

## *Chapter One* *Is it the Phantom?*

Our curtain rises on that evening of January 10, 18\*\*, when Messrs. Debiegne and Poligny, Co-Directors of the Opera at the time, gave a final gala performance to celebrate their retirement. The dressing-room of Mademoiselle Sorelli, the notorious dancer, had just been invaded by half-a-dozen young ladies of the *corps de ballet*, who had come up from the stage after dancing in *Polyeucte*. They exhibited great confusion, some with forced, nervous laughter, while others uttered small cries of terror.

Mademoiselle Sorelli, who wished to be alone to rehearse the praise-filled speech she was scheduled to give later in front of the departing Directors, looked angrily at the agitated and disorderly crowd. She inquired about the cause of such unusual commotion. It was Little Jammes—a small girl with a button nose, blue eyes, rosy-red cheeks and a lily-white neck—who gave her an explanation.

“It’s the Phantom!” she exclaimed in a voice trembling with fear.

Then she promptly locked the door behind her.

Mademoiselle Sorelli’s dressing-room was decorated with fitting, ordinary elegance. It featured the standard dressing table, sofa, chairs, screen and armoires. On the walls hung a few engravings, inherited from her mother who had known the glories of the old Opera on the Rue le Peletier: portraits of Vestris, Gardel, Dupont and Bigottini. But the room seemed like a palace to the brats of the *corps de ballet*, who were housed in communal dressing-rooms, where they spent most of their time singing, quarreling, berating their maids and hair-dressers and buying each other glasses of cassis, beer— even rum—until the call-boy rang his bell.

Mademoiselle Sorelli was extremely superstitious. She barely repressed a shudder when she heard Little Jammes speak of the Phantom.

“Silly little fool!” she blurted.

Yet, because she was a major enthusiast, in all matters supernatural in general and in the Phantom of the Opera in particular, she immediately pressed the girl for more details.

“Did you see him?” she asked.

“As plainly as I see you now!” said Little Jammes who dropped into a chair, moaning as her trembling legs gave way beneath her.

Little Giry—a girl with ink-black eyes, raven hair, a tawny complexion and unhealthy, thin skin stretched over small, weak bones—added:

“If that was the Phantom, he is horribly ugly!”

“Oh, yes!” cried the chorus of ballerinas.

And they all began to talk at the same time. The Phantom had appeared to them in the shape of a tall gentleman in a dinner jacket who had suddenly materialized in one of the corridors. They could not tell from where he had come. It was as if he had walked straight through the wall.

“Pooh!” said one of the girls, who had more-or-less kept her *sang-froid*. “You see the Phantom everywhere!”

That was unkind, but true. For the past several months, the only topic of conversation around the Opera was the ghost-like figure in a dinner jacket who wandered about the building, from top to bottom, like a lost soul. He spoke to nobody, nobody dared speak to him and he vanished as soon as he was spotted, no one knowing where or how. As any real phantom would, he made no noise when walking. At first, people had laughed and made fun of the notion of a phantom dressed like a gentleman—or an undertaker—but the legend soon grew to gargantuan proportions among the *corps de ballet*. All the girls claimed to have met the Phantom at least once, and to have fallen victim to his mysterious, but undoubtedly evil, wiles. Those who laughed the loudest were often the most afraid. When the Phantom did not actually appear, he betrayed his presence through small incidents, some humorous, others distressing, or at least the most superstitious people believed. If an accident occurred, a practical joke backfired or one of the girls misplaced her powderpuff, it was obviously the fault of the Phantom of the Opera.

In fact, who could honestly claim to have really seen him? One meets many fleet-footed men wearing dinner jackets at the Opera and none of them are phantoms. Truthfully, it was not the clothes that made the Phantom but what they covered—a frightful skeleton.

At least, so the ballerinas said.

And, of course, he sported a death's-head.

Was all this truly believable? The description of the Phantom as a walking skeleton was first given by Joseph Buquet, a chief stagehand who claimed to have actually seen him. He said he had had a close encounter—one might almost say a face-to-face if the Phantom had a face—with the ghost-like being on the small staircase by the footlights which leads directly to the vaults. He had seen him for no more than a second—for the Phantom had turned and fled—and that single encounter had left Buquet with an indelible impression.

"He is abnormally thin," he said. "His jacket hangs on a skeletal frame. His eyes are so deep that you can hardly see the pupils. There are only two big, black holes, like a dead man's skull. His skin is stretched across his face tight as a drumhead and is not white, but a pasty yellow. His nose is so insignificant that you almost can't see it and *its very absence is too awful to behold*. The only hair I saw were three or four long dark locks on his forehead and behind his ears."

Monsieur Buquet had tried to chase after the Phantom but in vain. He had mysteriously vanished without leaving any trace of his presence.

The chief stagehand was a serious, reliable man with little imagination and was known for his sobriety. His story was met with a good deal of interest and amazement. Soon, others came forward to say that they, too, had met the skeleton in a dinner jacket.

When rational men heard the story, they first said that someone must have played a practical joke on Buquet and they even accused one of his assistants. Then, a series of bizarre, inexplicable incidents occurred and even the most determined skeptics began to feel uneasy.

For example, firemen are generally held to be brave men who fear nothing, least of all fire!

One day, Monsieur Papin, the fireman posted at the Opera had ventured a little farther than usual when making his usual rounds of inspection in the vaults... He suddenly appeared backstage, terrified, trembling, his face ashen, his eyes bulging out of their sockets and practically fainted in the arms of Little Jammes' proud mother. Why? Because advancing toward him, floating in the air at eye level, he had just seen a head of fire without a body!<sup>1</sup> And yet, as I said, a fireman should normally not be afraid of fire.

The *corps de ballet* was thrown into disarray. First, that fiery head did not match the description that Joseph Buquet had given of the Phantom. The young ladies questioned the fireman, then interrogated the stagehand again, and finally came to the inescapable conclusion that the Phantom had more than one head, and could switch between them at will. Naturally, that only increased the danger in their minds. If a fireman could faint, then no one could possibly blame mere ballerinas for running away from dark corners and poorly lit corridors as fast as their slender legs could carry them.

In order to protect the Opera from the evil curse that might otherwise overtake it, at least as much as was humanly possible, Mademoiselle Sorelli herself, on the day after the incident with the fireman, ceremoniously walked to the concierge's vestibule, located next to the courtyard facing the aisle occupied by Management. She was accompanied by a gaggle of ballerinas that included even the children from dance class in their tiny leotards. There, on a table, she placed a blessed horseshoe. Anyone entering the Opera who was not a member of the paying public, was expected to rub it with their hand before setting foot on the first step of the grand staircase.

I did not make up the story of the horseshoe, any more than I have made up—unfortunately!—any other part of this tragic tale. The horseshoe is still there today, in the same place it has been ever since, in the concierge's vestibule, which one must pass through if one enters the Opera through the Cour de l'Administration.

This brief recap of past events enables us to better understand the state of mind of Mademoiselle Sorelli and her companions on the evening of January 10.

"It's the Phantom!" Little Jammes had exclaimed.

That decisive, yet all too believable, declaration had only increased the anxiety of the ballerinas. An agonizing silence reigned in the dressing-room. The only sound was that of the girls' gasping for air. Finally, Little Jammes flung herself upon the farthest corner of the wall and, her face filled with genuine terror, whispered that single word:

"Listen!"

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<sup>1</sup> Monsieur Pedro Gailhard, former Director of the Opera, himself told me this anecdote and vouched for its authenticity. (*Note from the Author.*)

Everybody did and they heard—or believed they heard—a faint rustling sound just outside the door. Not the sound of ordinary footsteps but a noise like that of silk lightly brushing against the wood panel. Then, there was nothing more.

Mademoiselle Sorelli tried to appear braver than her companions. She walked up to the door and, in a trembling voice, asked:

“Who’s there?”

No one answered.

Feeling that all eyes were upon her, that her every move was being scrutinized, she redoubled her valiant effort and said more loudly:

“Is there any one behind the door?”

“Of course there is!” cried that little plum, Meg Giry, who bravely held Mademoiselle Sorelli back by the hem of her gauze skirt. “Whatever you do, please don’t open the door!”

But Mademoiselle Sorelli paid her no notice. She was armed with a dagger that never left her person. She slowly turned the key and opened the door. All the dancers immediately retreated as one to the back of the dressing-room.

“Mum! Mum!” Little Meg Giry whimpered.

Mademoiselle Sorelli defiantly stepped into the corridor. It was empty. From behind its glass receptacle, the dancing flame of a gaslight cast an ominous, reddish light onto the walls, without quite managing to dispel the ambient darkness. The ballerina quickly slammed the door shut.

“No,” she said with a relieved sigh, “there is no one there.”

“Still, we all saw him!” Little Jammes insisted, returning with small, shy steps to take her place besides Mademoiselle Sorelli. “He must still be lurking out there somewhere. I’m not going back to the communal dressing-room alone. We should all go down to the foyer together. And after the speech, we can all come up together as well.”

As she outlined her plan, the child reverently touched the small coral finger-ring which she wore as a charm against bad luck. Mademoiselle Sorelli discreetly made a St. Andrew’s cross with the tip of her right thumb on the wooden ring which adorned the fourth finger of her left hand.

Mademoiselle Sorelli, wrote a famous chronicler, was a tall, beautiful ballerina with a sensual, grave face and a waist as pliant as a reed. It was often said of her that she was a “pretty thing.” Her beautiful gold-spun blonde hair stood atop a noble forehead and two emerald eyes. Her head was elegantly balanced on a slender, delicate neck. When she danced, she moved her entire body in an indescribably graceful fashion, evoking, like no other dancer could, a feeling of overwhelmingly languid charm. When she raised her arms and leaned slightly forward before launching herself into a pirouette, thereby emphasizing the finely sculpted contours of her breasts and hips, it was said of that most delectable of women that she was enough “to make one shoot oneself in the head.”

And speaking of heads, hers was not noted for its brain, but no one had ever seemed to mind that single flaw in an otherwise perfect creature.

So Mademoiselle Sorelli told the little ballerinas:

“Come, children, pull yourselves together! No one has ever really seen the Phantom.”

“Yes, yes, we saw him—we saw him just now!” said the girls. “He wore his death’s-head and dinner jacket, the same as when he appeared to Joseph Buquet!”

“And Gabriel saw him too!” added Little Jammes. “Only yesterday... Yesterday afternoon... In broad daylight too!”

“Gabriel, the Chorus-Master?”

“Yes! Didn’t you know?”

“And he was wearing his dinner jacket, in broad daylight?”

“Who? Gabriel?”

“No! The Phantom!”

“Gabriel told me so himself,” said Little Jammes. “The Phantom wore a dinner jacket. That’s how he recognized him. He was in the stage manager’s office. Suddenly, the door opened and the Persian walked in. You know the Persian has the evil eye...”

“Oh, yes!” answered all the little dancers together, warding off said evil eye by pointing their forefinger and little fingers while bending their second and third fingers against the palms of their hands and holding them down with their thumbs.

“And you all know how superstitious Gabriel is,” continued Little Jammes. “But, he’s always very polite. When he sees the Persian, he just puts his hand in his pocket and touches his keys. Well, as soon as

the Persian walked into the room, Gabriel jumped up from his chair to grab the handle of the cabinet so he could touch iron! When he did that, he tore a piece of his coat on a nail. In the rush to get out of the room and escape the curse, he banged his head against a hat-rack, and got a huge bump. Dazed, he stepped back and scratched his arm on the decorative screen, near the piano. He tried leaning on the piano to catch his breath, but the lid fell on his hands and crushed his fingers. He stormed out of the office screaming like a madman, slipped on the stairs and fell down the whole of the first flight on his back. I know all of this because I was passing there with *Maman* and we helped him up. Poor Gabriel was all bloodied and covered with bruises. We were almost scared out of our minds. But he seemed happy and thanked God that he had gotten off so easily. That's when he told us what had really scared him. Behind the Persian, he had seen the Phantom—the *Phantom with the death's-head!* Just like Joseph Buquet described him!"

Little Jammes had told her wild story so quickly that one might have thought the Phantom himself was after her. She finished breathlessly, amongst the hushed whispers of her audience. A long silence followed. Mademoiselle Sorelli was nervously polishing her nails, always a sign of great anxiety. Finally, it was Little Giry, who remarked:

"Joseph Buquet should know better and hold his tongue."

"Why should he?" asked somebody.

"That's what my Mum says," replied Little Meg, lowering her voice and looking around her as if she feared she would be overheard by other ears than those present.

"Why does your mum say that?"

"Not so loud! Mum says the Phantom doesn't like being talked about."

"How would she know?"

"Because... because... nothing!"

That strange reluctance to elaborate only intensified the curiosity of the other young ladies who pressed Little Meg to explain herself. They all leaned forward side-by-side in a collective motion expressing both curiosity and fear. They shared their feelings of terror, taking a keen pleasure in feeling the blood chill in their veins.

"I swore not to tell!" whispered Little Meg.

But it was too late—the other girls left her no peace and, naturally, promised to keep the secret, until Meg, who all along had been burning to tell what she knew, began her tale, her eyes strangely fixated on the door of the dressing-room.

"It's because of the private box..."

"What private box?"

"The Phantom's box!"

"The Phantom has a box?"

The notion that the Phantom of the Opera might have his own private box sent the ballerinas into fits of gasps and shudders.

"Oh, do tell us, do tell us!" they begged.

"Not so loud!" said Meg. "It's Box No. 5, you know, the second box on the left, next to the stage."

"You're pulling our legs!"

"No I'm not! My Mum's in charge of it... You swear you won't say a word to anyone?"

"Of course!"

"Box No. 5 is reserved for the Phantom. No one has rented it in months. The Directors have given orders to never rent it to anyone."

"And the Phantom really sits there?"

"Yes."

"So what does he look like?"

"Well, the Phantom uses it—but *there's nobody there!*"

The young ballerinas exchanged puzzled glances. If the Phantom used the box, someone should certainly have noticed him since he wore a dinner jacket and a death's-head. They tried to explain that simple logic to Meg, but the little girl remained unmoved.

"That's just it! The Phantom can't be seen. He's got no dinner jacket and no death's-head! All that talk about that and the firehead is just plain nonsense! When he's inside the box, you can only hear him. My mum's never seen him, not once, but she's heard him. She knows it's true because she gives him his program."

That last detail was too much for Mademoiselle Sorelli who felt it was her duty to inject a semblance of credibility into the conversation.

“Little Meg, you’re making fun of us!”

At that, the child began to cry.

“I shouldn’t have told you a thing! If my mum ever finds out... But I’m right. Joseph Buquet shouldn’t talk about things that don’t concern him—it’ll only bring him bad luck, you’ll see. My mum said so last night...”

Suddenly, there was the sound of hurried, heavy footsteps in the corridor.

“Cecile! Cecile! Are you there?” cried a woman almost out of breath.

“It’s my mother’s voice,” said Little Jammes. “What’s going on?”

She opened the door. A respectable lady, built along the lines of a Pomeranian grenadier, burst into the dressing-room and dropped, groaning, into a vacant armchair. Her eyes rolled madly in her cheerless, brick-colored face.

“How terrible!” she said. “How terrible!”

“What? What?”

“Joseph Buquet...”

“What about him?”

“Joseph Buquet is dead!”

The room was immediately filled with incredulous exclamations, horrified questions and frightened requests for an explanation.

“He was found hanging in the vaults, on the third level... But the most terrible thing,” continued the poor woman, panting, “*the most God-awful thing, is that the stagehands who found his body said that they heard music that came from nowhere surrounding the corpse... The music reminded them of the Dance of the Dead!*”

“It’s the Phantom!” blurted Little Meg, almost in spite of herself. However, she corrected herself at once and, with her hands pressed to her mouth, kept muttering: “No, no! I didn’t say that! I didn’t say that!”

All around her, her panic-stricken companions repeated under their breaths:

“Yes... It’s the Phantom! It’s the Phantom!”

Mademoiselle Sorelli was very pale.

“I’ll never be able to deliver my speech now,” she said.

Little Jammes’ Mother contributed her own opinion while downing a small bottle of liqueur she had found on a table. Yes, the Phantom had to be involved somehow. It was only common sense.

The truth, however, is that no one ever learned the cause of Joseph Buquet’s death. The verdict at the inquest was suicide. In *Memoirs of a Director*, Monsieur Armand Moncharmin, one of the men who succeeded Messrs. Debieulle and Poligny, described the incident as follows:

*“A regrettable accident spoiled the small party that had been organized to celebrate Debieulle and Poligny’s retirement. I was in the Director’s office, when Mercier, one of the Assistant Directors, suddenly came rushing in. He seemed half out of his mind and told me that the body of a stagehand had been found hanging on the third level where some of the most elaborate sets were stored, between a country farmhouse and scenery from The King of Lahore.*

*“‘Let’s go and cut him down!’ I immediately said.*

*“But by the time we had rushed down the stairs and ladders to the third level, the man was no longer hanging and the rope was gone.”*

Monsieur Moncharmin seemed to have found that last detail quite normal. A man is found hanging at the end of a rope. When they go to cut him down, the rope is gone. But our Monsieur Moncharmin found a very simple explanation! Here’s what he wrote:

*“It was right after the ballet and the dancers probably wasted no time in getting their hands on a notorious good luck charm.”*

There you have it! Picture the *corps de ballet* scurrying down precarious ladders in the dark to divide amongst themselves the rope of a hanged man! Simply preposterous!

On the other hand, when I consider the very spot where the body was found—the third level under the Opera—I ask myself whether *someone else* might not have had an interest in making that rope disappear after it had served its sinister purpose. Time will tell if I am wrong in this matter.

In any event, the awful news soon spread throughout the Opera, where Joseph Buquet was extremely well-liked. The dressing-rooms emptied. The ballerinas, huddling around Mademoiselle Sorelli like fainthearted sheep around their shepherd, made for the foyer through the poorly-lit corridors and stairways, trotting as fast as their tiny pink feet could carry them.