

# Quasimodo Casanova

*by* strannikov

Knock-kneed and pigeon-toed, Quasimodo lurched up to a bench on his lunch hour to read the latest from Bellringers Gazette. After shooing away the filthy pigeons and closely inspecting the bench, he squinted with his good eye at a second-page article on noise abatement headphones.

Minutes later, Laurent, a handbell chorister who filled in for Quasimodo sometimes, ambled along. "Ahh, Quasimodo" he hailed in a loud voice, which Quasimodo squinted at with his good eye. "They're installing a new half-ton bell at the Cathedral, Russian job just in."

Quasimodo answered with his usual "Hunh? What? Ehhh?" so Laurent was obliged to repeat with greater force.

The hunchback shook the paper with a sniff before replying in his normal half-shout: "Yeh, I'll be giving it the heave-ho after Mass tomorrow morning."

Laurent's head bobbed from side to side as he tried to read a front-page article that twitched in Quasimodo's huge gnarled hands. "Say, how're things with you and Esmeralda these days? Haven't seen her lately. I said— . . ."

After properly hearing the question, Quasimodo lowered the paper to eye Laurent over the top. "Hmm? Oh, her . . . ran off with some candlemaker, the bitch!"

Laurent, well aware of Quasimodo's upper body strength, had no interest in provoking the hunchback: but after working in the same cathedral for a few years, he had come to judge Quasimodo as something of a realist. "Well, you can't fault her much, you're not much to look at, you know, you can't think you'd have much appeal to a woman of her charms." This time, Laurent repeated himself holding his teeth firmly together.

On hearing the opinion, Quasimodo slammed the paper down onto his bandy legs. "What? 'Re you kidding?" he barked, lifting himself a bit from the bench. "I can pick up any woman I want,

whenever I want!" He swatted the air with the paper and returned to reading.

Laurent recalled involuntarily the sight of Quasimodo scaling the cathedral with a plump drunk vixen under one arm, up a rope that'd been dangling from the bell tower as if she were a small sack of onions, her screaming and kicking halfway up until fainting from the height. He's in a fine mood today!

"Ohhh?" Laurent drawled, lifting a hand to hide his widening smirk. Inspecting the available end of the bench, he blew the boards once before taking his seat. As fate, chance, or Providence would have it, here strolled Ophelie, a stately beauty from Marseille, sometime courtesan to the lesser nobility, strolling through in something burgundy wrapped in a heavy white lace shawl. "Really?" Laurent continued. "Well, here's your chance!" He tugged Quasimodo's arm and dropped his head nodding toward Ophelie.

Just as she reached their bench, Ophelie paused, opened her black taffeta handbag for a small mirror and some coloring and daubed her lips with a crimson almost as deep dark as her dress. She glanced at the pair of bell ringers without a word and with no discernible aversion to Quasimodo's monstrous features.

Laurent fidgeted more than Quasimodo. Unceremoniously, the hunchback finally lowered his paper and glanced up at the beauty. With his good eye he finally winked and gave a sly grin, which threatened to overflow with drool. Ophelie finished coloring her lips unperturbed. Modulating his voice for a stranger he had no reason to suspect was deaf, Quasimodo finally exhaled "That dress is almost as beautiful as you!"

Ophelie returned her mirror and coloring to her handbag, pressed her lips together, and wagged her head from side to side. "Almost as beautiful as you," she suggested.

Quasimodo instantly stood, for one moment taller than Ophelie before he crouched into his comfortable slouch. The hunchback nosed the air. "Mmm! A delightful scent! Attar of roses?"

Ophelie narrowed her gaze at the hideous hunchback. "Your nostrils are about as far apart as your ears, monsieur, I applaud this

exploit of your nose!" Laurent almost twinged under Quasimodo's rebuke, but Quasimodo was in no sense discouraged.

"Want to see my funny face?" the hunchback arched his only movable eyebrow, his thick tongue bulging from behind his gap-toothed grin.

Ophelie lost it right there, slapped a thigh with a hoot and then kept howling. Seconds later she wrapped both arms around her ribs to hold herself, laughing so hard that both Quasimodo and Laurent readied to assist her from tottering over.

"Quasimodo, you charmer!" she squealed, linking arms and pulling him along. The hunchback lurched off with the stately beauty, the stately beauty gliding off with the poise of a burgundy swan.

Laurent sat too stunned to shift. Abstractly, he lifted the hunchback's discarded copy of Bellringers Gazette before it could flutter away. He paused at the second-page article on noise abatement headphones, too, but didn't read the article to the end. He looked about to be sure the park was empty: only then did he leave the bench to return unobserved to his room.

In the remaining light of day, he pulled the pliant flesh around his eyes in different directions, took turns flattening and lifting his nose, first tugged on then mashed in his cheeks, modeled a range of sneers, leers, and grimaces, and lastly practiced various squints and crossings of eyes before his mirror, all to no avail.

After this private episode, Laurent disappeared from Paris. Though hardly mentioned in the Cathedral community itself, his disappearance was much commented on in succeeding editions of Bellringers Gazette.

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