

BOOK TWO: THE DEATH OF FANTÔMAS

CHAPTER I

The Trap

“In the name of the law, we arrest you!”

The Cossacks surrounded Juve suddenly and the policeman who, obviously, did not expect such an end to his adventures in Russia, could not keep from shuddering as he heard the words that indisputably announced new problems and difficulties. Yet, Juve recovered his composure.

In a calm voice, he asked, “You’re arresting me. Fine. But that doesn’t tell me anything at all. What are you arresting me for?”

The commanding officer replied, “You’re accused of giving His Majesty the Tsar a fake necklace instead of the real necklace.”

“Ah!” said Juve, and refrained from adding anything else.

Although, at the time of his arrest, he understood little about the reasons for it, he realized full well that there was no point in protesting to the Cossacks and that it was highly likely that, speaking at random, answering without knowing, could eventually expose him to more serious proceedings and greater problems.

Despite his composure, however, Juve grimaced. His arrest was so sudden, so unexpected that he initially wanted to consider it a mere formality. Yet, he quickly concluded that was not the case. They were not arresting him on a whim. They were completely serious, which became even clearer when they placed handcuffs on his wrists as four soldiers, four giants, kept a close eye on him.

“Well,” sighed Juve, phlegmatically. “This trip to Russia is coming to a very bad end. What will happen to me now?”

At that moment, despite himself, Juve could not keep from glancing, with regret, at the Northern Express which, in a few minutes, would leave St. Petersburg, in a cloud of steam, heading for Belgium and France.

Assuredly, Fandor and Hélène had to be on the train, waiting for him. They would have no idea that he had been arrested, they would leave and Juve would be all alone in Russian, a large country with strange traditions and extraordinary customs where he felt so terribly foreign, misunderstood, alone in the middle of the crowd, abandoned by all.

A moment later, Juve recovered, saying to himself, “Well, we’ll see which of us, Fantômas or me, has the last word. What is happening to me is obviously the consequence of one of that wretch’s many tricks. He may have won this match, but I will have my revenge.”

Juve docilely followed the soldiers as they escorted him out of the station and pushed him toward a sleigh. He was perfectly aware that protesting would serve no purpose. The soldiers who had arrested him were merely following orders, ignorant of the grounds. What did they care about Juve’s recriminations, his complaints?

“All right,” thought Juve. “He who laughs last, laughs best!”

The sleigh, surrounded by Cossacks on horseback, raced through the streets of St. Petersburg.

Juve, just a while earlier, as he headed for the station, had hoped, to tell the truth, that he would be leaving Russia for once and for all. Despite himself, he was unable to hold back a strong sense of disappointment as they took him back, a prisoner. Yet, thanks to the deep philosophical beliefs he always adhered to, he made the most of this unpleasant adventure to note, yet again, the picturesque nature of Russian customs. In France, the passage of a prisoner, in a vehicle surrounded by guards would obviously have aroused public emotions, a lively curiosity. But nothing at all like that happened in Russia. No one turned to look at the Cossacks, no one glanced at the prisoner. One more, one less, who was keeping count? There were so many arrests each day that onlookers had grown blasé.

“There’s no reaction,” Juve said to himself. “I can’t even enjoy the satisfaction of hearing brave people call out, as they would in France, ‘He looks like a bandit!’”

Juve, already reassured, started to joke. His gaiety, however, did not last long. The direction in which his escort was headed was filled with meaning.

“Good grief!” said the prisoner. “Are they taking me to Tsarskoye Selo?”

The sleigh did, in fact, stop at the Tsar’s palace a short while later. At that moment, the officers of the escort that were accompanying the sleigh invited him to get down. Juve set foot on the ground.

“Will I be thrown into some dungeon?” he wondered. “Stood against some wall and shot? Or will I be lucky enough to be interrogated?”

A very brightly dressed officer, obviously some important dignitary, stepped out from the palace. He murmured a few words in the ear of the commanding officer of the escort that had just arrested Juve. The officer nodded and walked over to the policeman.

“What does he want?” Fandor’s friend wondered.

At that very moment, the Russian stopped, bowed deeply to Juve, and introduced himself, saying, “His Excellency Gourochtsky, His Majesty’s aide-de-camp.”

The policeman was most surprised. People didn’t usually introduce themselves to prisoners. What did this mean?

Not wanting to be impolite, Juve in turn bowed, bending double, then declared, “Juve, French police officer, from the Sûreté de Paris!”

He had barely finished speaking when the other man held out his hand. Juve, naturally, clasped it and shook it. At that moment, however, the excellent Juve’s surprise reached extraordinary proportions.

“They’re shaking my hand!” he said to himself. “First they arrest me and then they give me an almost official reception. These Russians are crazy!”

But he barely had time to think about the sudden madness that taken over the inhabitants of the imperial palace.

With exquisite manners, the Russian added, “Please follow me sir. I have rigorous orders in your respect.”

“How could I not follow him,” Juve grumbled to himself, adding out loud, “Your wish is my command, Your Excellency.”

A moment later, Juve found himself alone in one of the large parlors at Tsarskoye Selo. It was a vast room, with truly remarkable architecture. It was, in fact, a rotunda. It was completely circular and there were no windows. Daylight flowed in through the ceiling, a ceiling of frosted glass on which human shadows appeared to be strolling back and forth. Juve noted all this with a glance.

He thought, “My word, this might just be the Tsar’s personal parlor. No windows... because he’s always afraid of being assassinated and thinks people will shoot at him through the glass... a glass ceiling with armed guards... that would be it!”

But, at the same time, Juve could not keep from smiling at that presumption.

“Damn, I’m a prisoner!” he grumbled. “And a prisoner suspected of robbing the Tsar of all the Russias... I suppose that, after all that, the Tsar won’t be giving me an audience! The excellent Nicholas II must be convinced that I’m an abominable criminal and must be scared stiff of me!”

This thought had just passed through Juve’s mind when his presumptions were proven wrong. The door to the parlor, the only door in the round room, opened wide.

An usher called out, “His Majesty, the Tsar!”

And the Tsar did, in fact enter. Nicholas II, blond, puny, looking like a young man, despite the fact that he was in his forties, appeared. He was wearing a military uniform and carried an enormous saber in his hand, which he used much like a cane. The Tsar was smiling.

He walked over to Juve, held out his hand, and said, “Good day Mr. Policeman.”

And, for possibly the first time in his life, Juve was so dumbfounded that he was unable to answer. In fact, after he had been arrested in the manner in which he had been arrested, and now finding himself suddenly in the presence of the Tsar, who was holding out his hand, Juve found the situation so unlikely, so startling, that he remained silent.

The Tsar said, "Mr. Juve, are you cross with me? Are you furious with me?"

"But Majesty..." Juve said, then stopped and crossed his arms.

"Good grief, Majesty, if your Majesty would authorize me to speak openly, I would admit that I wonder if I'm dreaming."

"And what makes you think that?"

"Damn," replied Juve, who was starting to neglect the rules of protocol, something which had never really been his strong point.

"Damn, Majesty, because I'm surprised and astonished... and overwhelmed by everything that is happening..."

At that moment, the Tsar collapsed onto a low chair, overturning it.

"Really, Juve," he murmured. "You're astonished? Please tell me why."

"Willingly, sire."

And Juve, who was starting to feel his normal good mood returning, quickly and clearly explained why he was so astonished.

"I was about to leave," he said. "I was about to return to France... I was quite certain that I had given you the real necklace and then, all of a sudden, they tell me that it was a fake necklace and then they arrested me... Naturally, I was upset by the situation. I was expecting, Sire, to be punished for a crime I had not committed. I was afraid your Majesty was angry with me. Yet, now, it does not seem as if your Majesty is all that irritated with me, since your Majesty honored me with a handshake!"

The Tsar had watched Juve closely as he spoke. When the policeman stopped talking, however, the other man burst into cheerful laughter.

"My dear Juve," he murmured. "This simply proves that you don't really know me yet. I'm a man of the moment."

"Which means?" asked Juve.

"Which means," confirmed the Tsar, "that when I discovered that the necklace you had returned was a fake one, I ordered my men to arrest you."

Juve lowered his head and, without wondering if he were being too bold, asked, "And now, Sire?"

"Now?" said the Tsar. "Well, now I've considered the matter. You certainly can't be the thief so I'm not arresting you any longer!"

Juve did not move a muscle when he learned that he was free. He was always calm, extraordinarily calm, in good times and in bad. However, he did not feel particularly satisfied.

"I'm free," he replied. "So much the better. I don't really have a taste for prison! Plus, it's annoying to be considered a thief. But can your Majesty tell me what is really going on? The necklace I returned to you is not the real diamond necklace that was stolen?"

When he heard these words, the Tsar shook his head and said, "Unfortunately not. Just a bad copy with no value at all."

Then the Tsar told Juve what had happened following his departure.

He informed the policeman that a chance incident had revealed the error, Fantômas' swindle. He told Juve how, in a moment of fury, he had ordered his men to race to the station and arrest Juve.

The policeman, for his part, did not take long to realize what had really happened. He uncovered Fantômas' trickery, figured out how the bandit had been able to deceive him. It took him no more than a second. Unfortunately, it did not seem as if it would be easy to remedy the situation.

"I've been conned," Juve concluded, who never minced his words when talking about unpleasant matters. "I've been conned by Fantômas like a fool. It's time to take up the fight!"

Juve stretched his arm out, as if to make a solemn oath, and said, "I had hoped that your Majesty had the authentic necklace in his possession. Since that is not the case, I will have to set out immediately to find it."

Juve was about to say more, possible to ask permission to leave immediately and set off on his new investigation, when the Tsar stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"Juve," murmured the imperial sovereign, in a tone that had suddenly grown serious. "I have to find that necklace. I absolutely have to!"

As Juve looked the other man straight in the eyes, the Tsar insisted, speaking each word distinctly, as if to highlight their importance, "I have to Juve, because I'm going to need it... because, in a short while, in less than a week perhaps, the empress and I will be going to France and, in keeping with protocol, it will be necessary for her Majesty to wear the necklace during the festivities organized in our honor... And you, Juve, have to find it since I must admit, despite myself, that if the necklace is not found, I would continue to have some suspicions in your respect..."

The Tsar's voice was filled with emotion as he spoke.

Juve, despite himself, was touched, and replied, "Your Majesty can rest assured that I will do everything in my power to satisfy his wishes. But I will need my freedom if I am to act. Am I free, Sire?"

The Tsar hesitated. Nicholas II was assuredly, as he had just told Juve, torn between two emotions. When he took the time to think about it, he realized full well that it was completely ridiculous to suspect Juve of theft. Yet, just as the Tsar decided that Juve was innocent, he realized, despite himself, that everything pointed at the policeman and that it looked almost certain that he had been Fantômas' accomplice.

Yet, Nicolas II could not have any illusions about Juve's request, Juve had to conduct an investigation to find the necklace and, to do that, the Tsar would have to free him. Juve could hardly investigate while languishing in prison or being required to remain in Russia, or even by being kept under police surveillance.

Abruptly, the Tsar made up his mind and said, "You will be free, Juve."

Then he corrected himself, saying, "You're free immediately!"

Juve had watched the hesitations and uncertainties flit over the Tsar's face. And Juve was far too good a psychologist to be mistaken when it came to the Tsar's reasoning.

He replied, "I thank your Majesty for not letting himself get carried away by such unworthy emotions. And I fully intend to provide evidence of my good faith. I would appreciate it if your Majesty would accept the oath I am about to make. Sire, I give you my word of honor that I will do everything possible to find your necklace. If I find it, we will be quits. If I don't find it, I will turn myself over to your police lieutenant. I imagine that this will mean that your Majesty will no longer have any doubts about me!"

Juve's words were clear and definitive. The Tsar saw this. He lowered his head and asked, "Juve, do you have any orders to give? Do you want to take the measures you consider necessary right away? I, of course, will make sure that everyone here is at your disposal."

"Your Majesty is too generous," replied Juve.

The policeman thought for a minute, then lifted his head, and said, "I do have orders to give, in fact, sire. But first I'll need some information.

"What information? Can I provide it?"

"Without a doubt, if your Majesty allows me to question him."

"Go ahead, Juve. Ask away! What do you want to know?"

"What is the name," Juve asked, "Of that border town where the Northern Express leaves Russia and heads into Germany?"

The Tsar replied, "That's the little station at Eydtkuhnen."

"Are there any policemen stationed there?"

"Of course."

"And how do the travelers disembark?"

"As they do in any other border station, Juve. They get off the train. Russian trains are not allowed to enter Germany because of the difference in track gauge. Then they go through Customs, they greet the Holy Images, and they get back on the train. That's all."

"Fine," said Juve.

The policeman looked lost in thought for a moment, then asked, "Where is the one place where it is certain that all of the travelers, without exception, will pass by?"

“The Holy Images sidewalk,” replied the Tsar. “No one can enter Russia, no one can leave Russia, without greeting the icons located at the border station. The passports, moreover, are checked right next to that icon.”

“Fine,” Juve said again.

And, since the Tsar was looking at him, no doubt expecting some sort of indication as to what he was about to do, Juve stood up coldly, without a word.

“I’ll go and issue orders, Sire. Do I have your permission to leave?”

“Go!” said the Tsar.

The train from St. Petersburg arrived in a cloud of steam at the small border station at Eydtkuhnen. Russian trains are usually deplorably slow, but the Northern Express, exceptionally, had pushed its pace as it approached the German border. Employees were already busy at the station.

Dressed in picturesque outfits that made them look like butchers, the station employees, with their large aprons flapping in the wind, stood in a line along the platform. It was obvious that, as the train was about to stop, they would race off to attack the compartments and convince the travelers to confide their small hand luggage to them. They would then carry it off to the Customs, hoping for tips.

A few minutes later, in fact, the entire station was filled with the noisy hustle and bustle of the crowd as everyone strove to complete the various formalities involved in crossing a border, formalities which are all the more complicated in Russia since passports are still required.

The travelers, naturally, all raced in a disorderly manner along the platforms. Each individual wanted to be the first to go through Customs and they fought hard to make their way into a narrow corridor that connected the Russian border station to the German border station, a narrow corridor where the Holy Images that all travelers had to greet when entering or leaving Russia were located.

Yet, while the hustle and bustle was at its peak, while everyone rushed this way and that, a man deliberately, slowly climbed down from the train that was parked along the platform, the Russian train that was about to head back to St. Petersburg.

Who was that man?

If Juve had seen him, if Fandor or Hélène had merely glimpsed him, they would have most certainly shuddered. Unfortunately, Juve was in St. Petersburg and both Fandor and Hélène had rushed to disembark. The young people, concerned because Juve had not joined them, had been eager to get to the German station where they hoped to find a telegram waiting for them.

Did the man know any of this? Was he aware that Juve was not on hand, that Fandor and Hélène were concerned? That was possible, considering the ironic smile on his lips.

“No one!” he said. “No one bothersome! All the better! I’ll leave Russia as easily as I got in. Obviously, the police are quite stupid! They can’t even guard a border station properly!”

He carried no baggage. Yet, from time to time, almost automatically, the man would reach his hand into the fob of his waistcoat, seeming to make sure that an object he prized was still there. The man walked a few steps on the platform. In the distance, he watched the crowd attacking the Customs employees.

“Imbeciles!” he murmured. “Imagine the panic I could cause if I were to shout, “Hey. Take notice! I’m here! Fantômas is here!””

And he burst out laughing.

“Fantômas!”

Was the man getting off the Northern Express at Eydtkuhnen really Fantômas? Was it really the terrible bandit who was walking slowly along the platform, glancing cautiously, carefully, left and right, clearly aware of the formidable gamble he was taking by trying to cross the border unnoticed?

It was, in fact, Fantômas.

Once again, Fantômas had been the supreme victor. Once again Fantômas had trumped Juve. Fantômas had managed to steal the real necklace. It was the precious diamonds that he had automatically sought in his pocket a few moments earlier. And if Fantômas, despite everything, was worried, after such

a major victory, it was because he was thinking, "This victory is too wonderful to be final. Juve will never accept his defeat and, out of a desire for vengeance, that damned policeman will try to find me!"

Yet, he had to act. At that moment, Fantômas was fully aware of what he needed to do. If he could get into Germany, if he could get out of Russia, he would be safe. If, on the other hand, he was unable to cross the border, he would fear the worst since Fantômas had no illusions about the matter. Juve had probably set all of the Russian police on his heels.

Yet, despite his concerns, Fantômas remained calm.

While Juve was, at times, capable of retaining a surprising presence of mind, Fantômas mastered his nerves marvelously. Anyone who crossed his path, as he walked calmly along the station platform, would never have suspected the emotion that tormented him.

The master criminal looked left and right. At first, he noticed nothing suspicious. But all too soon he shuddered. On the other side of the train, he saw Cossacks cordoning off the entire train. What did this deployment of troupes mean?

Fantômas frowned and said to himself, "My word, the station is under guard. Could Juve have sent a telegram notifying them of my possible arrival? Have they set a trap?"

He took a few more steps and muttered, "This is abominable! Soldiers on all sides. The station is completely surrounded. Obviously, I won't be able to get out. I'll either have to stay in the train and head back to St. Petersburg or risk everything, face Customs, head down the corridor filled with policemen, make my way to the German station!"

He stopped for a moment, pretending to read a poster, and asked, "What am I to do?"

Obviously, Fantômas had to think for a moment. Going through Customs, exposing himself to a painstaking search, letting the authorities see him up close, it all involved a terrible risk. Should he retreat from this danger? Remain in Russia? That might involve even greater danger.

"Well, let's try this!" Fantômas murmured.

Then bandit walked straight over to one of the station employees and asked, "Customs, good man?"

The man stared at him and replied, "Straight ahead, to your right, sir. But first you have to have your passport stamped."

"Is that obligatory?"

"Yes sir."

After a moment of silence, possibly without realizing the whirlwind of emotions he had set off in the other man, the station employee added, "And today, sir, there's more. We've received telegrams, and you don't just have to go through German Customs. A special service has been arranged. All travelers have to be searched."

"Searched?" Fantômas said, startled. "What do you mean?"

"It's simple," explained the man. "You have to get undressed. Special employees, policemen I believe, will examine your clothes before you put them back on."

"Thank you," replied Fantômas.

He took a few steps in the direction indicated by the man, then as the other man turned his head, Fantômas turned right, and walked into a large hangar.

"Good grief!" thought Fantômas. "What the devil will I do?"

Then he thought out loud, "Curse Juve! Sooner or later, that infernal policeman will have to pay for the anguish he's causing me just now!"

Overwrought, Fantômas collapsed onto a bundle, a large crate that stood nearby. He had no illusions about what he had just learned. Troupes surrounded the station, the close scrutiny of passports, the search, the painstaking search, all proved that Juve had already given orders to mobilize the police and that all the travelers crossing the border at Eydtkuhnen were under surveillance.

Despite himself, Fantômas shuddered, muttering, "If they search me, if they search my clothing, they'll certainly find the necklace... On top of that I don't have a passport... Will my adventures come to an end here? Will I stupidly allow myself to be caught by the idiotic Russian police?"

He ground his teeth.

Fantômas was still thinking when, suddenly, he leapt to his feet, instinctively taking a dagger from his pocket. He had heard a noise. Close by.

“Is someone following me?” he murmured.

But, at that very moment he smiled. Obviously, fear was driving him mad! What had startled him was the commotion, coming from a large crate, the very one he had been sitting on, caused by a dozen black hens.

Fantômas shrugged and stared fixedly at the poor creatures, lost in thought.