

THE MASK OF ERIK

by Rick Lai

© 2007 Rick Lai rlai@optonline.net

In *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910), Gaston Leroux (1868-1927) created a colorful past for the title character who was also known as Erik. Leroux pretended that his novel was not a work of fiction. He perpetrated the hoax that the Phantom's story had been unearthed through interviews with actual people including former employees of the Paris Opera House. A careful reading of the novel indicates that its events transpired decades before its year of publication. The novel's prologue indicated that the story took place "not more than thirty years ago." At one point, Erik made the farcical prediction that a young girl, Meg Giry, would be an Empress in 1885. The novel happened sometime between 1880 and 1884. Of the years available, I favor 1881 (1).

The Phantom was born in a French town not far from Rouen. His exact year of birth was unstated, but it was probably around 1830 (2). The Phantom's skeletal visage was a defect from birth. The makeup of Lon Chaney Sr. in the famous 1925 silent movie faithfully followed Leroux's description of the Phantom's face. Since the silent film was made in black and white, Chaney could never duplicate the bizarre yellow eyes of the Phantom.

Very little is known of the Phantom's parents (3). His father was a stonemason. The Phantom's mother was repelled by her son's ugliness. She refused to ever let him kiss her. Furthermore, she insisted that he wear a mask at all times. At an early age, the Phantom ran away from home.

He then spent his formative years wandering around the fairs of Europe. An unscrupulous showman exhibited the Phantom as the "living corpse." Falling in among a tribe of gypsies, the Phantom learned stage magic. He also developed a wonderful singing voice. Leroux became very explicit on the Phantom's movements after the skull-faced illusionist made an appearance at the great fair of Nijni-Novgorod. Before his Russian debut, there occurred a period in the Phantom's life that Leroux labeled "obscure."

Various hints are dropped about the Phantom's activities prior to his arrival in Russia. He was taught the art of snorkeling by Vietnamese pirates from the Gulf of Tongking. The Phantom also lived in India where he mastered the Punjabi lasso, a special method of strangulation. Somehow during these travels, the Phantom adopted the name of Erik by "accident." From these vague remarks by Leroux, more descriptive details can be deduced.

France was beginning its colonial conquest of Indochina in the mid-nineteenth century. There was considerable activity by French missionaries in Vietnam during this 1850's. Suppose a ship full of supplies for the missionaries was short of a full crew. It was not unknown for sailors to get a civilian drunk in order to "shanghai" him. Such a fate probably befell the Phantom while he was entertaining seamen with magic tricks near the French coast. When the Phantom's ship reached Vietnamese waters, we can assume that it was attacked by indigenous pirates. The pirates slew all of the French crew with one notable exception. The Phantom was spared because of his weird appearance. Originally kept by the pirates as a kind of mascot, the Phantom became a valuable

addition to their ranks. After participating in several raids, the Phantom accumulated a large amount of stolen booty. In 1858, Emperor Napoleon III of France dispatched a military expedition to Indochina to protect French missionaries. Once the French navy became active in Vietnam, the Phantom felt it prudent to flee with his wealth to the British colony of India.

Leroux wrote that the Phantom became an accomplished strangler in India. The Phantom learned to slay people by lassoing their necks and throttling them. This murder method was called the Punjabi lasso.

Native Indians with mastery in such techniques of strangulation belonged to the cult of Thuggee. The Thugs performed human sacrifices to the goddess Kali. Official history claims that Thuggee was eradicated by the British in India around 1830. Mystery and adventure writers such as Talbot Mundy and Sax Rohmer pretended that the cult continued to exist in modern times. Thuggee was featured prominently in the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984).

The motion picture placed the center of the cult in the Indian kingdom of Pankot. Indiana Jones reached Pankot after his airplane crashed in the Himalayas. The Punjab is an Indian province that borders the Himalayas. Pankot must either be located near or inside the Punjab. It would be logical that the Thugs' method of strangulation be called the Punjabi lasso.

Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom implied that the Maharajahs of Pankot were the hereditary rulers of the cult. James Kahn's novelization of the screenplay (Ballantine Books, 1984) asserted that the royal palace of Pankot remained uninhabited by a Maharajah from 1857 until 1935. 1857 was the year of the Sepoy Mutiny in which various Maharajahs formed an alliance to oust the British from India. One can assume that a Maharajah of Pankot was ousted as a consequence of the British suppression of the revolt.

Thuggee and the Sepoy Revolt also figured in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Uncle Jeremy's Household" (4). In Doyle's tale, the ruler of Thuggee in 1857 was identified as Achmet Genghis Khan, an Indian chieftain of Jubbulpore ("Jublepore" in Doyle's tale). Jubbulpore is located in central India. The Maharajahs of Pankot must have been deposed by the British during the suppression of Thuggee in 1830. Achmet, the heir to the throne of Pankot, must have fled to Jubbulpore. When the Sepoy Revolt erupted, Achmet took advantage of the chaos to reclaim his palace.

Achmet perished in the Sepoy Revolt, but Doyle indicated that his followers continued to practice their rites in the wilds of India. It was among Achmet's disciples that the Phantom made a home in India. The Phantom must have become a Kali worshipper. Besides learning the Punjabi lasso, the Phantom could have been shown by the Thugs through the secret passages of the abandoned palace of Pankot. During his stay in India, the Phantom learned much about the architecture of the palace.

The Phantom's name of Erik is reminiscent of Erlik Khan, a demonic Mongolian god. Robert E. Howard frequently utilized Erlik Khan in many of his stories. In "The Daughter of Erlik Khan" (*Top-Notch*, December 1934), Howard had an American adventurer, Francis Xavier Gordon, visiting Yolgan, a hidden city of Erlik worshippers. Yolgan was located in British India's neighbor, Afghanistan. The story was reprinted in

The Lost Valley of Iksander (1974). “The House of Om,” Howard’s outline for a never-completed short story (5), professed that Thuggee is an offshoot of Erlik worship.

During his sojourn among the Thugs, the Phantom could have uncovered legends about Yolgan. Determined to visit the city in order to examine its architecture, he departed for Afghanistan. Upon arriving in Yolgan, the Phantom discovered that his grotesque appearance compelled the city’s inhabitants to proclaim him an avatar of Erlik Khan. Misinterpreting the cries of “Erlik,” the Phantom adopted the alias of “Erik.” The newly christened Erik was held in Yolgan as an captive demi-god for roughly a year. The priest of Erlik tried to keep the Phantom under control by pacifying him with drugs.

In Sax Rohmer’s *The Golden Scorpion* (1919), Fo-Hi, a character very similar to Erik surfaced in Europe during 1915 (6). He had yellow eyes and wore a mask. It’s possible that Fo-Hi was Erik’s son. A priestess of Erlik Khan could have had sex with Erik when he was drugged. The consequence of this encounter was the birth of Fo-Hi. Having been under the influence of drugs, Erik had no memory of this sexual relationship (7).

The Phantom eventually escaped from Yolgan. Aware that the priests of Erlik had contacts in India, the Phantom went north to avoid capture. Lacking funds, Erik decided to make some money at a famous annual fair held in Russia. At this point, Leroux’s novel was very explicit about Erik’s history.

Erik was now in Nijni-Novgorod, a city situated at the confluence of the Volga and the Oka Rivers 260 miles east of Russia. An annual fair had been established there in 1817. The fair was the largest and most important in Tsarist Russia. Merchants came from all over Europe and Asia. If you try to look up Nijni-Novgorod on a modern map, you won’t find it. The city was renamed Gorki in 1932.

Erik mesmerized crowds with his displays of ventriloquism and legerdemain. The caravans returning to Asia carried news of his wonderful performance. A fur dealer returning to Samarkand brought news of Erlik to Persia (Iran). The “little sultana,” the favorite wife of the Shah, began to hear reports of Erik. The Samarkand merchant was summoned by the sultana to the royal palace at Mazenderan, a northern province bordering the Caspian Sea. The fur dealer was questioned by Mazenderan’s daroga, a sort of Persian police chief. The daroga was instructed by the Shah to find Erik and bring him back to Persia. Traveling to Russia, the daroga succeeded in his mission.

From reading Leroux’s text, the reader gets the impression that Samarkand is in Persia. Actually the city is in the Central Asian territory known as Turkestan in the nineteenth century (Samarkand is now part of Uzbekistan). In the 1860’s, the Russian Empire moved to absorb Turkestan. Samarkand was conquered by Russia in the 1868. To return to Samarkand from Nijni-Novgorod, the merchant must have gone south to Persia and then northeast to Turkestan. A more direct route would have been southeast to Samarkand. It is quite likely that Samarkand was then not yet part of the Russian Empire. The merchant could have taken this devious route to avoid Russian military patrols. While his countrymen were being threatened by Tsarist Imperialism, the merchant was apparently not averse to trading with the enemy.

Erik became a macabre court jester for the sultana. One of the amusements performed by Erik to entertain his patroness was the Punjabi lasso. Armed only with the lasso, Erik would face a warrior equipped only with a long pike or broadsword. Normally

Erik's opponent was a man condemned to death. Erik would strangle his assailant in front of an audience consisting of the sultana and her female attendants. The sultana was taught the usage of the Punjabi lasso by Erik. She employed the lasso to kill many of her female servants. Presumably, the victims had committed some indiscretion that displeased the sultana.

The Shah also developed a fondness for Erik. The Phantom was commissioned to perform political assassinations. Erik also participated in operations directed "against the Emir of Afghanistan, who was at war with the Persian Empire."

Leroux never mentioned the name of the Shah, but he was unquestionably Nasr-ed-Din, absolute ruler of Persia from 1846-96. Having visited Europe in 1872, 1878 and 1889, the Shah was well-known when the novel was published. As for "the little sultana," she was probably meant to be the Shah's favorite wife, the Anis-ed -Dowleh (Companion of the King). She had been born a miller's daughter. The Shah caught sight of her beauty while out riding. The next day, she was removed to the royal harem. Her influence over her husband was so great that all of her relatives were given positions at court.

Persia had fought a war with Afghanistan in 1856-57. The conflict occurred too early to involve Erik (8). There was border trouble between the two countries that lasted until 1872. The dispute was finally settled by British arbitration. Erik's action against the Emir must have been related to the border difficulties.

The Phantom was ambitious to prove himself as an architect. He persuaded the Shah to grant him permission to redesign a palace in Mazenderan. Erik fashioned an ingenious structure. The building was a honeycomb of secret passages. As a result of this achievement, Erik was called "the trap-door lover," One wonders if Erik merely earned this title from his passion for secret passages. Maybe he paid unsuspected, as well as undesired, visits to the sleeping quarters of the sultana's female servants.

I can find no evidence that Nasr-ed-Din ever remodeled a palace. George N. Curzon's *Persia and the Persian Question* (1892) mentions that the Shah constructed a "hunting lodge" on the ruins of a palace. This building was erected "many years" before the publication of Curzon's book. By the 1890's, the structure was on the verge of collapse. Perhaps Leroux's "palace" was this hunting lodge. Erik could have weakened the foundations with all his secret tunnels.

Whatever the longevity of Erik's creation, the Shah was initially pleased with it. In fact, the Shah became convinced that no one else should know the secrets of his Mazenderan residence. The despot ordered the execution of Erik and all his laborers. The responsibility of slaying Erik fell upon Mazenderan's daroga. Having befriended Erik, the daroga permitted him to flee the country. The daroga was nearly beheaded by the Shah for this act of mercy. Fortunately for the daroga, his friends dressed an unrecognized corpse in clothes that once belonged to Erik. When the body was found on the shores of the Caspian Sea, the Shah assumed Erik was dead. The daroga's sentence was commuted to exile. The Persian ex-official made France his new home.

According to Leroux, Erik left Persia for Turkey. Offering his services to the Sultan, the Phantom constructed "all the famous trap-doors and secret chambers and mysterious strong-boxes which were found at Yildiz-Kiosk after the last Turkish Revolution." The Sultan was Abul-Hamid II, He reigned from 1876 until his overthrow

by the Young Turks in 1909. Yildiz-Kiosk was a pavilion originally built by Abul-Hamid's father. It was extensively modified to contain secret passages in 1877.

Fearful that the Sultan would prove as treacherous as the Shah, Erik quickly left Turkey after completing his work. Leroux's text claimed that Erik now arrived in Paris. Becoming a building contractor, Erik entered a bid for the foundations of the Opera House. When his bid was accepted, Erik designed a clandestine retreat for himself on an underground lake beneath the cellars of the enormous theatre.

Like the Yildiz-Kiosk, the Paris Opera House has a real existence. Designed by Charles Garnier, construction of the Opera House began in 1861 and finished in 1875. Due to the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and the revolt known as the Paris Commune (1871), work on the Opera House was suspended. Leroux asserted that Erik erected his hidden sanctuary when official work was halted during 1870-71.

Leroux must be in error regarding Erik's movements. Erik must have gone to France before doing renovations to the Yildiz-Kiosk in 1877. Maybe Erik met Abdul-Hamid before he became Sultan. At the time Erik departed Persia, Abdul-Hamid was only the nephew of the reigning Sultan. After performing as a paid assassin in Abdul-Hamid's employ, Erik departed for France. When Abdul-Hamid became Sultan in 1876, the Phantom had already completed his work on the Paris Opera House. Erik contacted his former patron and offered his services as an architect. Once Yildiz-Kiosk was modified, Erik returned to his secret headquarters in France.

Leroux never explained where Erik gained his knowledge of architecture. My speculations about the Phantom's exploits in India and Afghanistan provide the answer. He gained his knowledge from exploring Pankot and Yolgan.

Leroux's novel concerned Erik's infatuation for Christine Daae, a woman whom he trained to be an opera singer. There seems to have been another woman in the Phantom's life during his years in the Opera House. The Phantom secretly watched performances from an opera box. Once he demanded that Madame Giry bring him a footstool. Giry speculated that the footstool was for an unseen woman who must have accompanied the Phantom the performance. The woman wasn't Christine. Who was she?

The answer lies in the mystery of a bizarre denizen of the opera cellars who was known as the Shadow (the Shade in some translations) or the Man in the Felt Hat. This enigmatic character wore a felt hat and a cloak like Erik. Leroux never fully explained who the Shadow was. Elsewhere, I have offered evidence that the Man in the Felt Hat was actually a woman trained in the art of subterfuge by Erik (9). Although the Phantom trained this woman beginning in 1879, he never fell in love with this protégé like Christine. Probably this lack of affection resulted because the woman did not appeal to the angelic side of Erik's nature. Music had become his passion, and this shadowy lady was not a singer. She also represented to Erik his darker demonic nature that he was hoping to overcome.

In 1881, the events of Leroux's novel unfolded. After pretending to be a "ghost" in the Opera House for many years, Erik kidnapped Christine Daae. Erik's former friend, the daroga of Mazenderan, offered his assistance to the Vicomte de Chagny, Christine's lover. The courageous pair trailed Erik to his subterranean lair. The daroga and the Vicomte were imprisoned in a diabolical death-trap by Erik. Christine gained their release by agreeing to stay willingly with Erik. Stunned by Christine's nobility, Erik

became remorseful. He released the opera singer her promise. She returned to the outside world and her lover. As for Erik, he died of a broken heart. His skeleton was discovered years later in the cellars of the Opera House.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE PHANTOM'S LIFE.

- 1830 Born in a town not far from Rouen.
- 1844 Runs away from home.
- 1845-52 Tours European carnivals and fairs as the "living corpse."
- 1853 Joins tribe of gypsies.
- 1856 Is "shanghaied" by French sailors. Joins Vietnamese pirates.
- 1859 Arrives in India.
- 1860 Becomes member of Thuggee cult.
- 1862-63 Resides in Yolgan as demi-god. Adopts name of Erik (a corruption of Erlik).
- 1863-64 Wanders around Central Asia and Russia.
- 1864 Performs a fair in Nijni-Novgorod
- 1865-66 Serves the Shah of Persia (Iran).
- 1866-67 Serves Abdul-Hamid, nephew to the Sultan of Turkey.
- 1867 Returns to France.
- 1868 Becomes building contractor.
- 1870-71 Builds secret headquarters underneath Paris Opera House during the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune.
- 1875 Installs himself secretly in the Opera House when it opens.
- 1877 Leaves France temporarily to modify Yildiz-Kiosk in Turkey for Abdul-Hamid, now Sultan of Turkey.
- 1879 Trains a woman to pose as the Man in the Felt Hat.

1881 Performs the actions described in the event of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

NOTES

1. I originally chose 1881 as the year of the novel because 1911 was often incorrectly given as the novel's year of publication in most English reference books. Actually, 1911 was the year in which the novel was published in an English translation. The novel was published in France as *La Fantome de L'Opera* in 1910. Therefore, the novel could be placed in 1880. In *The Essential Phantom of the Opera: The Definitive Annotated Edition of Gaston Leroux's Classic Novel* (Plume, 1996), Leonard Wolf chooses 1881 as the year of the novel for many reasons including the references to the operatic works being performed.
2. The assertion that 1830 was the probable year of the Phantom's birth was made in the original version of this article published in the fanzine *Golden Perils* #8 (March 1987). I envisioned that Erik had to be around fifty to have traveled throughout Indochina, India, Russia, Persia (Iran) and Turkey before arriving in France shortly before the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71). A few years after the publication of my article, Susan Kay wrote an excellent novel, *Phantom: The Story of His Life* (Random House of Canada, 1990) which placed Erik's birth in 1831. I doubt very much that the talented Ms. Kay read my article, and her chronological reconstruction of the Phantom's life differs substantially from my other conclusions.
3. "His Father's Eyes" by Jean-Marc Lofficier has the Phantom being born around the 1790's. The Phantom's mother was a woman raped by the Frankenstein Monster. Both the Monster and the Phantom had yellow eyes. Besides the contradiction surrounding my premise that the Phantom was born in 1830, "His Father's Eyes" also had the Phantom being born with the name of Erik. In Leroux's novel, Erik was a name that the Phantom adopted by accident in the course of his travels. The only way to reconcile "His Father's Eyes" with my own theories would be to argue that the Monster's son was actually the father of the stonemason identified by Leroux as Erik's father. The stonemason inherited his father's eyes but not his extreme ugliness. Both of these characteristics of the Monster would be inherited by his grandson. The Phantom's accidental assumption of the Erik name would be prompted by the fact that it was also his father's name. "His Father's Eyes" can be founded in Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier's unabridged translation of Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (Black Coat Press, 2004).
4. "Uncle Jeremy Household" (also titled "The Mystery of Uncle Jeremy's Household") can be found in these collections: *The Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Castle Books, 1981), *Masterworks of Crime and Mystery* (Doubleday, 1982) and *The Unknown Conan Doyle: Uncollected Stories* (Doubleday, 1984).
5. "The House of Om" can be found in *Shudder Stories* #2 (Cryptic Publications, December 1984) or *The "New" Howard Reader* #1 (June 1988).

6. For the chronology of *The Golden Scorpion*, see my “Some Chronological Observations on the Fu Manchu Series.”
7. Erik’s lack of memory would mean that he was sincere in the 1881 statement that Christine Daae was the only woman who permitted herself to be kissed by him.
8. Both Leonard Wolf’s *The Essential Phantom of the Opera* and Susan Kay’s *Phantom* disagree with my conclusion. They both place Erik in Persia during the 1850’s.
9. See my “Speculation: Who Were The Shadow’s Parents?” section in *Chronology of Shadows*.