

Ballad of Fantomas

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 shattered, just like glass.
Storm-tossed, 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 the 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!



Golden-domed, the Invalides
Was despoiled by nightly theft.
Fantomas devised the deed,
Carried out the greedy crime.
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.
Scaring spooks and older folk,
Fantomas is making tracks,
After one of his attacks.

Scotland Yard: the CID
Could not solve the 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. Rouge, pair, passe.
Armoured gunboat mounting guard.
Captain with gigantic loss
Gives the order to bombard.
Who's this captain mounting guard?
Clearly, it was Fantomas.

Out at 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?

From *Fortunes*, 1942. © Editions Gallimard. 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 elaborate sound-effects. Music was by Kurt Weill; radio production by Paul Deharme; Antonin Artaud directed, and took the title role. The original *Fântomas* books were by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, the silent films by Feuillade.

