleeve, as if even grief might make a sound in such a place. For several long seconds neither man moved. Then, with a care so great that the act seemed almost sacred, the Persian opened his shaded lantern a little.

A soft yellow light spread over the nearest space, and Raoul found himself in a room unlike anything he had imagined. It was not a dungeon, not a cave, not the den of some filthy beast hidden below the Opera. It was a room with furniture, with carpets, with a strange air of quiet domestic life, and in the middle there played a little fountain whose delicate water rose and fell with a low silver murmur. “The house,” Raoul breathed. “Yes,” said the Persian. “We are in his house.”

The sight shook him deeply, because it made Erik at once more human and more dreadful. A man who could build such a home under the earth, beside a

secret lake, and live there listening to music and water was not only a mad kidnapper or a walking terror. He was also a lonely mind that had arranged beauty around itself in darkness. Yet Raoul could not pity him then. He looked wildly from chair to curtain, from wall to doorway, and whispered, “Christine is not here.”

The Persian raised his hand for caution. “Not so loud,” he said. “If she is not in this room, she may be in the next.” Raoul forced himself to master his breathing, though every pulse in his body cried to search, to call, to break open doors with his hands. The Persian moved the lantern a little farther and showed him more of the place. There was an organ, a table, shelves, and objects chosen with real taste. Nothing in the room was coarse or careless. The horror lay not in ugliness, but in the quiet order of a life built below the world.

“He lives here like a gentleman,” Raoul murmured bitterly. “Like a prisoner who has made himself king,” replied the Persian. He then pointed toward the darkness beyond the room and added, “Do not forget where we are. One careless step, one foolish word, and the walls themselves may answer him.” Raoul nodded, and for once he asked no more questions. He had begun to understand that here every object might serve two masters, the eye and the trap.

They moved forward on bare feet, the Persian leading, the lantern almost closed again. The little fountain behind them seemed now like the only innocent thing in the whole house. Ahead, the air changed. It grew wider, colder, and fuller of the smell of water. Raoul knew at once that the lake must be near. “No farther that way unless I tell you,” the Persian whispered. “The lake is his strongest defense.” Raoul drew back obediently, though the instinct to run forward nearly tore him apart.

Then both men stopped. From somewhere deeper in the house came a sound so faint that at first Raoul thought it was no more than a change in the movement of the water. But it came again, and now there was no doubt. It was music, slow and broken, as if a tired hand were moving over keys in thought rather than performance. The Persian closed his eyes for a moment and listened. “He is at work,” he whispered. “Or he was, a moment ago.” “Then Christine is with him,” Raoul said. “Perhaps,” the Persian answered. “Or perhaps she is in another room,

waiting.”

They advanced again, and now the Persian seemed less certain of every step. He touched the walls with his fingertips, then the floor with the edge of his foot, then the wall again, as though the house itself kept shifting around him. “He changes things,” he murmured once, more to himself than to Raoul. “Not the great lines, perhaps, but enough to kill a man who trusts memory too much.” Raoul heard that and felt a cold weight settle in his stomach. They were inside Erik’s house, yes, but being inside did not mean they knew anything at all.

At one point the Persian bent, examined the floor closely in the weak light, and drew back at once. “Not there,” he said. “Why?” Raoul asked. “Because the floor wishes to be touched too much,” replied the Persian. “That is never a good sign here.” They went around by another way, close to the wall, and came at last to what seemed a narrow inner passage hidden behind hanging cloth. Beyond it was another room, darker than the first and strangely hot. The air did not move there. It seemed to wait.

Raoul was about to step in when the Persian caught him by the chest and held him back. “Listen first,” he whispered. They listened, and after some moments Raoul thought he heard very far away a low sound like someone breathing through pain. “Christine?” he almost said, but the Persian pressed a hand over his mouth. Both men remained still. The sound came again, yet now it seemed to come not from the room before them, but from behind the wall on the right. “Another hidden chamber,” the Persian said softly. “Or a speaking wall. With him, one cannot tell.”

The Persian set down the lantern for a moment and searched the wall with both hands. Raoul watched every movement, leaning so close that he could feel the old man’s breath. At last something yielded under the Persian’s fingers, not with a click, but with a faint inward sigh. A line opened in the dark, straight and narrow as if the house itself had parted its lips. “Be ready,” whispered the Persian. “For what?” asked Raoul. The old man answered, “For whatever he has prepared for those who come too near the center.”

They passed through the opening together. At once the air changed again. It

was drier now, more still, and touched with a heat that was not natural to the underground. The wall behind them moved back into place, and the small sound of it closing seemed far louder than any cry. Raoul turned sharply and put out both hands, but he could no longer find the line by which they had entered. “The door,” he said. “Where is the door?” The Persian did not answer at once.

He had lifted the lantern higher and was looking around with a face suddenly gray with understanding. The room into which they had stepped was not furnished like the others. It was bare in a deliberate way, almost elegant, but cruelly so, as if comfort had been studied only to be denied. The walls shone strangely, and the heat pressed close from all sides. Then the Persian spoke at last, and his voice was heavy with the knowledge of a man who has feared one particular thing for years and now sees it before him. “We have been expected,” he said. “This is the torture chamber.”

Part 17

Raoul turned toward the Persian in horror. “The torture chamber?” he repeated. The old man nodded once and spoke in the low, firm voice of someone who had no right to panic because panic would kill them. “Yes,” he said. “I have feared this room for years. Erik built such things long ago for princes in the East, and he has made one here for himself. If he shuts us in properly, we may die without ever seeing the hand that kills us.”

Raoul looked around again, trying to understand what sort of room could deserve such a name. At first it seemed almost empty. There were smooth shining walls, lines that broke and returned, and strange depths where no true depth could exist. The Persian lifted the lantern a little higher and then lowered it at once. “That is enough,” he whispered. “Too much light helps the room. It was made to deceive the eyes before it destroys the body.”

“Then explain it to me,” Raoul said, struggling to keep his voice steady. “How does it work?” The Persian answered, “With mirrors, heat, and despair.” He touched one of the shining surfaces with the back of his fingers and drew them

away quickly. “Soon the walls will grow hot. The eyes will begin to lose themselves in false distance, false trees, false roads, false skies. Men run toward what they think is escape and strike only glass or polished steel. After that come thirst, fever, madness, and death.”

Raoul clenched his fists. “Then we break the walls,” he said. “If there is glass, we break it. If there is iron, we shoot it.” “And if the bullet returns to us?” the Persian asked quietly. “And if the broken piece opens not a road but another trap? No, monsieur. In this room strength is less useful than patience. That is why I told you to keep your hand raised. A man must always know where his own body truly stands when everything around him begins to lie.”

Even while they spoke, the chamber had already begun to change. What had first seemed only smooth walls now widened and multiplied in the half-light. Long dark lines appeared where there had been none, and these lines soon looked like tree trunks stretching away into impossible distance. Here and there pale spaces opened between them like narrow paths. Above, the reflections climbed and crossed until the ceiling became a confused roof of leaves, branches, and hot sky.

Raoul stared and then took a step back. “A forest,” he whispered. “Yes,” said the Persian. “The forest of the torture chamber.” The old man turned slowly in place, studying the false roads with narrow, suspicious eyes. “Do not trust anything that invites you forward,” he added. “And do not separate from me for any reason. If you lose me here, you lose more than me.” Raoul answered, “I understand,” but his eyes were already hurting from trying to decide which shadows were real.

Then a voice broke over them so suddenly that Raoul almost fired. It came from the left, then the right, then above them, and at last from behind their own shoulders, all in the space of a few seconds. It was Erik’s voice, mocking, musical, and full of poisoned play. “Welcome, gentlemen,” it said. “Welcome to my little bag of life and death. How do you like my forest? Have you come to take Christine from me? Then walk, walk, my fine gentlemen. There are charming roads everywhere.”

Raoul cried out, “Coward! Show yourself!” At once the voice laughed close to his ear, though there was no one beside him. “Why should I show myself?” it asked. “You are already seeing too much.” The Persian seized Raoul’s arm. “Do not answer him,” he whispered. “He wants your anger. Anger makes men run, and in this room running is the first step toward death.” But Erik went on speaking, now in one place, now in another, as if the walls themselves were amused. He mocked Carlotta, repeated the sound of her ruined note, and laughed at old stories of the Opera until the whole chamber seemed alive with his mouth.

Then, beneath the mockery, they heard another voice. It was Christine’s. Faint at first, then clearer, it came through some tiny hidden opening beyond the mirrors. “Erik! Erik!” she cried. “You tire me with your voice. Be quiet, Erik. Do you not feel how hot it is here?” At once came Erik’s answer, soft and almost tender now. “Yes, my dear Christine. The heat is becoming hard to bear.” Raoul sprang forward at the sound of her suffering, but the Persian held him back with all his strength.

“Where is she?” Raoul whispered hoarsely. “Behind one of these walls,” said the Persian. “Very near, perhaps, and yet impossible to reach if we choose the wrong way.” Christine’s voice came again, filled now with distress. “What is this? The wall is warm. The wall is burning.” Erik answered with horrible gentleness, “That is because of the forest next door.” “The forest?” she repeated in fear. “What do you mean?” Then his laughter rose and spread around the chamber. “Did you not see that it was a forest from the Congo?”

The words were followed by a terrible burst of mirth that echoed from wall to wall until even Christine’s weaker cries were nearly lost in it. Raoul pressed both hands against the nearest shining surface as if he could force his way through by pure grief. “Christine!” he shouted. “Christine, I am here!” But either she did not hear him or Erik drowned out his voice at once with another laugh and a fresh shower of cruel little phrases tossed from mirror to mirror. The Persian drew Raoul away before he broke his hands against the heated wall.

“Listen to me,” the old man said. “This is exactly what he wants. He wants us to waste our strength before the real agony begins.” Raoul turned on him wildly.

“The real agony? Can there be more than hearing her suffer behind the wall while I stand useless?” The Persian answered, “Yes. Much more. The heat is only beginning, and the room has not yet fully become what it was made to be.” As he spoke, he touched the wall again and this time did not need to warn Raoul. The stone itself seemed to breathe fire.

They began to move together, slowly and with the greatest care, one hand raised, one hand ready, testing each apparent road before trusting it even for a step. But every direction offered another line of trees, another opening, another false depth. Once Raoul saw what looked like a clear path and almost took it, then realized just in time that he was about to walk straight into his own reflection. Another time he thought he saw the Persian three steps ahead and reached out, only to touch cold mirrored emptiness. Sweat was already gathering on his face and neck.

The air thickened. It no longer felt like underground air, but like the breath of an oven slowly closed. The little lantern became harder to use because its weak truth fought against a hundred lying lights born out of the mirrors. Sometimes the forest looked black and wet as if rain had just passed over it. Sometimes it seemed dry, yellow, and waiting to burn. Always it remained false, and yet the body reacted to it as if it were real. Raoul’s throat tightened, and he understood how a man could lose reason there long before he lost life.

At last the Persian stopped and bowed his head as if listening not to the room, but to some memory older than the room. “The tortures have begun,” he said. “From now on, every minute matters.” Raoul leaned against a wall, then drew back from its growing heat and looked around at the endless lying forest that closed them in on all sides. Somewhere beyond that burning maze Christine was still with Erik, and somewhere within the maze Erik’s laughter was waiting to return.

Part 18

The heat rose steadily. It did not come in one violent wave, but in slow layers

that wrapped themselves around the body and pressed closer with every minute. The false forest deepened too, until the chamber seemed no longer to contain two men, but to stretch into an endless wilderness of trunks, leaves, and burning sky. Raoul put a hand to his face and found it wet. “This air is killing us,” he whispered. “Yes,” said the Persian. “That is its purpose.”

Once again Erik’s voice came to them through the mirrors, now sweet, now mocking, now almost cheerful in its cruelty. “Well, gentlemen,” it said, “do you like my little room? It is very useful. It was made for a sultan who feared spies and did not care to stain his hands with blood. Men lose themselves here. They become thirsty, then wild, then ridiculous. After that, they die.” Raoul cried back, “Monster! Christine, do not listen to him!” At once Erik answered with a laugh, “But she must listen to me. She is my wife.”

Christine’s voice came through the hidden opening again, weak and trembling, yet still clear enough to tear Raoul’s heart. “Erik,” she said, “why do you speak like that? Open the door. I beg you. You are hurting me.” Erik replied in a tone almost tender, “Hurting you, my dear? No. I am only asking you to choose. You know very well what I ask. It is either the wedding mass or the mass for the dead.” At those words the Persian bent his head and muttered, “There. He returns to it always.”

Raoul turned toward the wall as if he could force his way through by the sound alone. “Christine!” he cried. “Do not answer him. I am here. I will save you.” But the chamber caught his voice, twisted it, and threw it back at him from twenty false directions. One echo seemed to speak from above, another from behind a mirror-tree, and another from the heated floor itself. The Persian seized him and said, “Do not waste yourself. He has arranged it all so that your courage becomes his amusement.” Raoul struck the nearest shining surface with the flat of his hand and almost fell, for it burned him like hot metal.

Then Christine spoke once more, and now fear had become openly visible in her voice. “The walls are hotter still,” she said. “Erik, I cannot breathe. Let me out of this room.” Erik answered, “That depends, my love. If there is no one in the torture chamber, then all is well. But if there is someone in there, if some

curious visitor has slipped in behind the walls, then perhaps we must make a little more heat, so that truth may come out." The Persian closed his eyes. "He suspects us," he whispered. "Or he wants her to believe he suspects us."

A bright light suddenly burst above them, and both men looked up. High near the ceiling a hidden panel had become transparent, and through it a stream of light poured into the chamber. The forest became sharper, more impossible, and more painful to the eyes. Raoul saw then that the Persian had been right from the beginning. The room was made not only to heat the body, but to destroy judgment. Every line wavered, every distance lied, and the very brightness became another torture.

Beyond the wall they heard Erik speaking again, this time with the delighted patience of a teacher forcing a child to learn a cruel lesson. "Look, Christine," he said. "Climb the little ladder. Yes, there. Do you see the bright window? If there is anyone in the torture chamber, you will see it now. If there is no one, then you may stop trembling." Christine answered in terror, "I do not want to look. I do not care about the chamber any longer. Please, Erik, I am afraid of the dark, I am afraid of the light, I am afraid of everything here." Erik laughed softly and said, "Then look all the same."

The next cry that came from Christine told them she had looked. "No!" she cried. "No, there are trees, fire, a whole forest. What is that place? Who would put such a place in a house?" Erik answered with pride, and his pride was more terrible than his anger. "It is a forest from the Congo, my dear. It is very beautiful. Men lose themselves in it. They thirst in it. They die in it. It is one of my inventions." The Persian pressed his lips together and murmured, "He is boasting now. When he boasts, he is dangerous and careless at the same time."

For a few moments there was silence beyond the wall except for Christine's unsteady breathing. Then Erik spoke again, but in a different voice now, lower and more intimate. "Christine," he said, "why make me suffer like this? *Don Juan Triumphant* is finished. I want to live like everyone else now. I want a wife, a quiet house, music, evenings, Sundays, ordinary things. Why should I not have them? Why should I always remain alone under the earth?" Christine's answer

came slowly, and Raoul could hear tears in it. “Because you terrify me,” she said. “Because everything around you terrifies me.”

“Then love me a little,” Erik replied. “If you loved me, nothing would terrify you. Tell me yes. Tell me yes to the wedding mass, and I open everything. I make the walls cool. I let your little viscount live, if he is not already dead. I let the world go on.” Raoul sprang forward at this and shouted, “I am alive, and I will kill you before you touch her again.” But his cry only fed the chamber. Erik’s laughter rolled around them at once. “Excellent,” the voice said. “So there are indeed guests in my forest.”

The Persian pulled Raoul away from the wall with almost desperate force. “Enough,” he said. “Now he knows, or chooses to know, and we must think of more than rage.” Raoul, nearly wild, answered, “Think? While he bargains with her like that?” “Yes,” said the Persian with fierce calm. “Because if we do not think, he will marry her, kill us, and perhaps blow half the Opera into the air before morning.” Raoul stared at him. “Blow up the Opera?” The Persian nodded toward the floor. “Why do you think I am listening not only to the walls, but to the ground?”

They forced themselves to move again through the shining forest, following no apparent path, testing every space with extreme care. The heat drove them first one way, then another, and more than once Raoul nearly rushed into his own burning reflection. At last the Persian stopped suddenly and said, “There must be water somewhere below this chamber. If I remember correctly, he planned such things with both fire and water in mind.” They knelt and searched the lower edges of the walls, then the floor, then the corners where the reflections broke. At first they found nothing but smooth heated surfaces and narrow lines of iron.

Then the Persian touched something hollow. He listened, knocked again, and listened a second time. “This way,” he whispered. They followed the wall into a more obscure section of the chamber, where the false forest thinned a little and the reflections became broken by darker shapes. There, lined in two neat rows, stood a number of small barrels. Raoul bent over them in surprise. “Barrels?” he said. “Yes,” replied the Persian. “Too many barrels.” He ran his fingers over one

lid, then another, searching for some sign that one had been opened and used.

All the barrels were tightly sealed. “They look full,” Raoul murmured. “Then let us know of what,” said the Persian. They raised one a little and felt its heavy weight. After that the Persian drew a small knife and began to work at a bung while Raoul held the lantern near. At that exact moment both men froze. From somewhere far away, and yet also from very near, there came a monotonous street cry in a sing-song rhythm known to every Parisian ear: “Barrels! Barrels! Have you any barrels to sell?”

Raoul looked around wildly. “Did you hear it?” he whispered. “Yes,” said the Persian, and for the first time his hand truly trembled. The cry came again, farther off now, but still impossibly close, as if it had passed through the wood itself and was retreating inside one of the barrels. “Barrels! Barrels! Have you any barrels to sell?” Raoul stared at the cask beneath his hands and said, “It is singing from inside.” They went around it, listened, heard nothing more, and then returned to the bung with greater urgency than before.

“Hold it steady,” said the Persian. Raoul braced the barrel, and with one sharp effort the old man forced the bung free. At once a dry substance poured into Raoul’s waiting palms. “This is not water,” he said. The Persian leaned close to the light, saw what lay there, and in the same instant threw the lantern away from them so violently that it shattered in the dark. “Do not move,” he said at once in a strangled whisper. “Do not breathe too hard. That is powder.”

Part 19

Raoul did not move. Even after the Persian had whispered the word, even after the shattered lantern had gone dark, he kept his hands frozen over the open barrel as if fear itself had turned him into wood. Powder. Under their feet, around them, near the burning chamber, near the hidden rooms, near the lake, near the whole body of the Opera, there were barrels of powder enough to blow up not only the house above them, but streets beyond it. The old man’s warning had come just in time.

“Back,” the Persian breathed. “Slowly. Do not strike anything.” Together they retreated from the opened barrel until they reached a safer patch of floor near the wall. In the dark they could no longer see the false forest clearly, but that did not save them from it. Now that the lantern was gone, the chamber became worse in another way. The heat remained, the mirrors still lied, and the darkness itself began to invent shapes. Raoul could not tell whether he was standing beside the Persian or only beside another reflection of emptiness.

“So that is his last threat,” Raoul whispered. “He would kill all Paris with us.” “No,” said the Persian softly. “Not all Paris. But enough of Paris to satisfy a despairing madman who wants the world to notice his wedding.” Raoul’s hands shook with rage. “Then let us find him now and shoot him.” “And if we walk one step too far and touch fire, iron, powder, or water in the wrong order?” replied the Persian. “No, monsieur. We are alive because we still think. Keep thinking.”

Then Erik’s voice returned, more distant than before and yet perfectly clear. It came through the hidden walls with that dreadful calm he used when his mind had gone past ordinary anger and entered some colder region. “Mademoiselle,” he said, “you have seen the forest. Now I must speak very plainly. If the grasshopper is turned, we all jump. Under our feet there is enough powder to blow up part of Paris. If the scorpion is turned, all that powder is drowned. You will make a beautiful wedding gift of life to the good people above us.”

Christine gave a cry that was not loud, but full of such suffering that both men in the chamber felt it more than they heard it. “No,” she said. “No. You are lying to me. You want to trick me.” Erik answered in that same white, tired voice, “Why should I lie now? I am too tired for lies. I ask so little. Turn the scorpion, my dear Christine, and we shall marry. Turn the grasshopper, and the whole matter ends for everyone.” The Persian bowed his head. “He is near the edge,” he whispered. “When he speaks like that, a single word may decide between tenderness and massacre.”

Raoul had already dropped to his knees. Not from weakness, but from the simple knowledge that there was nothing left to do except pray, listen, and suffer. He pressed one hand against his chest as if to steady the beating of his heart. The

heat was growing worse now. Every breath seemed to carry fire into his lungs, and yet the colder terror was in his mind. If Christine turned the wrong figure, either by mistake or because Erik deceived her, then all three of them might vanish with half the theater above them.

Time began to move strangely. The chamber held silence the way an oven holds heat, and each second grew larger than the one before it. At last Erik spoke again. “If in two minutes,” he said, “you have not turned the scorpion, I shall turn the grasshopper myself.” Raoul shut his eyes. The Persian made no sound. Beyond the wall, Christine did not answer at once. That silence was more fearful than any scream. One could almost hear her mind moving between horror and uncertainty.

For she had reason to hesitate. Erik had lied, threatened, tricked, and dominated so often that even now truth itself sounded like another trick in his mouth. If she saved Raoul, she might kill the Opera. If she saved the Opera, she might condemn herself to marriage with a man she feared. If she refused to choose, Erik would choose for her. Such was the net he had drawn around her. Raoul understood that now with unbearable clarity, and because he understood it, he could not call to her. Any word from him might push her toward the very disaster he feared.

The silence deepened. Then Erik said softly, almost sweetly, “The two minutes are gone. Good-bye, mademoiselle. Jump, grasshopper.” Christine gave a sudden desperate cry and, from the sound of it, seemed to have flung herself physically toward him. “Erik!” she cried. “Swear to me. Swear on your infernal love that it is the scorpion I must turn.” “Yes,” said Erik. “For our wedding.” “You see!” she answered in terror. “We shall jump.” “At our wedding,” replied Erik. “The scorpion opens the dance. That is all. But enough of this. If you do not want the scorpion, then the grasshopper is mine.”

Then there came a confusion of voices, cries, and movement so violent that Raoul and the Persian both started up together. It seemed to them that Christine was struggling with Erik’s hand itself, trying to stop him from reaching the fatal lever. Raoul could bear no more. He joined his own shout to Christine’s, and for one wild instant he was ready to throw himself headlong through any wall, mirror,

or fire between them. But before he could move, another sound cut through the chamber: a heavy mechanism shifting somewhere below the floor.

“She has chosen,” said the Persian. His voice was hoarse with strain. “Which one?” Raoul whispered. But the old man did not answer. He was listening downward now, not upward, and that fact frightened Raoul more than words could have done. Under their bare feet the floor seemed to tremble very slightly, as if distant water had been called and had begun to obey. A moment later a low rush passed through the walls around them, not yet a flood, not yet disaster, but the promise of both.

“Back to the wall,” the Persian said quickly. “And stay together.” They obeyed. The heat of the torture chamber had not ceased, but something else was happening beneath it. The chamber no longer felt dry. A new coldness entered through the floor, mixed with damp air rising from below. Then, in the dark near their ankles, something touched Raoul’s skin. He jerked back, thinking first of rats again, but it was water. “It is coming in,” he said. “Yes,” replied the Persian. “Then she turned the scorpion.”

The water did not rush at once to the knee or waist. It crept in first, thin and searching, feeling its way through hidden channels, then gathering itself. Soon both men could hear it clearly. It slid along the edges of the chamber, lapped at the false walls, and found the lower joins in the mirrored forest. The chamber, which had been made to kill by heat and thirst, was becoming a second kind of death. “Can he drown us here too?” Raoul asked. “He can do almost anything in his own house,” said the Persian. “That has always been the trouble.”

Erik’s voice came one last time through the wall, and now it was strangely changed. It was no longer cold with decision, but shaken by some deeper force, whether triumph, despair, or love turned monstrous. “Very well,” he said. “Very well, my dear Christine.” After that there was no answer from her, and the silence on her side became almost worse than before. Raoul strained to hear even the smallest sign of her breathing, but the water had grown louder. It now washed over the floor in quick dark streams, and each moment the level rose.

“We cannot stay here,” Raoul said. “No,” answered the Persian. “But we

must not rush blindly either." He bent, felt the course of the water with his hands, and turned his face toward the deeper dark. "This way. Toward the lake. If the scorpion has drowned the powder, the old paths may already be filling. We go where the water itself wishes to go, and we pray it leads us not to death first." Then, side by side, half walking and half feeling their way, they moved into the dark as the torture chamber began slowly to drown.

Part 20

The water kept rising in the torture chamber, cold at the feet while the air above remained burning hot. It was as if Erik had made a room where fire and flood could serve him together. Raoul and the Persian moved slowly along the wall, feeling their way in the dark and listening for some change that might mean escape. But the water only climbed higher, and the false forest still stretched around them in broken reflections. "If he leaves us here much longer, we die in either case," Raoul whispered. The Persian answered, "Yes. Unless her pity has already done what our courage could not."

Then, through the hidden walls, they heard no more cries of bargaining, no more hard questions about the scorpion or the grasshopper. Instead there came a silence so deep that both men stopped where they were and looked into the dark as if silence itself had become a sign. After that, very faintly, Raoul thought he heard weeping. Not Christine's weeping alone, but another sound mixed with it, rougher, heavier, like the breaking of a heart that had never learned how to cry until too late. "Something has changed," said the Persian. "Yes," Raoul answered. "But what?"

They did not have to wait long for the answer. A mechanism moved somewhere beyond the wall, then another. The pressure of the rising water altered. A hidden door opened, and a path that had not been there before seemed to appear in the dark. "This way," said the Persian at once. "Quickly, before he changes his mind or the house changes for him." They followed the new current of air and found themselves drawn out of the torture chamber and back toward the inner

rooms of the house. The terrible forest fell behind them like a fever dream, though the smell of hot walls and wet powder remained in their clothes and throats.

When at last they reached a safer room, Raoul broke from the Persian and looked wildly about him. There, in the chamber called Louis-Philippe, he found Christine alive. She was pale, exhausted, and shaken to the soul, but she was standing. Raoul ran to her, and for a moment neither of them could speak. Then they threw themselves into each other's arms with the simple force of two people who have already passed through death in their minds. "Christine," he said. "Christine, I thought I had lost you forever." She answered only, "Take me away. Take me away at once."

But they were not alone. Erik was there too, masked once more, standing with a weakness that made him lean against the wall as if his body could scarcely hold him upright. He did not stop the lovers. He did not call guards, set traps, or laugh. Instead he watched them in silence, and the silence around him was stranger than all his former threats. At last he said in a voice that seemed emptied of everything except pain, "Go. Both of you. Go while I can still tell you to go." Raoul turned toward him at once, still holding Christine's hand, unable to understand such mercy from such a man.

Christine then did something that neither Raoul nor the Persian would ever forget. She stepped once more toward Erik, though she trembled as she moved, and she looked at him not with love, but with pity so deep that it became almost holy. "Poor unhappy Erik," she said. Then, because he had asked so little and suffered so much in the asking, she allowed him what no woman had freely given him before. He kissed her forehead while she remained alive and did not draw back, and after that she herself kissed his brow in return. That act, small to anyone else, changed his whole fate.

For Erik fell at her feet in tears like a man struck down by kindness after a lifetime without it. He wept over her hands, over her compassion, over the miracle that she had not fled from his face when his mask was gone. Through those tears he gave back the gold ring and said it should belong to her and to Raoul. He told her she might marry the young man when she wished, because she had wept with

him and had called him poor and unhappy instead of monster. “Take it,” he said. “It is my wedding gift. I know whom you love.” Christine wept with him, and for a few moments all three of them stood in a grief that was more merciful than joy.

Then Erik went to free Raoul completely. The young man had indeed been his prisoner and hostage, shut away for a time in a remote underground vault where no cry could have reached any human ear. Now Erik brought him back openly and allowed the lovers to embrace before him. He asked only one last promise from Christine. “When I am dead,” he said, “come back by the way of the lake and bury me in secret with the gold ring.” Christine promised, because she knew that he was asking not for triumph, but for the final dignity that life had always denied him. After that he opened the way for them to leave.

The escape itself was dark and hurried. They took one of the hidden roads leading toward the side near the Rue Scribe and passed away from the underground lake that had seemed like the center of a nightmare. Behind them, tragedy had not yet fully ended, for Count Philippe had already died there by a miserable accident near the water when the siren sang. But Raoul and Christine, once free, thought first only of flight, and then of marriage, and then of some distant place where the Opera, the mirrors, the lake, and the name of Erik would not follow them. They vanished from Paris almost at once.

Some time later the Persian saw Erik again, and that final meeting explained what had happened in the heart of the monster after the lovers’ escape. Erik came to him weak, exhausted, and nearly falling as he walked. “Do not speak to me of the count,” he said when the Persian questioned him. “It was a sad accident. I have come to tell you only that I am going to die.” Again and again he said those words. “I am going to die of love,” he confessed. He spoke not with pride now, but with wonder, as if he himself had only just discovered what sort of wound he carried.

He told the Persian everything in broken phrases. He said that Christine had waited for him upright like a living bride, that she had let him kiss her brow, that she had cried with him, that her tears had run beneath his mask and mingled with his own. He said that no woman, not even his mother, had ever allowed him such closeness before. “It is good,” he said, “so good, to kiss someone.” Then he

described how he had placed the ring back into her hand and sent her away with Raoul, because after such pity he could no longer remain only a beast of darkness. The Persian, who had once feared him greatly, wept as he listened.

Erik spoke also of his burial. He begged that when the time came, Christine should keep her promise and return secretly to lay him to rest with the gold ring still on him. After that, he said, there was nothing more for him in the world. He had known every trick of stone, mirror, shadow, music, and terror, but now a single human tear had undone him. “She said, ‘Poor unhappy Erik,’” he repeated, and those words seemed to him richer than any throne. Soon after that confession, he died, exactly as he had foretold, not by knife or bullet or judgment of men, but by the collapse of a heart starved too long for love.

Years passed. The drama became rumor, then legend, then almost a fairy tale told in the foyers of the Opera, unless some old witness corrected it in a low uneasy voice. Yet the truth did not vanish. It returned piece by piece through documents, memories, and the testimony of those who had seen enough to know that the ghost had been a man. At last, much later, when work was being done beneath the Opera, human remains were found in the place tied to the old mystery. Among them there was one sign that ended all doubt.

It was the gold ring. Because of that ring, the dead man could be known. Christine had kept her promise. She had come back secretly by the lake and buried Erik where he had asked to lie. That is why I say now, after all inquiry and all hesitation, that the Opera Ghost truly existed. He was no idle tale of dancers, no mere shadow, and no invention of frightened servants. He was Erik, a genius, a criminal, a sufferer, and perhaps, in the last hour of his life, simply a man who had been loved with pity for one moment too late.

So the story ends not with the triumph of terror, but with a broken heart under the Opera and two lovers fleeing toward life. The house above continued to glitter, music continued to rise, and Paris continued to amuse itself, but deep below, near the little fountain and the underground lake, the last tears of Erik had already dried in the dark. Some monsters are born from evil alone, but some are born from pain, loneliness, and rejection carried too far. Erik was both. And that is why his end

remains terrible and sad at once.