

Finally, one day or night—they are the same to Esmeralda—she hears a noise at the heavy door. She looks up, and the light hurts her eyes. She sees a man come through the door. He is dressed in black. Esmeralda cannot see his hands or face.

After a long silence, the girl says, "Who are you?"

"A priest."

At the sound of this voice, Esmeralda shakes with fear.

"Are you prepared?" the priest asks.

"For what?"

"For death. It will be tomorrow. Do you understand why you are here?"

"I did once, but now I don't." The girl begins to cry. "Sir, I'm cold and afraid. This is no life without light, without fire, without friends."

"Follow me," says the man. He touches the girl's arm.

"Oh, it's the icy hand of death. Who are you?" Esmeralda asks.

The priest takes his hat off and the girl sees Father Claude Frollo. She saw this face in Madame Falourdel's dirty little hotel above Phoebus's head. She remembers his burning kiss. This man killed Phoebus and he wants to kill her.

"It's you! The evil priest. Why do you follow me? You've tortured me, and you've killed my Phoebus. Why do you hate me?" Esmeralda asks.

"I cannot hate you. I love you!" cries the priest.

"What kind of love is this?" the girl shouts.

"It's a painful, secret love. It has destroyed my life. Before I met you, I was happy."

"And I was, too!" says Esmeralda.

"Quiet! I must tell my story. I was a good priest, an honest man. I was proud. I walked through the streets of Paris with my head high. I had religion and science, and those were enough. But then one day, when I was in my tower, I heard your music in the square below. I looked out and saw you—the most beautiful thing in the

world. I watched, and I was lost. My books held no interest. The cathedral became a prison. I wanted only to see you, to touch you, to love you.

"From that day, I was a different man. When I opened a book, I saw your face. I went into the cathedral, and I heard your voice. I followed you because I cannot live without you. I waited for you on street corners. I watched you from the top of my tower. Every day I became crazier with the idea of you in my head.

"Then one day I heard that soldier say your name. He laughed and joked about you. I followed him, and you know the rest."

"Oh, my Phoebus!" Esmeralda cries softly.

"Don't say that name. He didn't love you. He didn't even know your name. Look at me! I was with you in the courtroom. I saw you on the torturer's table. You suffered, but do you understand *my* torture? I watched you smile at that stupid soldier in that dirty room. I watched him touch you and kiss you. He wanted to use you and throw you away. But I love you and I can help you. They'll hang you tomorrow, but I can stop them. You can live. Touch my hand. Follow me out of this prison. Learn to love me. Learn to forgive me. Please! Please!"

Esmeralda looks into the priest's eyes and says, "What has happened to my Phoebus?"

"He's dead!" cries the priest.

"Dead!" Esmeralda says. She feels even colder now. "Then do not talk to me about living."

The priest is not listening. "The knife went deep," he says quietly to himself. "He's surely dead."

"Go! Leave, murderer! Love you? Forgive you? Never! My blood and the blood of Phoebus de Châteaupers are on your hands. You're a devil!" Esmeralda screams.

She falls to the floor. Father Claude takes his light, slowly climbs the stairs, and shuts the door. The room is black again.

