

MEPHISTA

CHAPTER I

The car was parked near the Buttes-Chaumont. It was impossible to find a place in front of the O.R.T.F.,¹ Rue Carducci, Rue des Alouettes, and the nearby streets were too narrow and congested. Therefore, Teddy Verano arrived on foot, glancing idly and sadly at the ugly walls of the huge factory where they produced billions of images intended to entertain, inform and educate the people of France.

“Studio 26?”

In the immense glass cage that served as the entrance hall, someone gave him directions as precisely as possible. He had already been there anyway, so he wasted little time in the huge aisles under the high, ungainly balconies and down the glass-walled hallways. At last, a comfortable, cheerful elevator, warm and silent, brought him upstairs.

He stepped onto the set to the disapproving looks of a great number of people who obviously had nothing to do there, and whose presence must have annoyed the director, cameramen and, especially, the artists forced to live, love and suffer before 80 pairs of eyes. However, no one asked the detective anything. He slipped into the crowd, staying out of the shot and walking quietly, out of habit, even though they were not shooting yet.

Edwige Hossegor was there. He saw her in a black, sequin dress, close-fitting to show off her beautifully slender, sensual figure (despite being in her forties), with her gorgeous, elegant face under her magnificent black hair. But this was not the right moment to approach her. The director was putting the final touches to the scene they were about to shoot.

Teddy Verano, like everyone else, listened. But his mind was elsewhere. He fingered the letter in his pocket. The note that had made him rush over to the studio. A woman’s desperate call for help. From Edwige Hossegor, presently one of the biggest stars of the big and small screen. From this supple Venus swamped by admirers. From this woman who was loved, worshipped, and idolized by a huge public. A woman whose beauty was as famous as her kindness.

The Orange Prize² had just been awarded to this charming creature.

And yet the seductive, delightful Edwige Hossegor specialized in the role of vamps and cruel women, and the viewers, of course, claimed in the magazines that they did not want to see her doing anything else.

But who could say what her private life was like? Why send off this distress signal? On the surface, she looked satisfied, happy...

Weren’t there rumors that the playboy she had charmed, Baron Tragny, was bound, any day now, to offer to share his name and fortune with her?

Tragny was there; Verano recognized him. Soberly elegant, around 50 years-old, he was still a ladies’ man and looked bursting with health and youth. He was often photographed with Edwige, who had the face and figure of a woman no older than 35, and the readers must have sighed, “What a beautiful couple!”

Verano wondered.

Did the baron know about the note? Did he know that Edwige wrote a brief letter to a private detective in a trembling hand:

¹ The Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française was the national agency charged, between 1964 and 1974 with providing public radio and television in France.

² Annual Parisian social event which began in the 1950s. A “Lemon Prize” was awarded to a celebrity famous for his or her bad temper, and an “Orange Prize” to one famous for being pleasant.

Some people told me about you. I trust them. I want to trust you. I'm scared. Come to Studio 26, O.R.T.F., Buttes-Chaumont. I have to see you right away. I'm afraid... I'll tell you all about it in person..."

Why does this beautiful, rich woman who was about to marry one of the most eligible bachelors in Paris, who had met constant success, why did she think she was in danger?

Teddy was not very convinced of the reality of this danger.

Neurosis? Overwork, perhaps. Edwige Hossegor had filmed and filmed, non-stop, for years.

But some movement was stirring the crowd. The director was backing up, starting to shout into a megaphone that was connected to microphones. The boom operators were placing the "fishpoles" that picked up the sounds, the electricians were aiming their spots, and the cameramen were at the ready. The constant murmur of the parasitic crowd had come to end as well.

"Camera!" the director yelled. "Action!"

They were "getting the scene."

Teddy Verano had taken the time to read *Télé 7 Jours*, the TV guide magazine, so he knew what the production was about. Edwige Hossegor had the starring role in a new, 13-episode series, *The Vampires of Paris*. Since the fantasy-spy genre was trendy, they had written the role for her.

In front of Teddy, in front of all the others, they ran through a short scene.

In a modern studio apartment, a man, alone, in a bathrobe, was relaxing watching the television. He smoked. He sipped a whiskey. He was at peace. He thought he was beyond the reach of everything. Suddenly, Edwige Hossegor appeared...

—Or rather *Mephisto*.

This was the fictional name the screenwriters gave her. A spy? Or some modern, entrancing witch who used occult gadgets?

Teddy Verano had read the summary too quickly to know everything. What he noticed, like all the spectators, was the undeniable screen presence of Edwige Hossegor.

She approached the man, who looked up, surprised, enthralled, and worried too. Then he tried to get up but the woman in the black sequined dress looked at him in a way that set his imagination on fire. She leaned over him... And she struck!

The knife had come out of nowhere. Blood spurted. Because, of course, it was a color film.

The scene ended, after editing, with a close-up of Edwige Hossegor.

Everyone held their breath, admiring the posture but especially the expression on her face. How could such a beautiful woman reveal so much savagery?

Teddy appreciated it like an expert. What an actress! So kind and simple, and yet she could really scare you with her pretty face all contorted and that flame of hatred burning in her black eyes.

But the scene continued.

The victim lurched and clutched the armchair. Mephisto stepped back, watching his death throes with fearsome cruelty.

The poor man staggered and gasped out the name of his enemy, "Me... phis... ta..." He stumbled; he was about to fall... to die.

No! With a jolt, he suddenly plunged his shaky hand into the pocket of his bathrobe. He pulled out a 6.35 mm gun, clambered to his feet and shot.

And Mephisto, who did not have time to react, cried out like a wounded animal and fell backward, arms akimbo.

In silence, the audience was dumbstruck by the fall, marvelously executed, though so difficult to accomplish.

The man, exhausted, dropped the weapon and looked, stunned, at the body of Mephisto, placing his hand on her chest where the blood (stage blood) was still flowing.

"Cut!"

And the atmosphere changed in the blink of an eye.

Despite the conventionality of the scene, everyone was still under its spell because of the talent of interpretation. The actors were still in the spotlights but they were no longer playing their roles. A murmur of admiration ran through the crowd.

“Wonderful!”

“She’s the best!”

“Don’t you think it’s a little out of fashion?”

“With her? Not a chance. All of France is going to be following *The Vampires*. Now they’ll call her Mephista.”

Teddy Verano figured that it would be good fun to watch the series and thought of all the people who would suddenly become unavailable during its show time, glued to their TV screens.

Jean-Pierre Max, the actor, walked into the wings. Covered with splotches of fake blood, he laughed that he needed a good shower.

“Thank you, Edwige,” said the director, “that’s all for today.”

A dresser came up with a comb for the star, who lay there, arms stretched out, in that incredible position after her delicate, skillfully executed fall. Teddy was listening to praises spoken about the acting of his future client.

“Very good, Edwige? What...?” And the dresser screamed, “Madame! Madame!”

The crowd rushed onto the stage. The spotlights were still on and streamed over everyone.

Baron Tragny turned pale, shouldering his way through the crowd.

“Edwige!” he shouted.

Teddy Verano felt his heart sink. By reflex, he fingered the letter in his pocket, which Edwige had sent him three hours ago.

What if I got here too late? he thought.

The baron, the director, the script girl and the dresser lifted Edwige up. Before breaking down in tears, Tragny howled:

“Dead! It’s impossible...”

Overwhelmed, Teddy Verano just watched, struggling to understand.

In a modern studio apartment, a man in his thirties, alone, was relaxing watching the television. Relaxing? Not exactly. With a glass of whiskey in hand, he kept turning away from the TV screen to look at a magnificent, framed photo on the table.

Edwige Hossegor.

Edwige Hossegor, in an exquisite summer dress, radiating beauty and youth. A remarkable photo. Across the photo, the beautiful actress has written elegantly but nervously:

To Jacques Lemoulin. Best Wishes from Edwige Hossegor.

Jacques Lemoulin sighed. Yes, they knew each other. She was sweet to him. But he would never be anything but one admirer amongst many. The prize place was taken. Lemoulin, more than anyone else, knew the role that Baron Tragny played in Edwige’s life, and that he would soon make her his wife. But Jacques Lemoulin still loved her. Hopelessly.

He sipped his Cutty Sark and wrapped himself in the smoke from the aromatic tobacco. He turned away from the photo to listen to the TV. Politics, wars, riots, disasters. Sporting competitions and space race. What did the world matter to a desperate lover?

Suddenly, breaking news:

“We have just heard news that will cause the film world, and especially the world of French Television, to grieve...”

Frozen, Jacques Lemoulin saw a photo appear on the screen. The same photo, exactly, that he had on his table, except without the sweet but impersonal dedication.

The voice from the speaker seemed to come out of a nightmare:

“On the stage... an inexplicable accident... *Vampires of Paris*... Mephista... heart attack...”

Jacques Lemoulin stood up, covered in a cold sweat. Before him, the images of Edwige in her different film roles marched by, then a clip from her latest telefilm. And she smiled at him, talked to him, like to millions and millions of other people.

“Edwige...”

A sob choked the young man’s throat. Younger, of course, than she whom he had made his idol, in whose shadow he had lived for months.

“It’s over... finished... I’ll never see her again.”

“Jacques...”

His name? Someone’s calling him?

By reflex, he looked at the small screen. But, no, it had already changed. The news had switched to sports. Rugby players were fighting over an oval ball to the shouting of a bunch of maniacs who thought they are athletes.

“Jacques...”

Lemoulin turned around, shocked.

She was there.

Smiling, more seductive than ever, she had just entered the apartment where he lived alone and, he thought, was completely locked up.

Edwige, in her black sequined dress that glimmered with the night. He wanted to go to her, but she came first and hugged him with that irresistible movement, both beguiling and authoritative, that only she could perform.

The poor boy, overwrought and excited, as he had just learned of the sudden death of his beloved, saw her, touched her and kissed those trembling lips that the whole world knew and admired, those perfect lips pressing against his.

He savored the kiss, the ultimate caress that he had so often dreamed about, but never thought he would taste.

Then he became alarmed. Edwige Hossegor, since it was her, it was really her, slowly backed off and looked at him.

“Edwige... No, I’m going crazy... I’m dreaming or is it really you?”

“You’re not dreaming, my love.”

Jacques Lemoulin, with all his senses on fire, forgot about the televised news. It had to be false, completely false, seeing that Edwige was here, in front of him, touching him, suddenly bringing him the scent of paradise that fulfilled love gave to men as a consolation for their sad condition.

With a dry throat, he mumbled her name. Then everything happened very quickly.

The beautiful, gorgeous face of the actress changed. It was beautiful, yes, still beautiful, but now of a sinister, frightening beauty. Her face took on one of those expressions that came from her remarkable talent. All of a sudden, it was not Edwige who stood before him. It was...

She herself told him, in a deep, dramatic voice.

“No... Not Edwige... There’s no more Edwige... I’m Mephisto.”

And she struck. The knife came out of nowhere. Exactly as it was filmed two hours earlier in Studio 26 at the O.R.T.F. And this time, there was no fake blood spurting out of the chest of her victim. It was real blood...

Jacques Lemoulin’s face became terror-stricken. His dying eyes were stupefied by the unbelievable action. They were also clouded with contempt. She died, or at least they said she did. And yet, she’d come to him. And she killed him.

This time, it was not like in *The Vampires of Paris*. The victim did not react. He staggered backward and crashed into his television set. The screen shattered.

Slowly Jacques Lemoulin fell to the carpet.

Mephisto watched him die. And a glimmer from Hell danced in her big, black eyes.