

DANCING WITH ANGELS

by A.N.D

Erik was heading out for a little night air when he heard the stagehands grumbling.

“Fetch and carry, fetch and carry,” one was growling. “And everything to be done at once.”

“Joseph, be quiet!” the other hissed. “Let’s take these boxes to the prop room and get out of here!”

“Why?” returned the first one belligerently. “Are you afraid?”

“Joseph ...,” warned the second man.

“Do you think the ghost will get you? Wooooo...”

Erik curled his lip (what there was of it) as the stagehand started making outlandish groans that he seemed to think were scary sounds. Someday that Joseph Buquet would go too far...

The voices were covered by the sound of heavy objects being dropped carelessly against the wall. Erik flinched as he heard something shatter. Then something else went thud, with a protesting musical jangle. Clumsy oafs! It would serve them right if he had the Directors fire them.

Mercifully, they stomped away then, having done with their destruction for the moment. Erik waited a bit for them to get out of sight. then slipped into the room to assess the damage, and to see if there was anything he might tithe as personal property. Never call it stealing - if the Opera was his, then its possessions were his, and he could not steal from himself, *n’ c’est pas?*

Most of it was general stage dressing - books, knick-knacks, picture frames - nothing particularly interesting. Erik dug warily, avoiding the shards of what had once been a stained-glass lamp. Deciding that nothing in there

was worth getting his hands cut for, he turned to see what had chimed so protestingly in the other crate.

He found the remnants of a music box half way down. The aged cabinet had been scratched and cracked badly, but not so badly that it would show from the stage. More than one thing slid loose inside as Erik pulled it free, but inspection showed that although the works were gummed with age and dust, and the comb had been bent out of shape as the sounding board warped, the mechanism was still relatively intact and the cylinder was good.

Erik deemed it worthy of salvage; if nothing else, the tune might provide a little inspiration for his own works. And restoring it would make a good project for those times when he was not writing Don Juan or coaching his new pupil. Besides, he'd always enjoyed building mechanical things.

Careful investigation of the comb allowed him to figure out the original notes of the piece. It was a lovely but unfamiliar tune, and the words "one thousand kisses" inscribed on the end of the cylinder in German only added to the mystery of the little box. Still, after a night of experimenting with the tempo on his organ, he decided on the speed the cylinder should be set to spin, and after that, fixing the clockwork was child's play for the engineer.

However, the cabinet was not so easily made, mostly because he couldn't decide on a design for it. The old one had been made in the height of rococo fashion, a style Erik considered tasteless at best. But should the new one be art nouveau, or neo-gothic, or classical, or...? Several of what otherwise would have been long, lonely nights were dedicated to drawing and rejecting sketches for the new look.

But he was always careful not to let his amusement with his musical bagatelle make him forget his appointments with Christine. He stationed himself behind her dressing room mirror promptly after every rehearsal, and again before and after every performance. He drilled her voice and bolstered her confidence, and slowly, almost unwillingly, fell in love with her.

He did not dare let her see him; she loved her Angel of Music, but how could she love this demon's face, this face his own mother could not love? But still, perhaps, he could let her know how much she meant to him just

the same. One night after her lesson, Erik went down and finally began work on the music box - a simple veneered rectangle, adorned with a "C".

The varnish was almost dry the day Christine came bursting into her room, almost bouncing on her toes in her exhilaration. "Angel? *Mon Ange*, are you here?"

"I... I am here," Erik told her from behind the mirror. "You are so eager for your lesson tonight, hmm?"

"I'm excited, for tomorrow I will sing the lead in the matinee! Carlotta wishes to have the day off!"

"Congratulations!" Erik told her heartily. "But tonight you practice extra hard to be ready."

He drilled her until she was exhausted, but her enthusiasm never dimed. It was her first lead, and what actress would not be delirious with joy? And Erik, walking wearily back to his house on the underground lake, privately rejoiced that his present was ready. His little angel would have forever a memento of her first lead, and all because of him.

She sang beautifully in the matinee, which Erik watched from the comforts of his private box. Someday, oh someday, she would be the star of that stage - of the country - of the world! But he left while the applause was still thundering so that he could have his surprise ready upon her return.

He had just settled it on her make-up table when the doorknob turned. Erik dropped his note on top of the box and bolted through the mirror, barely concealing himself before Christine, as radiant as the bouquet of roses she carried, came in.

"*Qu'est que ce?*" she asked the air as she saw the box upon her table. Her rhetorical question was answered when she picked up the note and read, "*Congratulations on your first lead—L'Ange Musique.*"

Slowly she lifted the lid, and the sprightly tune began to play. "Oh. Angel, it is beautiful!" Christine cried, as she closed her eyes and began to dance to the music.

Erik's heart all but stopped as he watched her. She looked so beautiful, dancing there in the gaslight. His hand moved of its own volition to check

that his mask was in place and pulled the counterweight to the mirror/door. Her eyes were still shut as she waltzed, but they flew open as Erik stepped into her arms.

“Who--?” she gasped, leaping back. Erik was too speechless at his own daring to answer. What had he done? What madness had prompted him to reveal himself to her?

Her hand lifted tentatively to his mask. “Angel? Are you my angel? Is that why you wear a mask?”

Erik leaned warily back, out of range of her questing fingers. “It is not... fit to see the faces of angels, *mon cherie*,” he warned her.

“You *are* my angel!” she said - and flung herself back into his embrace.

“Oh, my angel, my wonderful Angel of Music! You have come to share my triumph!”

Erik froze, simultaneously terrified and delighted. Then slowly, unbelievably, he gathered his angel close to him and danced with her to the music, daring to dream of one thousand kisses.

END

