

Shadows in the Opera Lights

The bustling street noise below worked its way up to my apartment and through the windows as I stared out at the approaching storm clouds. It looked like a nasty storm was about to befall Paris and hopefully, it held off long enough to not interrupt the season opening of the Opera House. I was looking forward to this as under new management and the loss of Erik meant that this would be a strong future for the Opera. Sadly, not knowing what had become of Christine and Raoul, I felt we Parisians were lost for exquisite talent. My remembrance was abruptly ended by the knock at my apartment door. As I opened the door and standing with hat in hand a man most commonly known as the "Persian." A mysterious man who had worked with Erik for years. He had supported Erik in his escapades and travels. Most importantly he had aided in my attempts to piece together what had happened years ago between Christine and the Opera Ghost, Erik. I was curious as to why this man stood before me today. It had been years since the body had been discovered in the foundations of the Opera House and assumed to be the suspicious ghost.

"Sir, I came of urgent means." He began after a customary greeting and we had settled in the sitting room of the apartment. I sat quietly across from this man patiently waiting for him to continue. "I fear I may not have been the utmost honest with you back in the day when you first asked about the 'Ghost.' As I had told you he had been born near the town of Rouen, home of Joan of Arc. Just northwest of here. What I did not tell you is after that awful night upon the death of Count Phillippe and the disappearance of M. Christine and Compte de Chagny he too ran. He mounted a horse and flew out of Paris. He was a smart man. He knew all would be laid on his feet. While he was responsible for many deaths there are some he can have no claim to. Count Phillippe is one of those; M. Christine and the Compte de Chagny, however, is another story. Oh no, sir! He did not kill them, but their stories did not end with Erik there in the mazes and cellars of the Opera. You must make your way Rouen if you wish to know more." With that, he got up and left the apartment. Did I understand this man correctly? Christine and Raoul survived? They had somehow made it out of those tunnels? The Ghost was still

Shadows in the Opera Lights

somehow tied to their fate? I sat for a time after the Persian left pondering what he had said. When it was time to ready myself for the Opera I did so and proceeded to the Opera House and my seat. I sat in my seat on the floor level and glanced up to box five. Still empty. Still unchanged. I passively wondered if the new owners felt that something would happen if there were to be guests seated in that box. So many evils had come from that hollow column. The show progressed and throughout I kept wondering what had happened to Christine to make her disappear from a place by all accounts she had loved. I knew by the end of the show my next few months would wind up twisted back into the hands of Erik and that his story had not yet been finished. I would be leaving for the morning to Rouen.

The rain had come as expected. Roadways had flooded but that had not stopped my intense need to progress to Rouen. I had set out at daybreak and with the new train that ran between Paris and Rouen I was there in two hours. I reached my hotel and after settling into my room I headed to the front desk to ask if they had heard anything about our mysterious persons. I was surprised to learn that for years there had been whispers of a man living in the woods just off the Seine. There was also that unknown couple that had moved in years before a large country home just north of the city. They never attended any events and no one had seen or heard from them. They came with their maid and manservant who never spoke to the villagers about anything except the regular business. All mail and deliveries went through them. Attempts had been made to discover what was in those packages they received but no one had any luck. They were all in puzzle boxes that tightly concealed their contents. This had in my mind confirmed what the Persian had told me. They had all made their way to Rouen. I needed to know why Christine and Raoul had come here if they knew it was likely that Erik was to be here too. Surely after the events unraveled after the fretful performance of *Don Juan* they would never have placed themselves in such a position. After I ate a quick lunch, driven to discover the end of the story, I found my way to the country home.

Mergler: Life After the Opera
Shadows in the Opera Lights

A home would have been a simple explanation for the palatial structure that stood before me when I arrived. If Rouen had the typical picturesque neat rows of townhomes offset with the massive bearing of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, this estate held Tudor charm with Victorian gardens. All neat and well maintained. The home had to have more than just a maid and manservant caring for the properties. I wondered around the walls of the property until I came upon a voice in the garden that sounded as if the angels had come down to earth and laid their voices on unsuspecting humans in clear inviting tones. Drawn to discovering the source I continued until I found a break in the wall where the stone had turned to bushes. Pushing myself through I found a beautiful older woman sitting on a stone bench overlooking a small fountain. Upon hearing me crash through the brushes she looked up startled to have been interrupted.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” She demanded.

"My name is Gaston Leroux. I am a writer." I stayed my distance I did not wish to frighten her more than I had already done.

“What is your purpose for being here?” She again demanded.

“I came because I wrote a story years ago. A story about you, Comte de Chagney, and” I stuttered, "the ghost." She gasped and began to back away from me. "Please don't leave! I spent years gathering information on what had happened. Everyone just disappeared. Paris was touched by your experience. They were enthralled by the mysteries of the ghost. Since those dark days, we have learned so much about Erik. About what happened? What we never learned was what happened to you. We never learned what happened after the Opera.” I paused hoping I had struck a chord where she would be able, heaven help me even willing, to tell me the end. To tell me what had brought her to Rouen.

Shadows in the Opera Lights

"Sir, you have no business to ask this of me. You have no business to be here. I pray every day that those days are behind us. I wish for privacy and so must everyone involved. Otherwise, you might have heard from them since." She again began to back away.

"Madame, I did talk to many people who were there and whose lives were affected. Nothing like yours and no one knows why you and the Compte have cut off the world. Please tell me to let me understand what befell you after that dreadful night of *Don Juan*."

"What *befell* me, M. Leroux? What *befell* me was a future to live in hiding only to fail. What *befell* me was nights without sleep and spent wandering the halls of my home? Is that not enough for you!?" I continued to stand and stare hoping in my heart she would find it in hers to help me understand. As I stood there and she stared at me and me at her I saw something like the crashing of crystal to the stone floor in her eyes. The impeccable way she stood upright seemed to slump and she began to droop. Those years of being a prima ballerina failing her.

"Please come with me. It is time. Time to clear the cobwebs from the corners." With that, we entered her home and found ourselves in a bright airy space not much bigger than my apartment. It was cozy nonetheless.

"Where does one begin sir? First, that night so much was lost. Erik was gone, Phillipe was gone, and the Persian had disappeared. Raoul and I had only ourselves to escape those tunnels. Escape we did. But where to go? Erik frightened us and we had no idea what was to be of us or him. Raoul called his carriage and we climbed in. With just the clothes on our back, we escaped Paris and headed north. We were in Norway, Scandinavia, even went to America for a time. Always though we felt watched. I never felt peace anywhere. Eventually, I remembered Rouen was the place of Erik's birth. It was here his deformities began his monstrous fate. I figured there would be a place he would never return. I would finally feel at peace. I was wrong sir. In America, we had established a household and brought

Mergler: Life After the Opera
Shadows in the Opera Lights

them over with us to understand secrecy was paramount. They agreed and came with us. We established this home and began to live peacefully.

“Until the first package arrived. It was a puzzle box. Inlaid in the top was none other than an Angel. An Angel of Music. I knew who had sent this box and Raoul worked until he figured out the puzzle. It took but a week and he eventually figured it out. Inside was a piece of composition. An aria declaring his love and how he would never leave us to be. I belonged to him. I knew that no matter where we went my Angel of Music would follow us. He would never stop. Raoul knew this too. We ignored the first box and then a week later another and then another. For a year solid there was a puzzle box delivered every week without fail. Raoul began to have enough of this. He began his search to try and find Erik. It took him to the woods west of here. There were rumors of a man who lived in them. A man of such ugliness that no one would want to set their eye upon him.

“Raoul left one night to set things straight and end the torment. Erik had lured him to the woods and meanwhile Erik, ever the trickster had found a way into our home. He stood before me this one night as I was preparing for bed. Tried to claim me as his own, even presenting me the gold ring he had hoped would make me his wife once more, only to be surprised himself by Raoul. They fought. It was terrible. In the end, though Raoul had landed a devastating blow to Erik. And Erik laid there dying. I stood there watching the blood pool beneath him. I took that ring and gave it back to him. Placed it on his finger. Erik could only love himself and should only be wed to himself. Raoul and his manservant took the body and buried it back in the gardens where I first met Erik. It only seemed fitting. You look at me to be crazy for still caring to bury him and ensure he was cared for even after he tormented me. He loved me and a part of me felt pity for this man who was made a twisted shell by society. He deserved better than he ever received. His music was beautiful, after all.

Shadows in the Opera Lights

"Now Raoul and I live here in peace. The Angel is back where he belongs to the Opera; this is how we wish to keep things. Please return to Paris. Speak to whom you must please recognize our need and want for privacy. It is has been many years since we have set eyes on the National Academy of Music and hope never to again relive that time." She sat staring at me sipping on her tea that had arrived during her story.

I still had so many questions. This all seemed to wrap up too nicely. Erik was dead. The ghost was back at the Academy; I had seen his body. Christine put the teacup she held down and stood up. Indicating our time had come to an end without a chance for me to ask more questions. She walked me to the door and began to see me out. To my left, I saw what seemed like a quick swish in the shadows. I turned to say good-bye only to catch her playing with a small gold band on a chain around her neck. How had I not have seen this before now?

I spent the night in my hotel tossing and turning. My thoughts reeling more now than before. A brief tea before I collected my things at the hotel and began the train ride back to Paris. Mulling over the only questions I could formulate, "It was Erik's body I had seen at the National Academy of Music. Right? What if Christine was hiding more than she shared?" In my heart I know there is more to this story; those are secrets I fear will stay with all the other secrets deep in the chambers of the Opera House.