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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