

## On the Radio: The Ballad of Fantomas<sup>1</sup>

by Robert Desnos, translated by Timothy Adès

Your attention, please! Pray silence  
For the sad and sorry story,  
All the grievous inventory,  
Nameless acts of harm and violence,  
Every one scot-free, alas!  
Of the felon Fantomas.

First, his mistress, Lady Beltham,  
Saw the day her husband caught them  
Making flagrant love together:  
On the spot the felon killed him.  
Next he sank the good ship Leopard,  
Sabotaged, submerged, and scuppered.

He commits his hundredth murder.  
Juve and his assistant Fandor  
Think to see this libertine  
Punished by the guillotine.  
But an actor's crayoned face  
Fills the basket in his place.

Lighthouse in the storm, like glass,  
Shattered. Luckless ships go down  
To the lowest depths, and drown.  
Four heads bobbing on the tide:  
Lady Beltham, golden-eyed,  
Fandor, Juve, and Fantomas.

Yet the monster's pretty daughter,  
Helen, had a noble nature:  
She was sweet, not taking after  
Her appalling family,  
For she rescued poor young Fandor,  
Who had been condemned to die.

In the railway baggage-lockers  
There's a gory parcel, bleeding.  
They've detained some gangster cove.  
What has happened to the carcass?  
Why, the stiff's alive and breathing!  
It is Fantomas, by Jove!

Bottled up inside a bell  
Tolling for a funeral,  
Death rubbed out his Number Two.  
Blood cascaded from the skull,  
Sapphires, diamonds as well,  
On the gathering below.

Paris, one fine day in spring:  
Suddenly, the fountains sing!  
People listen in surprise.  
Little do they realise  
That those siren melodies  
Cage a weeping captive king.



Vital military clues:  
Secrets, destined for the Tsar.  
Smartly turning similar,  
Fantomas receives the news,  
Personates the autocrat.  
Juve arrests him, just like that.

He got La Toulouche to kill  
An Englishman with monstrous bites.  
She was a hag, a foul-eyed beast!  
There was blood, he drank his fill,  
Stashed his looted perquisites  
In the guts of the deceased.

You recall that huge fracas –  
Raiders took a motor-bus,  
Rammed the bank, whose vaults they cleared,  
Rifling safe and automat:  
Terrible – I'm sure you heard ...  
He was at the back of that.

Epidemic of bubonic  
Plague attacks an oceanic  
Liner, caught far out at sea.  
Horrid sights, what lunacy!  
Agonies and deaths, alas!  
Who's the culprit? Fantomas.

Killed: one cabman plying for hire,  
Knotted neatly to his post,  
Going like a house on fire.  
Let the inmates curse and swear:  
They cannot dispute the fare,  
Driven by a lifeless ghost.

Be afraid of jet-black roses.  
They exhale a languid breath,  
Murky vapours, dismal gases,  
Enervating, dealing death.  
Lamentably, one more time,  
Fantomas commits the crime!

Next he killed the aged mother  
Of Fandor, the valiant sleuth.  
Fate miscarried altogether,  
Sorrow has a bitter tooth ...  
Sure, he had no heart at all,  
This notorious criminal!

Domed with gold, the Invalides  
Was despoiled by nightly theft.  
He devised this greedy crime,  
He it was who did the deed.  
Having such a mental gift,  
What a way to use one's time!



He assailed – what insolence!  
The Queen of the Netherlands.  
Gallant Juve was quick to bang  
Up the rogue, with all his gang.  
Even so, in the event,  
He evaded punishment.

Just in case his dabs betrayed,  
Fantomas had gloves, well-made  
From a bleeding trophy's skin,  
Hands of one he'd just done in:  
And the dead man was arraigned  
By the thumb-prints they obtained.

On the waters of the Seine  
There's a phantom takes a walk.  
Juve's enquiries are in vain.  
Fantomas is making tracks,  
Scaring spooks and older folk,  
After one of his attacks.

To the English CID  
He remained a mystery,  
Till an overdue arrest  
Saw him hanged and laid to rest.  
Guess what happened. Need I say?  
Still the ruffian got away.  
Up across the Eiffel Tower  
In the eerie midnight hour  
Juve pursues the criminal,  
Trails the shadow. All in vain:  
With fantastic strength and skill  
Fantomas escapes again.

Monte Carlo. On the sward  
Struts a quite resplendent guard.  
His commander, losing fast,  
Gives the order to bombard.  
Who's commander of the guard?  
Clearly, it was Fantomas.

In the sea a vessel founders.  
Fantomas had been on board.  
So were Helen, Juve and Fandor  
And too many to record.  
Since no bodies have been found,  
No-one knows if they were drowned.

At the deeds of Fantomas  
And his gang from Montparnasse,  
(Pretty Boy Sarcophagus,  
Bill the Beadle, Sniff the Gas),  
Paris, Rome and London shook.  
Were they ever brought to book?



For yourselves I wrote this song,  
For the world, for everyone.  
Everyone is tremulous  
At the name of Fantomas.  
May each one of you live long:  
That's my wish, and I am gone.

Finale

Spreading like a mighty pall  
Over Paris, over all,  
Who's the ghost with sombre eyes,  
Silently observed to rise?  
Fantomas – a wild surmise:  
Is that you, against the skies?

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<sup>1</sup> From *Fortunes*, 1942. A radio version by Desnos had been broadcast in 1933, in a 'superproduction.' All the stanzas were recited, many being amplified by sketches with several actors and sound-effects. Music was by Kurt Weill; Antonin Artaud directed, and took the title role. The original Fantômas books were by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain.

