

The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Victor Hugo

TIMELESS CLASSICS





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Quasimodo

The good people of Paris were awakened by a grand peal from all the bells in the city. January 6, 1482, was a double holiday. It was the Feast of the Epiphany and the Feast of Fools. Today there would be fireworks, a tree-planting, and a play.

All the houses and shops were closed that morning. Crowds of people made their way toward the fireworks or the play. Hardly anyone went to the tree-planting.

The Palace of Justice was already quite crowded. No one wanted to miss the election of the Pope of Fools. This event would take place after the play.

It was not easy to get into the great hall of the palace. Thousands of people filled the area.

Their ears were stunned by the noise. Their eyes were dazzled by the beauty of the palace. They were amazed by the towering arches, carved wood, and gold trim. The floor was made of the finest black and white marble. Pictures of all the kings of France adorned the walls. The tall, pointed windows were made of lovely stained glass.

The rich marble table was very long, broad, and thick. On it was a very tall wooden cage. The upper floor of the cage was easy to see from every part of the hall. This would be the stage for the play. The lower part of the cage was covered by fabric to hide the actors' dressing room. A ladder was used for stage entrances and exits.

When the clock struck 12, it was time for the play to start.

The crowd fell silent. Every eye was fixed on the marble table. Nothing could be seen but the four sergeants who were guarding the stage. These men stood as stiff and still as four painted statues.

The crowd waited 15 minutes. Nothing happened. No one appeared on the platform or the stage. The crowd grew restless.

Finally, one man said, “Let us have the play—or I say we should hang the sergeants!”

The four sergeants turned pale and looked at each other. The angry crowd started to move toward them.

Just then, the dressing room curtains opened. A young man, shaking with fear, came out and began to bow.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the young man announced nervously, “tonight we have the honor of performing before the Cardinal. He’s not here right now. We shall begin when he arrives.”

The mob began hooting. “We want to see the play! Begin immediately!”

The man who had come out to make the announcement trembled. He didn’t know what to do. He was afraid of being hanged—hanged by the people for making them wait, or hanged by the Cardinal for not waiting. Either way, he would lose!

Luckily for him, another person came forward. It was a tall, slender young man with sparkling eyes and smiling lips. His name was Pierre Gringoire. He was the author of the play.

“Begin the play right now,” he ordered. “I will explain to the Cardinal.”

And so the play began. The audience had trouble following it. The only person who seemed to be enjoying the play was its author! The audience was distracted by a beggar who had climbed up a pillar near the stage. Soon he distracted even the actors on the stage. They stopped performing.

“Why do you stop? Go on! *Go on!*” yelled Gringoire. No sooner had the actors obeyed him than there was another distraction. The door of the reserved platform opened. The usher announced: “The Cardinal.”

Poor Gringoire! Nobody paid attention to his play. All heads were turned toward the platform. His play was cut short a second time! Everyone in the audience tried to get a look at the Cardinal, followed by his staff of abbots and bishops. He bowed and smiled before sitting on his red velvet chair. The people in the audience watched intently, pointing out the churchmen they recognized and telling their names.

The Duke of Austria, along with his 48 ambassadors, entered soon after. Again, the

audience stared as they were seated. Each dignitary was announced by the usher. There were a thousand whispers at each name. Meanwhile, the four actors on the stage were completely forgotten by the audience. This is just what poor Pierre Gringoire had feared!

At first, Gringoire asked the actors to raise their voices and go on. Then, seeing that nobody was listening, he ordered them to stop. For a quarter of an hour, the performers patiently stood on stage, waiting for the audience to quiet down.

At last the play began again, but the audience had lost interest. One man shouted, "People of Paris! This play is not amusing. Nothing happens! I thought we were going to select the Pope of Fools. In my city of Ghent, this is how we do it: A crowd such as this one gathers. Then anyone who chooses puts his head through a hole and makes an ugly face. The one who makes the ugliest face is chosen Pope. That's it! It's a lot of fun, I tell you. Shall we choose your Pope of Fools this way? It will surely be more amusing than watching any more of this boring play."

The audience clapped in agreement. Someone broke the glass out of a small round

window. Then people started putting their heads through the empty circle of stone. Every human expression was seen. Men and women, young and old, scholars and shopkeepers—all got in on the fun. At last the Pope of Fools was elected. “Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!” the people called out on all sides.

A truly ugly face had peered out of the hole. The nose was big and oddly formed. The mouth was shaped like a horseshoe. A coarse eyebrow arched over the small left eye. The right eye was completely buried under an enormous growth. The teeth were jagged. One tooth stuck out like an elephant’s tusk. The chin was forked. Above all, the look on this unfortunate face showed a mix of spite, wonder, and sadness.

The new Pope of Fools was brought out in triumph. It was then that everyone realized the man had not been making a face—this was his *real* face! Indeed, his whole body was ugly. His head was covered with coarse red hair. Between his shoulders rose an enormous hump. His legs were strangely put together, and his hands and feet were huge. Still, there was an air of strength and courage about him. He looked like a

giant who had been broken into pieces and then carelessly reassembled.

People in the crowd began to shout. “It is the bell-ringer, Quasimodo! Oh, yes, it is Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame! Quasimodo, the one-eyed! Quasimodo, the bowlegged! Hurrah! Hurrah!” A woman spoke to him, but he did not answer. “He is deaf,” a man near her explained. “He became deaf from ringing the bells.”

Quasimodo was crowned with the fake tiara and the mock robe of the Pope of Fools. Then he was made to sit down on a special chair. Twelve men carried the chair upon their shoulders. Quasimodo looked down on the handsome, well-shaped men who were carrying him. A strange kind of joy seemed to spread over his sad face. Then the parade proceeded through the palace and out into the streets.

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Esmeralda

Night comes early in January. It was already dark when Gringoire left the Palace. He could not return to his apartment, for he was six months behind in his rent. He had hoped to be paid for his play—but that didn't happen. Where would he go to find lodging for the night? The answer was easy. He could choose any pavement in Paris!

While crossing the Palace square, poor Gringoire saw the Pope of Fools coming. The band that had played at his play was now playing for the parade. Another reminder of his play's failure!

Shivering in the cold, he wandered through the city, looking for a place to sleep. When he saw a big bonfire in one of the city squares,