

The Orchestra of Death

By Ianthe Jerrold

It was an evening in the end of November and the roadway gleamed in the lamplight under a soft drizzle of rain. A long queue waited at the gallery entrance of the Coliseum, for it was ten minutes before the opening of the doors. By the shining kerb a bent-backed man moved up and down, playing a monotonous melody on a tin whistle, his cap pulled down over his eyes and the collar of his faded coat turned up against the rain. Nobody heeded him.

A small party of young girls wearing munition badges stood in the queue near to the doorway, and there was much laughing and lively talk among them. One of them took a postcard from her handbag and passed it to the friend at her side.

'Mademoiselle José Dessars in "La Rose de la Syrie"' she read slowly, as two others peered over her shoulder.

'Yes, that's her; not in this dance, but in the one mother seen her in at the Pavilion. She dances a treat, mother says . . . No, a kind of dark rose shade and silver shoulder-straps. She was supposed to be a rose in the dance, see. She comes on tonight after Lucy Glynn. Got a penny, Maude?' The whistle-player stood by the kerb diffidently holding out his tattered cap.

A long line of motor-cars stood now before the open doors, and the bright vestibule was full of moving people. A poster on a wooden frame which leaned against the doorway drew the eyes of every passer-by. It was a black sheet of paper lettered in white, and bore the words:

JOSÉ DESSARS,
Valse Triste.

The doors opened.

'Two by two, please,' said the policeman. Slowly the long queue began to move in at the narrow entrance. . . .

Josephine Dessars lay on the bed in her big, untidy room and stared with blank eyes at the shaded lamp on her open desk. She was half-dressed, and the quilt which had covered her had been tossed aside and lay in a heap on the floor. A variety of soft garments hung over the high foot of the bedstead. She held a folded newspaper in her outflung hand.

Her short coarse hair was black against the white pillow, and accentuated the pallor of her small face; her round, dark eyes were purple-ringed, and the upper lids were swollen and reddened. There was on her face no sign of tears, but the look of one who has spent many restless nights and days in an absorbing anxiety of mind.

There was a sharp click, and then the sound of a door being cautiously opened. A tall girl, with a thick knot of dull fair hair, came quietly into the room and shut the door softly behind her. She tip-toed to the side of the bed. Josephine looked up and smiled.

'Oh, you're awake! How's the headache?'

'All right now,' said Josephine, and yawned, lifting her small arms above her head. 'What's the time, Phyllis, dear?'

'You don't look much better,' said Phyllis, gravely. 'And it's a quarter to seven. I was just going to wake you up. And I've turned your bath on.'

‘Thank you, Phyllikins.’ Josephine yawned again and sat up. In spite of her thirty-six years she looked a child as she swung her legs over the side of the high bedstead. She was an unusually small woman, with slender limbs and a narrow, oval face. Her thick hair showed very few lines of grey.

Phyllis, her pupil and protégée, picked up the Telegraph from the floor.

‘Why, you haven’t even unfolded the paper yet—you don’t seem to take any interest in anything now. What’s the matter with you, José? And you’ve been looking simply awfully ill the last few days!’

Josephine, thrusting her feet into brocaded slippers, laughed.

‘I’m all right, silly child. It’s my cold still hanging on, that’s all.’

‘I don’t believe you sleep a bit at night, either,’ said Phyllis, settling herself down on the bed with the air of one determined to argue the matter out. ‘And you talk in your sleep. Last night I was awake and I could hear you. And what do you think you said? You kept muttering over and over again: “They’re dead; they’re all dead.” You kept saying that. It sounded dreadful. Who’s dead, Josephine, darling?’

Josephine Dessars laughed nervously.

‘Did I say that, dear? How funny! The “Valse Triste” must be getting on my nerves. But I must hurry up.’ She flung a dressing-gown around her shoulders and went to the door. ‘Sort some clothes out for me while I have a bath, there’s an angel.’

Phyllis sighed, and got up slowly from the bed. To Josephine Dessars, as she went down the brightly lit passage, the very click of her own heels on the parquet seemed to repeat the words: ‘They’re dead; they’re all dead.’

Josephine Dessars had danced for nearly thirty years. The daughter of a French circus-rider and a wandering Englishman, she had spent her childhood passing from town to town with her mother’s troupe. An elfish and precocious little girl of eight, she had taken her childish part in the acrobatic displays which were a feature of such travelling shows. Later, when she had grown to a graceful girl, she joined a different company and gained a certain reputation in provincial French towns as a ballet-dancer. She had inherited the volatile and adventurous temperament of her father, together with something of the shrewdness of the French bourgeoisie.

So she danced her way from town to town. She had many lovers, for men and women alike fell under the spell of her happy kindness and her soft, slow voice. But she was unemotional and ambitious, and she formed no deep attachments.

She was very happy in those early days.

It was in Vienna, when she was twenty-three, that she committed the one great indiscretion of her life. There she met Otto Geracht. He was an Austrian revolutionary, a dreamer, a fanatic, almost a madman; but he had a great eloquence and a queer attractive personality. Through his influence Josephine Dessars became acquainted with a society of revolutionaries known as ‘The Seven. In a moment of impulse and enthusiasm she joined it. It was a small society and consisted of but seven members. They were all possessed of powerful intellects and a really great enthusiasm, but all had the same curious twist—a disregard of logic, a love of theatrical poses, a contempt of individual suffering together with a real concern for the suffering of humanity. It was their optimism and youthful faith that attracted Josephine.

Their aim was an advanced Socialism; they talked a lot of the brotherhood of man. They had indeed a beautiful faith in a future Golden Age, but, like all fanatics, they were absolutely callous of the suffering they caused, with a firm belief in an ultimate end that should justify any means.

Josephine had looked upon the whole affair as an adventure. Although these people attracted her she was not of them. She did not at first realize that what was a passing enthusiasm, a mere thrilling experience, to her, was to them the whole aim of their existence.

So she listened to the passionate eloquence of Otto Geracht and joined 'The Seven'. She never forgot the night of her initiation. The members met at the dwelling-place of Geracht, a big, ugly house in a narrow back street. Ten o'clock was the hour for their meeting, and Josephine had gone to it straight from the theatre; she had hurried through the gaily lit streets with an enjoyable sense of romantic adventure.

It was not until she had entered the bare gas-lit meeting-room that the first apprehension came upon her. She realized for the first time the immense earnestness of Geracht and his associates. She saw herself as she was, practical, happy, ambitious, and knew most certainly that she had nothing in common with these absorbed unworldly dreamers. She had felt suddenly hysterical and had become conscious of a desire to leave the house before she committed herself too far. But Otto Geracht had come to her and talked to her while they waited for the arrival of two late members, and the old feeling of adventure had in part returned to her. So she had remained, and when all the members had come they had seated themselves around a small square table, and she had been given a chair at the right hand of Otto Geracht.

As Josephine Dessars drove through the rainy streets of London to the Coliseum she lived again through that night of thirteen years ago. She seemed to see again the massive figure of old Geracht as he stood with square finger-ends upon the table addressing those few people in that great half-furnished room. She felt again, as she had felt so many times during the last five days, the old sensation of growing anxiety and repentance. She heard again Geracht's deep, rather harsh, voice as he formally introduced her. She remembered how the others had drunk to her health in some pale, sickly wine, and how Anna Petro, a Czech singer and the only other woman present, had looked at her across the table with a sort of contempt and pity in her melancholy eyes.

She had stood up as if in a dream and had repeated after Otto Geracht a pledge of lifelong loyalty to the brotherhood. Then Geracht had opened an old brown-covered book and had read aloud the rules of the society, which were few. He had paused and had looked around the table slowly from one tense face to another; finally his large light eyes had rested upon those of Josephine.

'And it is required of each member when elected to take a pledge of loyalty to this society. It is forbidden for any member to divulge to the outside world the names of any of his fellow-members, and it is forbidden for any member to divulge any of the secret affairs of this society. The punishment for any infringement of this rule is death.'

Here he had paused, and Josephine remembered how she had watched, as if hypnotized, his big black-nailed fingers playing with the leaves of the book.

'Any member,' he had repeated slowly, 'who proves guilty of disloyalty will be discovered and put to death, no matter where he may be. He may hide himself in the remotest parts of earth, but sooner or later he will be found. He will receive a sign of his approaching death in the form of a black cross. In less than twenty-four hours from that time he will die.'

'He will receive a sign of his approaching death in the form of a black cross: in less than twenty-four hours from that time he will die.' The words echoed through the mind of Josephine Dessars as clearly as if they had but just been spoken. Then she found herself repeating, like one who strives to comfort with a parrot-phrase of consolation: 'But they're dead; they're all dead.'

Sitting there in the darkness she began silently to tell over the names of those who had belonged to the Secret Society of Seven.

‘—Otto Geracht, died three years ago in Leipzig; Diedrich Kummer, killed in the Prague riots; Anna Petro, killed herself in Vienna the year after I came to England. They’re dead, all of them. I have nothing to fear, nothing. They’re all dead.’

But her restless mind reverted once again to that far-off night in Vienna, and she seemed to see again the large eyes of Otto Geracht looking into her own with their vague peculiar gaze. For nearly a week she had seen those eyes, all through the days and in her dreams at night.

‘You have been false,’ they seemed to say to her. ‘False! you have been false.’

Josephine Dessars had been false. It was now three days since the sensational arrest of Sir Marcus Pinder, MP; he was yet awaiting his trial on a charge of high treason. And it was Josephine Dessars who had given the information which had led to his arrest. She had known of him in Vienna as a friend of Otto Geracht; she had indeed once met him at Geracht’s house. She knew that he was pledged to the wild idealistic Socialism of the Society of Seven; he had not been a member, but she had heard him often discussed as one of the chief secret tools of the society. She knew that Geracht had had a very great influence over him and had indeed granted him sums of money with which to carry forward the cause. It was he who had arranged, under the directions of Geracht, the assassination of Mousset in 1906.

All this she had known of Marcus Pinder, but during the peaceful, happy years which had elapsed after she came to England, she had heard little of him. She had still felt a certain sympathy for his ideals, although her old enthusiasm had long since died.

But when war broke out the old shadowy dreams of a brotherhood that admitted no nationality faded away. Josephine Dessars knew herself a Frenchwoman, an Englishwoman.

Then one day she had seen in the newspaper the announcement of Sir Marcus Pinder’s appointment to a seat on the Treasury Bench. The name had leapt at her eyes from the white page as she had unfolded the paper. Sir Marcus Pinder! A host of recollections had come crowding into her mind. She had stood as one in a trance for a time while her thoughts had gone wandering back to the days when that name had been so familiar to her. Sir Marcus Pinder! I-lad not his mother been some relation of Diedrich Kummer? Her mind went back to an evening in the house of Otto Geracht. Pinder had been there. He had monopolized the talk at the supper-table. She remembered him as a short, thickset man with greying hair and a birdlike vivaciousness of manner. Some of his words came back to her:

‘The seed we sow will not bear for many years in England or in France, Miss Dessars. In Germany, and in Germany alone of all the great nations, may we hope for quick and good results. The German mind has a broadness, an idealism—’

This man was helping to control the destinies of France and England. Josephine had consulted no one. She was accustomed to bringing her mind to quick decisions. She had written that morning to the Home Office, stating clearly all that she knew of Marcus Pinder; she had explained the way in which she had acquired her knowledge, and had given a detailed account of the Society of Seven. As she wrote she felt like one confessing old childish follies. It was as she had written her signature to the letter that she had felt a curious sudden sensation of being watched. She had looked up. There had been no one in the room. But at that moment there had flashed back to her memory for the first time for many years the picture of a big, bare room and a tall man who held a book in his large white hands.

‘And it is required of each member to take a pledge of loyalty to this society. It is forbidden to divulge any of the secret affairs of this society. The punishment for an infringement of this rule is

death. . . . He will receive a sign of his approaching death in the form of a black cross. In less than twenty-four hours from that time he will die.'

Josephine Dessars had addressed and posted her letter of information; but from that moment she had existed in a very inferno of restlessness and excitement. All through that night she had not slept, but had lain on her back with wide eyes looking into the darkness, unable to free herself of a terror that she knew was without foundation. So it had been for every night since that one. Memories of her past life possessed her mind utterly; not by any effort of will could she rid herself of them. Neither work nor amusement could divert her thoughts for one moment. She was like one under an obsession; she felt herself dwelling upon the borderland between reason and insanity.

Looking out at the wet dim-lit streets, she found herself wondering how long this obsession would last. She had a sudden impulse to speak, to put into words her vague alarms. She turned and slid her arm around the thin body of the girl at her side.

'Phyllis—Phyllis

Phyllis turned to her. But under those clear, thoughtful eyes Josephine fell silent. How could she tell this girl of her shadowy fears? What had Phyllis in common with those old days of intrigue and adventure? Josephine would not alarm and mystify the child with the tale of her own neurotic foolishness.

So she said:

'It's nothing dear. What are you thinking about that you are so quiet?'

'I was thinking about tonight. Oh, Josephine, I do hope the people will like it—I love first nights.'

The car slowed down and came to a standstill. They stepped out into the fine misty rain. The street was almost deserted.

'Oh, I'm excited!' cried Phyllis, as they went up the long passage to Josephine's dressing-room. The bright-lit room was dazzling after the darkness of the street. Josephine took off her cloak and hung it over a chair. She went across the room to switch up the light over the mirrors.

'A—ah!' she cried, with a quick intake of breath. She stood rigid by the table, one hand outstretched towards the electric buttons. Phyllis saw her face go grey as paper. Her eyes dilated, and stared with an intensity of horror at something upon the laden dressing-table.

'What is it? What is it?' cried Phyllis, putting her arms around her. She was rigid to the touch as a dead thing.

Then suddenly her body relaxed; she groped for a chair and sank down upon it. She still looked with a kind of horrified bewilderment towards the dressing-table. The frightened girl followed the direction of her eyes. Two black sticks of grease-paint were upon the corner of the table; by some chance they lay one upon the other, in the form of a cross.

'Oh, what is it?' cried Phyllis again.

Josephine said:

'Nothing.' She began to laugh, and tears came very quickly to her eyes. Her mind seemed filled with a terrible chaos of speculations; she could not force herself to think clearly. Like one who hears voices in his half-sleep, she listened to the terrified questions and endearments of the girl who knelt at her side. Somewhere at the back of her brain a hammer kept time to the throbbing of her heart. 'I shall go mad,' said its every dull thud. 'I shall go mad, I shall go mad.'

Phyllis cried again, her face as white as Josephine's own:

'Oh, José, what is it, what is it?'

‘I saw—I thought I saw—Oh, it’s nothing, Phyllis, nothing. I must dress.’ Josephine rose to her feet. She put her hand under Phyllis’s chin with an attempt to smile; but her eyes had not lost their look of dazed horror.

‘It’s nothing, really. I’m awfully silly and nervy, I know, Phyl. I shall take a long rest when the season’s over. We’ll go away somewhere.’

‘But

‘It was nothing, really. Don’t think about it any more, Phylly. Help me with my dressing, dear; I think we’re a bit late. This will be the first time I’ve made myself up as an invalid.’

She went on talking vivaciously as she took off her clothes; it was less to reassure Phyllis than to stem the current of her own wild thoughts. But all the while she chattered there floated at the back of her brain a dark image, an ominous black cross.

Phyllis responded soon to her talkativeness and laughed as she stroked the folds of the garment that Josephine was to wear. It lay upon the sofa, a soft white robe of thick silk. The dance had been arranged by Josephine herself, and was set to the eerie music of the ‘Valse Triste’ of Sibelius. It was to be a strange performance, and Josephine held secret doubts as to its good reception. The dance was an adaptation of the story to which the ‘Valse Triste’ was written—of a dying woman, who rises from her bed and joins in the wild dance of the spirits that throng her room.

Josephine sang softly the slow opening bars of the music as she slipped her dress over her head. Phyllis watched her from the sofa, admiring the faint flush that excitement brought to her white cheeks.

‘You’d better run along now,’ said Josephine. ‘I’m ready.’

Phyllis turned her from the mirror and surveyed her. Her plain white dress hung in heavy folds to her ankles. It was suggestive of a bedgown. The long hanging sleeves almost reached its hem. She wore no wig, and her thick dark hair stood out around her face; it was without band or ornament.

‘Kiss me for luck, Phyl,’ she said, ‘and run along to the Stracheys.’ She turned to her mirror again as Phyllis closed the door behind her.

The safety curtain was being lowered for the interval as Phyllis entered the box where her friends were. The orchestra was playing a selection of popular airs; a buzz of talk had arisen among the audience. Phyllis looked around the auditorium before she sat down. The place was crowded.

As the curtain began slowly to go up there was a sudden hush; the first slow notes dropped on the heavy air like pearls. Phyllis leaned forward and settled her elbows on the edge of the box.

The curtain rose upon a dimly lit stage. The walls were hung with deep purple curtains; the floor was covered in dark felt. In the centre of the stage, at the back, was a high couch draped with purple cloth. A woman clothed in white lay upon it. A small lamp burnt dimly by the bedside. There was not light enough upon the stage to distinguish any details; the purple background seemed full of deep shadows. The soft, slow music from the orchestra was as quiet as sleep.

For a minute or more there was no movement, neither on the stage nor among the audience. Then Josephine stirred upon her couch and moaned softly. The valse rhythm of the sleepy music became more insistent. Josephine turned and let one arm fall listlessly over the side of the bed.

Suddenly a white flickering light appeared upon the purple background and went out. Another appeared, and another, until the dark walls seemed alive with pale dancing flames. It was as if the dim stage were full of will-o’-the-wisps. The music grew louder and lost its dreamy quality.

Josephine sighed deeply like one who wakes from an unquiet sleep, and raised herself slowly upon one elbow. The stage became dim again and all the little moving lights went out. Then suddenly one appeared, a patch of wavering flame, upon the hangings of the bed. Josephine put out her hand as if to touch it; it flickered away across the floor and up the wall. Josephine gave a soft hollow laugh and rose slowly from where she lay. She stood unsteadily for one moment; she was like a spirit in her long white robe. Her face was pale, and her bare feet were white as chalk against the purple carpet. Her eyes followed the movements of the dancing flame. She made one or two uncertain steps as if to reach it; then with a low laugh she sprang after it and the strange dance began.

Soon other faint wavering flames appeared upon the walls and floor, until the whole stage was once again flickering with pale lights. They flashed across the white, smiling face of Josephine as she swayed in her fantastic dance. They seemed to dance with her like living things. The dance grew always faster as it proceeded, until the stage was dazzling to the audience. The dancer's shining draperies seemed made of the same stuff as the white flames that leapt around them. It was an eerie performance; but it was beautiful.

Josephine felt nothing now but a great exultation. For her the facts of life had ceased to exist. She was a dancer, and nothing else; she was one with the lights that danced about her head and hands, and with the bright quick sounds that danced and died like invisible butterflies. For the first time for many tortured days she found forgetfulness. The smile that was on her lips was not acted, but was the unconscious expression of sheer happiness and triumph.

Wilder and louder grew the music, and the ghostly dance swifter and swifter: until the dancer suddenly stood still and put her hand to her eyes. Then as if exhausted she sank upon the couch. The moving flames went out; the stage was dim and shadowy again. The slow theme returned and the music from the orchestra was like soft calling voices.

All was still for a few moments. Then, as before, the music quickened and grew loud. The flickering lights appeared again singly. The dancer lifted her arms, and sprang to her feet like one who makes an effort. The wild dance began again. But now the small flames, as they appeared one after another, seemed to merge together until a pale light flooded the stage. It was a queer soft radiance, neither brilliant nor harsh; it was as if the stage were full of moonshine. In this still light Josephine danced, and her white dress gleamed like a lily under the moon. She felt etherealized, a spirit dancing on an immaterial plane. Her body moved in such perfect time with her mind that she seemed to have no body. Looking straight before her she saw, but without any recognition, the black and white blur that was her audience. A movement somewhere between herself and the blur caught her eyes, and all unconsciously she lowered her gaze to it. It was the baton of the conductor moving in agitated rhythm with the music. It brought

her mind back to a certain extent from its uplifted state. She felt vaguely irritated by the sight of it; the cold commonplaces of life seemed to start knocking again at the doors of her mind.

The movements of her wild dance took her to the back of the stage, but when she came to the front again her eyes were caught once more by that small object; it seemed to move with a kind of crazy desperation. Her eyes travelled up the black sleeve of the man who held it.

Then the walls of the universe seemed to fall crashing about her ears. For a moment her mind was absolutely empty; then all that she had ever known of fear and evil rushed into it like a tidal river. For she had looked into the light eyes of Otto Geracht.

There he stood, massive and tall as she had always remembered him, his great shoulders rather hunched about his ears, his grey hair hanging in wisps over his forehead. Josephine went on

dancing; her limbs moved mechanically. But her mind was filled with a terror more appalling than anything she had ever known.

Round the stage she went in her swift dance, but those clear eyes, she knew, never left her for one moment. She looked into them. There was no hostility in them: large and pale, they met her own with that faint vague questioning look she remembered so well. She could see every detail of his head and shoulders; there was no light shining upon him, but he stood out with clear distinctness. Swifter and swifter moved his arms, and his great body moved with them; but his head was never turned to one side, and neither were his unblinking eyes.

Josephine forced herself to look away from him. She looked around the orchestra in the wild hope of meeting a friendly recognizing glance that might dispel the terrible illusion. She could not see all the members of the orchestra, but a few of them seemed to stand out with a curious distinctness, as if she were looking at them in the light of day. There was something familiar about the downbent head of the first violin, who stood next to the conductor. He raised his eyes from the printed sheet before him, and a cold hand seemed to close around Josephine's heart. It was Diedrich Kummer. He looked at her unseeingly.

In wild horror her eyes went from one figure to another. There were the others: Hugo Spizke and Charles Palacky stood at the right hand of Otto Geracht. They had fiddles; little Palacky was playing with that air of desperate concentrated alacrity which had distinguished all his movements. There to his right sat old Van der Heyder; he held the oboe in his hand and looked at Josephine with gentle dreaminess. Even as her terrified eyes swept his face he raised his plump hand and settled his pince-nez more firmly on his nose; it was an old mannerism of his.

There was the thin, sad Ledstein with the flute, and there Anna Petro sat by the harp. Her dark eyes held those of Josephine for a moment; there was no enmity in them, but the old enigmatical look of mockery and pity. Josephine in her wild fear had an impulse to cry out to her and implore her sympathy and support. In the old days she had been attracted by the woman's mournful beauty, and had been baffled by the atmosphere of mystery that had always surrounded her. Surely Anna Petro was capable of understanding and sympathy! But the dark eyes never changed in their regard, and the long fingers went on touching the strings with lazy indifference.

Josephine's eyes fell again upon Otto Geracht. She felt trapped and helpless. She wanted to stop the dance, to cry out, to leave the stage, but her body seemed hypnotized. Her lips were stiffened in a frozen smile. Her limbs moved without her volition; she had as little command over her movements as if she had been a wooden marionette, and the large hands of Otto Geracht had held the strings instead of the conductor's baton. Faster and faster moved that small gleaming stick, and wilder and louder grew the ghostly music.

In a very agony of terror Josephine looked up to the right in the hope of meeting Phyllis's sane and loving eyes, but she could see nothing. A black mist seemed to hang between her eyes and the auditorium. Only those grotesquely moving figures in the orchestra were distinct. She tried to scream, but no sound left her lips.

The wild music reached its climax. This was the end, then, at last. The light upon the stage went out as Josephine threw herself once again upon the dark couch. The music ended with a few slow bars. The curtain fell.

There was absolute stillness in the theatre for a few seconds. Then the applause burst out. As one man the audience rose to their feet. Volley of clapping followed volley. Someone at the back began to cry 'Encore! Encore!' and the whole audience took up the cry.

Behind the curtain on the now brilliantly lit stage four or five people stood with a sort of frightened hesitancy upon their faces. A man in evening-dress was bending over the white figure

of Josephine Dessars where she still lay upon the purple couch. He raised his head towards the others with a shocked look upon his face; his lips seemed trembling into the form of a word.

A tall fair-haired girl suddenly came on from the wings. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone. She seemed about to speak, but stopped and stood looking towards the figure on the bed with nothing but surprise in her big eyes. One of the women left the whispering group and laid her hand upon her arm.

‘My dear,’ she began. But Phyllis pushed her aside. She hurried towards the bed and leant over the small figure lying there. Then, very slowly, she drew back.

‘Josephine—Josephine—,’ she said in a whisper that had a ringing quality which echoed for a long time in the brains of all who heard it.

But Josephine Dessars was dead.