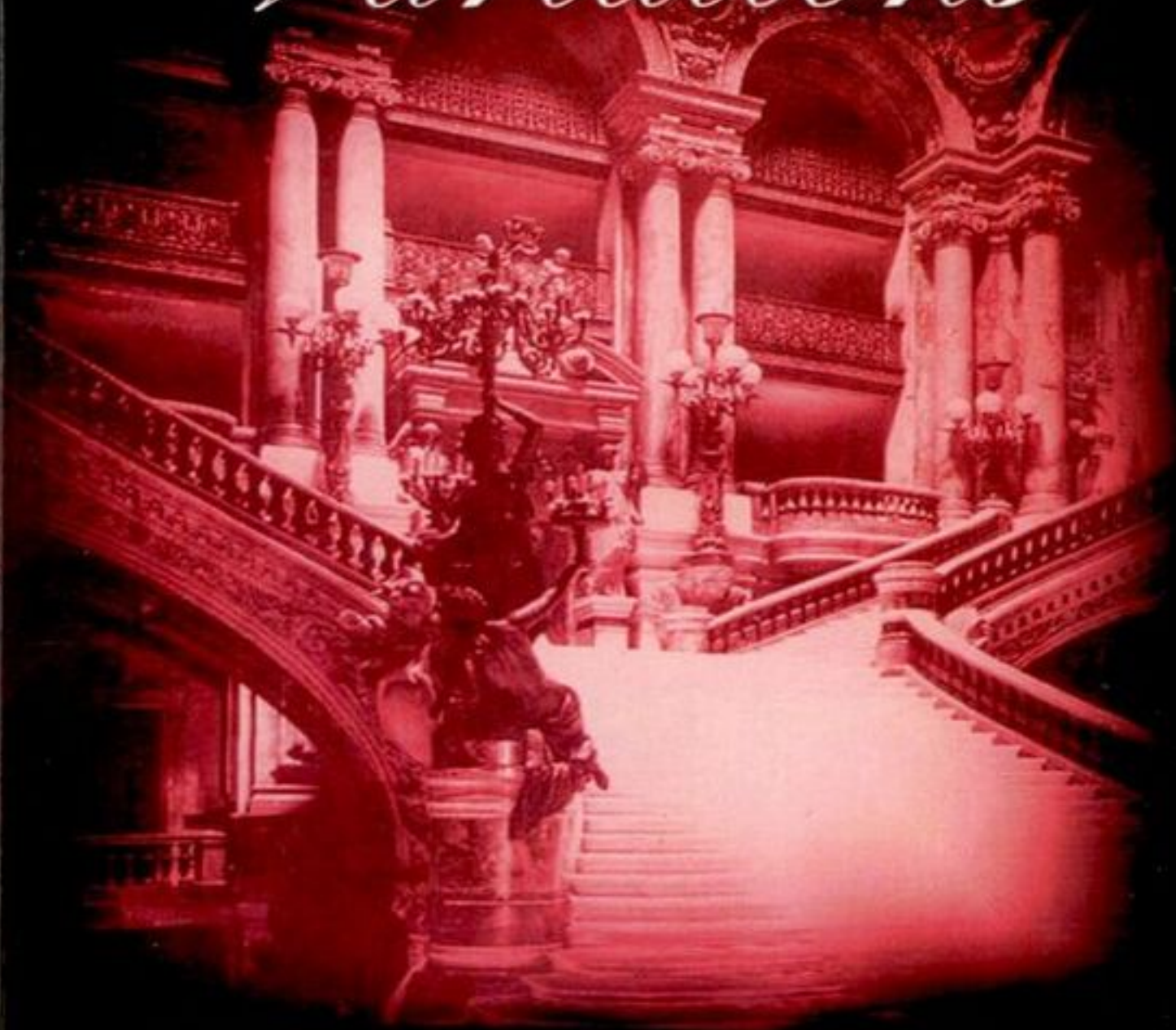


Phantom Variations



Tales from the World of the
Opera Ghost

Edited by H. D. Kingsbury

Masquerade

By Orianna Duomille

In this short tale of horror and suspense, Christine finds herself torn between her Angel of Music and her long lost childhood sweetheart. What she doesn't realize is that the choice has already been made for her.

~ * ~

Christine Daaé woke after her spectacular performance of *Faust's* Margarita in the arms of a gentleman she did not know. The effort of that final song had drained her of life, so that she'd fainted amidst the resounding applause. It seemed as though she could hear the audience's praise still, echoing in her dazed mind. She'd given her soul to sing, and they had loved her! She could only hope that her Angel would feel the same.

But he would not come for her with so many people in her dressing room! As she began to regain her senses, the concerned crowd left—forced away by the strange man who had been holding her so possessively. Once assured of their privacy, the man placed a pillow beneath Christine's feet and made her comfortable upon the divan, then knelt before her. Something about him seemed familiar, though with her head aching she could not imagine who he might be. With a voice strained from singing, she asked, "Monsieur, who are you?"

The gentleman kissed her hand, his brown eyes alight with mischief. "Why, mademoiselle, do you not remember the little boy who rescued your scarf from the sea?"

At once, Christine eyes widened; she turned her gaze to the ornate mirror that dominated her dressing room wall. She studied it for a lengthy moment before her shoulders relaxed and she allowed herself to respond. "You do not look like the boy I remember. It has been so long!"

"Too long, I fear, for you to recognize me," he said. "Perhaps you have even forgotten me—for surely, you are a famous diva now, who will sing before kings! What time do you have for thoughts of childhood beaux?"

Christine sat herself up, and reached into the bottom drawer of the bureau. She withdrew a short length of silk, faded and worn, discolored from stains of saltwater. "Never will I forget the little boy

who dared to save my precious scarf," she answered. With a fond smile, she embraced him. "My dear Raoul. After all these years!"

He hesitated only for a moment, then returned the hug with an imperceptible sigh. "Christine. You worried me so, when you fainted on-stage."

"I am quite well," she said, and indeed, she sat straight with no sign of weakness now. "But really, you must go."

"Go?" He laughed at that, a high sound of disbelief. "But I've only just seen you again, and where shall I go? Have your maid help you dress for dinner and I shall take you out. Anywhere in Paris you wish to dine! We must celebrate—your success, and the reunion of childhood sweethearts. Or have you forgotten that too?"

"Never!" she declared. "But I cannot leave with you tonight, Raoul. Perhaps tomorrow, or the night after that."

Raoul stood; his expression darkened as he cast his gaze about the room. "You are expecting someone! Have you a secret lover, then?" And he looked behind the dressing screen, as though expecting to find a man crouched in hiding. "He must be waiting for you, even now. In the closet, perhaps? Or under the bed?"

Christine wrung her hands. "No. Oh, Raoul. You mustn't think such things of me!"

Her distress appeared so great that he relented and pressed a kiss to her pale forehead. "Of course not, my dear Christine. You are an angel, and always shall be. Tomorrow night then, I shall come for you."

"Yes, tomorrow night." She led him to the door and bid him farewell. After he had gone, Christine threw the bolt across the door and leaned her head against it in bittersweet relief. She hated to be rude to dear Raoul, and oh, how she had missed him. But tonight of all nights! The scent of his cologne lingered in the air—tangible proof of his brief visit, which she hoped her angel would not notice.

She began to unlace her costume, but stopped suddenly and turned to face the great mirror. "Are you there?" she whispered, her voice almost unheard.

"I am," came the deep reply from beyond the glass.

"And—and my performance? Were you there, Angel?"

"No force on this earth could have kept me from your side," the voice exclaimed. "I heard every note, my child! The angels themselves wept, and I along with them."

She sank to the floor in a puddle of silk. "I feel as though I have died, for tonight I gave you my soul."

"As I shall give you mine," he promised. And the mirror opened.

"You shall not see that boy again, Christine. Do you understand me? Never again!"

Christine flinched at her master's harsh words. She recognized the jealous flash in his eyes, for she had seen the same glint in Raoul's eyes when he had learned of her Angel's existence. Sensing the rage smoldering beneath Erik's tight control, she tried to appease him.

"Haven't I promised never to marry?" she said. "What harm is there in allowing me the comfort of an old friend—one who shall be leaving before long, perhaps never to return?"

"He shall not return to you! Not if he values his life," Erik warned darkly. "Promise me you shall not seek him out. Swear this, and I shall believe you."

How could she choose between the two men who cared for her? One who cherished her as a longtime friend and companion. One who loved her as deeply as the fires that burned in his golden eyes. Her heart broke in two as she struggled to determine her destiny.

"Swear it, Christine!"

She could not argue with her master, and so she whispered, "I promise...."

Yet she could not help it when Raoul sought her out again and again, though she warned him that he risked his life to do so. Never had she felt more torn, sundered by her treacherous heart.

"Come away with me tonight, Little Lotte," he pleaded. "Come away and I shall take care of you, forever."

On the roof of the Opera House, bathed in moonlight, Christine shook her head. "I cannot. Raoul, do not ask it of me! How could I bear to break his heart by leaving now?"

In disbelief, he laughed. "That monster has deceived you, tormented you; and yet willingly you stay? Don't you understand that every hour you spend here, your danger grows? You mustn't wait, Christine. Don't put this off until later—for later may very well be too late!"

"Tonight, then," she whispered, her face pale and glowing. "After my performance. No! Do not begrudge me this. I will go with you. I will marry you, but only after I have sung...one last time...for him. For if I left now, and he never heard my voice again, I believe it truly would kill him."

Raoul consented, then kissed her on the forehead in a manner which reminded Christine very much of Erik, though she could not say why. Erik had never dared touch his lips to her skin, not even once.

And so she sang once again from *Faust*, her voice as pure and heavenly as any angel's. She wept and surrendered her soul to sing farewell to her Angel of Music.

But he would not accept such a beautiful gift of leave-taking from her.

Even as her voice rose to the final notes of longing, the stage lights extinguished themselves. When they lit again only moments later—Christine Daaé had vanished.

She roused slowly, with the soft strains of violin music coaxing her awake. At first, she thought she must have fainted as she had during her first performance. The sickly sweet odor lingering beneath her nostrils told her otherwise. He had drugged her—which meant he knew.

With a cry, she sat upright and found herself in her bed, not at home with Mama Valerius, but in the Louis Philippe room, in the little house beside the underground lake. Fighting nausea, Christine stood, but found herself hampered by heavy skirts and a long train that had wrapped itself around her ankles as she slept. Yet, her Margarita costume had no train, nor such layers of lace and satin. A gown such as this ought to be worn by a princess, a baroness at the least. She would not wear as fine as this even to her own wedding. With that thought, she understood, and the realization of what she wore nearly sent her into another swoon.

A wedding gown! But why? *Why?*

"Erik," she called in desperation. The violin music stopped; a moment later his shadow crossed the doorway.

"You are awake, my love! And just in time. Did you enjoy the music I played? It will be our wedding song." He gazed down at her with adoration, then crouched at her feet and began to straighten out the fabric of her skirts. As soon as the gown hung properly, he stood and extended his arm. "Come, it is time for us to say our vows."

She shook her head vigorously.

He retracted his arm and sighed. Disappointment glimmered in his golden eyes. "You need not touch Erik, if the thought frightens you still."

"It is not your touch," she said. "But your words! They frighten me, for have I not promised you I would never marry?"

His laugh sent a chill down her spine. "Ah, but my dear! You have already broken that promise, at least in spirit. I know about your engagement to de Chagny! Do not try to explain. I know that he is handsome and I am not, but you gave me your promise first. You

shall marry no other! A trying vow, I realize, which is why I shall make it much easier for you to keep. You shall marry *me*, and then you shall not be tempted to run away again."

He frowned at her from beneath his mask. "You are looking quite pale, my dear. Have I frightened you, truly? Curse my thoughtlessness! Here, lie down." He helped her to the bed. "There. Rest a while longer; when the color has returned to your cheeks, we shall depart from these cellars forever. You shall be my bride, and think no longer of the viscount de Chagny."

"Raoul!" She moaned, and one hand jerked toward her mouth in despair. "What have you done with him?"

"Why, nothing! Nothing at all. Need I kill him, in order for you to give me your heart? If so, I shall not hesitate!" He looked at her in contemplation. "Perhaps it would be unwise to wait. Come! Let us marry now; you shall have all the time you need to rest, after you are my wife. You needn't shrink away from Erik so! Has he ever harmed you?"

As he drew closer, she moaned and closed her eyes. Then she felt his bare hands upon her. Those cold fingers wrapped around her forearm in a grisly caress. The smell of death wafted toward her like an omen. Angel or no, she could not let him take her away to be his bride! Not like this, without her consent. Before she could think the matter through, she reached beneath her skirts, fumbling for her garters. Surely he hadn't dared to change her underthings while she slept....

No, he hadn't, for she felt the familiar ribbons holding her stockings up—ribbons that she had tied herself, and which held in place a gift from La Sorelli. Though it meant her stocking would fall, she pulled the tiny dagger from the knotted garter. Without pausing, she brandished it just as the older ballerina taught her. Three quick moves, and Erik drew away from her in shock.

He stood with wide eyes, blood dripping from his arm. Three distinct gashes marred the fine wool of his wedding suit. His pale skin peeked through the ripped sleeve, creating a sickening contrast of colors: ivory, red, and black. As she watched in horror, the droplets fell onto the pure white of her wedding gown, spreading in overlapping circles. *What had she done?*

"Oh, Christine...." He made no move to stop the bleeding, merely looked down at her with a hurt expression. "I have overwhelmed your delicate senses. My poor Christine! You shall have one hour to compose yourself. Do try to be more in control of yourself when Erik returns!"

After a short, proper bow, Erik vanished. Christine rose and dropped the dagger to the Persian carpet, not caring if it stained the expensive rug. Her hands shook. Her legs barely held her as she ran to the washroom. Frantically, she splashed cold water from the basin onto her face and wrists. The faintness eased, though her heart still pounded without mercy. She then set to washing the blood from her gown. Such expensive lace! How could Erik not be furious?

How could she worry about stained lace, when he would return shortly with every intention of making her his bride?

She dabbed at the fine lace, until she realized that her efforts had only diluted the blood and spread it further. With a choking groan, she left the washroom and began pacing the bedroom. The warm air quickly dried the front of her gown, and the stains darkened to brown. A small part of her mind called it fitting, that her bridal dress should be marred so. But no, she fought the idea. This would not be her wedding gown! She would rather die than be forced to marry. Why couldn't Erik accept her decision like any normal man? Why must he possess her physically, when he already owned her soul?

In a fit of despair, Christine sank to her knees. The silk skirts billowed around her like clouds, then slowly they too settled down, as if agreeing with the hopeless situation. For several moments she didn't even hear the voice calling her name.

When she finally looked up, she thought herself in a dream. Surely she'd gone mad and now saw visions of that which could not be—for there in the doorway stood Raoul! With a wordless cry, she sprang to her feet.

"Christine, darling! How I've worried." He curved one gloved hand around her jaw and very properly kissed her cheek. "Have you been locked up down here? Why, look! You're crying. Has the monster hurt you? I shall kill him if he has!"

She jerked her head. "No! No, he would never harm me. But you! Oh!" She moaned and gripped him by the arms. "Raoul, if he should find you here—he'll kill you. Not even I could stop him, for he's gone mad with love."

"Love? Ha! Do you think a foul creature of darkness knows anything of *love*?"

"Raoul, you mustn't say such things! Even a pitiful creature is entitled to love, just like any man. But, oh! He will return at any moment, and then he will kill you and make me his bride."

"We must act quickly then. Have you anything to pack?" he asked. "Anything that you must bring with you?"

"No. No, I—wait! My mother's locket." Her hands flew to her neck. "He must have removed it when he dressed me."

He glanced over her shoulder, his gaze fixed on the dressing table. "There, by your hairbrush. Isn't that it?"

Christine crossed the room and stopped at the elegant cherry wood table. Ignoring the silver brush and comb set, she picked up the tiny gold locket. Wondering, she gazed into the mirror at Raoul's reflection. How had he known exactly where to find it? Her focus changed so that she saw her own image: disheveled blonde curls and frightened blue eyes above a gown of white silk, *stained with droplets of bright red blood*. Her fist tightened about the necklace, so that her fingers became pale with the strain.

"Whatever is the matter, Little Lotte? You look as though you've seen a ghost!" He chuckled. "Do hurry. We mustn't tarry, lest Erik return before we've made our escape."

Christine turned away from the mirror; the locket fell from her suddenly nerveless fingers. "I never told you his name," she whispered.

"Silly child! You must have, else how would I have known?" He came toward her, but frowned as she backed away from him. He stooped to pick up the gold locket from where it lay on the carpet, then held it out to her.

She stared at his extended arm, eyes wide with horror. Blood seeped through the black wool, staining his jacket sleeve.

"Christine. We must go!" He reached for her, and she shrank back with a strangled cry.

"But you're bleeding!" she cried, her beautiful voice harsh with fear.

"Oh?" He shrugged. "I must have caught myself on your mirror. I had to smash it, you know, to get through. Your beloved tutor cut the counterweights free, so the mechanism wouldn't open."

She shook her head, disbelieving. Was she going mad?

"Tell me—" she began, trembling. "Tell me about the day we met, by the sea—when you found my scarf."

"What nonsense is this, Little Lotte? We haven't time for stories." With a coaxing smile, he reached for her, but again she shrank back.

"Tell me!" she insisted. "What did your nanny say when you came up from the water soaking wet? What songs did my father play for us that night? *Answer me!*"

He stared at her. "My dear, you are hysterical. Come now, we must leave this place! We'll be married, as soon as you like, in a church decked with roses. But we must go quickly, before Erik returns. Don't you want to be free?"

In reply, she clutched at his jacket sleeve and tore the damp fabric away. Before he could evade her, she also ripped his shirtsleeve and

exposed a bandage soaked through with blood. She gasped. "How—how did you manage to wrap this so neatly if you cut your arm on my mirror? You couldn't have!"

"What difference does that make, now? We must leave this place, Christine!"

With a shake of her head, Christine clawed the bandages away. There! *Three slashes across his forearm*, clean and straight, as if by knife-edge, not jagged glass.

A scream tore itself from her throat. She reached up to his face and scratched at the mask he wore. Away came the healthy pink skin of an aristocrat, the perfect nose and lips, the rich brown eyes, the handsome features of Raoul de Chagny. Away they came and settled onto the floor like a crumpled newspaper.

Erik looked down at her with his distorted yellow complexion and glowing eyes. She threw herself away from him, tripping on her gown. He advanced, until she could go no further. The bed stood behind her, soft and unyielding. "No," she cried, shutting her eyes tight. "No!"

"My poor angel. I tried to warn you." He reached for her, bringing with him the fading scent of Raoul's cologne mingled with the putrid scent of death.

Her eyes snapped open. "Where is Raoul? Have you killed him tonight?"

"My dear, I have not slain anyone tonight. Nor the night before, if I recall. Perhaps not even this week! You are a good influence on me, indeed."

"Then where is he?" she shrieked. "*What have you done?*"

Erik turned his back on her and began wrapping up his arm with the discarded bandages. Matter-of-factly he spoke. "The Viscount de Chagny died on a Naval expedition, more than four years ago. I assure you, I had nothing to do with it! When I came upon his obituary, I recalled all that you had told me about your childhood sweetheart. I knew that even if you did not love Erik, you might love Raoul..."

She stared at him in growing horror, her mind unable to comprehend. The gloves Raoul always wore—to cover unnaturally cold fingers? The strong cologne—to disguise the stench of death! The stolen kisses, the whispered endearments, all those moments shared in secret with her beloved, she'd actually been—*with Erik!*

"I could have become accustomed to hearing another man's name on your lips, if it were mine that you kissed," Erik continued, his voice gently scolding. "I had it all planned out—your knight in shining armor appearing at the last moment to rescue you from the

horrid monster! You would have loved us forever...and you would never have known, had you kept your temper."

Christine let out a sound of dismay.

As best he could, Erik straightened his torn shirt and jacket and faced her again, standing tall. "You see, my dear Christine. I told you—you would marry no one else. And, after all...*I am the master of masks.*"

The End