

ACT I

*In which Fantômas arrives in New York,
matches wits with Detective Frederick Dickson,
and makes use of the unfortunate Mr. Brian Shea.*

Chapter One: The Arrival of Fantômas

Allow me, if I may, to deliver a warning to the Reader. The story that is about to unfold may shock, disturb and terrify you. It concerns a personage so sinister, so evil as to strain credulity. It is difficult to imagine in these enlightened times that such a fiend could have existed. Nevertheless, he did exist and his atrocities are a matter of fact, not superstition. Although the story began in 1900 at the Château de Beaulieu in France, and encompasses a parade of horrors that includes the brutal slayings of the Marquise de Langrune and the painter Jacques Dollon, it does not end there. Nor does it end with the tragic sinking of the *RMS Titanic* in April 1912. Instead, the trail of Fantômas leads us to America—specifically, New York City in the year 1917.

Before we settle in to that time and place, however, let's take a look at a steamship somewhere in the Atlantic, about a month after the *Titanic* tragedy. We'll start down below, in steerage, where hundreds of peasants, pressed against one another for warmth, struggle to find comfort during their long journey to the new world. Above them, in much roomier, more luxurious quarters, are the first and second-class passengers, many of them lucky enough to be provided for by relatives already in the United States.

Now we travel up to the deck of the ship, under the moonlight, where we observe two men engaged in conversation. The man on the left is Emile Cortez. You can tell by his bearing that he is a Spaniard, and more than happy to display his nationality in mixed company. Despite the lateness of the hour and the conspicuous absence of other passengers, he has made every effort to keep up appearances. His perfectly styled hair and moustache are slick enough to catch the moonlight, and the cigar between his lips takes on all the significance of the Spanish flag mounted on foreign soil as a symbol of national pride.

The other man is, for all intents and purposes, almost completely nondescript—a study in averages, of medium height, medium build and hair of indeterminate color. His deep-set black eyes are his only real distinguishing feature. We can assume that it was his almost complete lack of outward personality that led Emile Cortez to engage him in discussion. The soul of a Spaniard never shines as brightly as when it is placed against a bland foreigner.

Emile Cortez exhaled a mouthful of smoke, waving his cigar hand to waft the scent of tobacco around the deck. "Direct from Cuba," he said. "The best tobacco in the western hemisphere." He offered the man a second cigar. The man held up his hand and shook his head. "Are you certain?" Cortez asked.

The man nodded his head and relaxed under Cortez's watchful gaze. "Do you speak English?" Cortez asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Ah," Cortez nodded. "Then we will speak in English, for it is a beautiful tongue. Is this your first trip to America?"

"No."

"An interesting country, America." Cortez exhaled a puff of smoke and settled back into his deck chair. The two men gazed out at the Moon as it shone gold over the lightly tossing ocean. "One or two more generations, and I suspect that America will become the receptacle for the whole of Europe's working class. Not that I'm cynical, you understand, about the 'land of the free,' but one look at a ship of this size, its steerage stuffed with penniless merchants and arthritic craftsmen, it's difficult to believe that life will get any easier once they've completed their journey. But mark my words, my friend. When the story of America is finally told, it won't be told by kings or presidents or captains of industry. It will be told by the poor, the infirm, the downtrodden..."

"The criminals?" the man asked.

Cortez considered this for a moment. "Yes," he said, "if you like. Why not? The story will be told by the criminals."

The man smiled.

"What is it you do for a living, my friend?" Cortez asked.

"I'm—a businessman," the man answered, blowing away the foul cigar smoke and briefly turning his

head away.

Cortez didn't seem to notice. "Well, you're headed to the right country, then!" He laughed heartily, which led to a chest-shaking cough. He brought his arm to his mouth, and expelled a mouthful of brown fluid on the back of his sleeve. "Cuban or no," he chuckled, "these things will be the death of me."

The man chuckled.

"But what can I do?" Cortez gesticulated. "Life is short. Our bodies, depressingly mortal." He hooked his index finger around his cheek and pulled it to one side, revealing a row of golden teeth. "The results of age, tobacco and a childhood of poverty. And years from now, when I've rotted in my grave, a handful of gold will be all that's left of me."

The man laughed. "A handful of gold, a pocketful of dust." Cortez laughed as well, and stifled another cough. "And what brought you to France before this journey?" the man asked.

"What brings any man to France?" Cortez said, waving his cigar through the air. "The steps of Montmartre, the steeple of the Sacré-Coeur..." he leaned in, "...Pigalle, the Moulin-Rouge," he whispered, with a wink. "And, of course... Fantômas."

The man raised an eyebrow and gazed, for the first time, into Cortez's eyes. "Fantômas, you say?"

"Indeed," said Cortez, his eyes alight. "Fantômas!"

"The Lord of Terror," the man said. "*L'homme sans visage*."

"Exactly!" Cortez exclaimed, jabbing his cigar perilously close to the man's face. "The Terror of Paris. Responsible for some, if not all, of the most heinous crimes of Europe."

"Relentlessly pursued by the intrepid Inspector Juve and the wholesome journalist Jérôme Fandor," the man added with a hint of sarcasm. "Tell me, Señor Cortez. I remember hearing that Fantômas, in an attempt to feign his own death, once killed an entire shipload of passengers by releasing a horde of rats on board, each of them infected with the plague."

"That is not even the most sinister of his crimes, my friend." Cortez's eyes grew wide with excitement. "Maybe you remember the case of the young painter, arrested for murder, who died in his jail cell. After his death, the Princess Sonia Danidoff was robbed of her priceless necklace and the young artist's fingerprints were discovered in her room!"

"Impossible!" the man exclaimed.

"Fantômas, hideous fiend that he is, had stripped the flesh from the dead man's hands and fashioned from them a pair of gloves with which he continued to commit his crimes, leaving the dead man's fingerprints in his wake. The poor young man. Like so many others, to be used as a pawn in Fantômas' horrible crimes. What was that man's name? Pity, my memory isn't what it used to be."

"Pardon my cynicism," the man scoffed, "but I don't believe a word of it."

"No?" Cortez asked in amazement.

"It seems to me," the man expounded, "that whenever the authorities, or for that matter the general populace, are confronted with crimes too horrid to imagine, or too inexplicable, they accuse this mysterious Fantômas."

"Not true," Cortez insisted. "Fantômas is a master of disguise who can take on many different identities. He leaves no evidence behind at the scene of the crime, therefore his presence cannot be determined by modern police procedural. Instead, one must follow one's instincts. Often, it is impossible to see or hear Fantômas. Instead, you sense his presence. The scene of the crime bears the unmistakable whiff of evil and violence. That is how you know Fantômas."

The man laughed. "You are not describing a man, Señor Cortez, but rather the Devil himself."

Cortez leaned forward with excitement. "A man! Yes, a man! But a man who employs the Devil's tricks! A master of deception whose weapon is pure terror. He strikes randomly, wreaks havoc with no obvious motivation. Creates fear for no other reason than to grip the imagination. Once you have been confronted with Fantômas, it is not uncommon to dream of Fantômas. To see Fantômas everywhere, to imagine his hand in every sinister crime. That is the power of the illusion the fiend creates. But make no mistake—Fantômas is a man. And like all men, he can be discovered, caught, arrested, guillotined."

Cortez sat back in his chair and gazed wistfully at the full Moon. "My father was a police officer in Barcelona. He often spoke of the famous Paris Sûreté with a great deal of fondness, having apprenticed there for many years, and following their exploits in the papers. It was his great wish, God rest his tired soul, that I take up the family trade. After his death, I corresponded with Messieurs Juve and Havard of the Sûreté, and made arrangements to be their guest in Paris. I was eager to join in the chase for the wretched Fantômas." With this, Cortez uttered a deep sigh, and his words betrayed a sense of melancholy and regret. "Alas, the forces of evil do not wait for the forces of good before plying their wicked trade. By the time I

arrived in Paris, the *Titanic* was already at sea, and my pursuit of the scourge of Paris ended before it had begun. I waited with Havard for news of the tragedy, and as the *La Capitale* came in every day, shared in his grief for a man I had never met, but whose ruthless pursuit of justice I happily shared.”

“It must have come as a great disappointment, having traveled all that distance.”

“At first,” Cortez confessed. “But then I received word that Fantômas had survived.”

“Really!” the man exclaimed, with no small amount of alarm.

“And furthermore,” Cortez continued, “that he was headed for America!”

“You don’t say!” the man whispered. “I wonder who betrayed his confidence.”

“I will tell you who.” Cortez glanced around the deck of ship, scanning it for prying eyes. “A cowardly tramp named Bouzille. A foolish ragman, one of thousands that peddle their worthless wares on the streets of Paris. A man of endlessly shifting allegiances, he allied himself with both Fantômas and Inspector Juve. He confessed all to Monsieur Havard after disguising himself as kitchen help to gain entrance to this ship while it was still docked in France. Before it departed for the continent, Bouzille secured documents allowing Fantômas secure passage.”

“This ship?” The man’s eyes grew wide with fear.

“Si,” Cortez replied. “I have reason to believe that Fantômas is on board this very vessel!”

“No! It can’t be! After sinking the *Titanic*...what will we do if he unleashes his fury on the ship’s crew or, worse yet, its passengers?”

Cortez rose from his chair and placed his hands on the man’s shoulders. “Try not to panic,” he said. “Tomorrow, we dock at New York Harbor and will have made safe passage to the city. If Fantômas is on board this ship, I will arrest him.” Cortez sat back down and stubbed out his cigar on the rail of the ship.

“You are a brave man, Emile Cortez,” the man exclaimed, with genuine admiration.

“Thank you, friend,” Cortez answered. “I am as my father would have me.”

“God rest his tired soul.”

The ship began to pitch, the winds to blow. “We have a rough night ahead of us, my friend.” Cortez said. “I feel a storm rolling in. Perhaps it’s time for us to retire below.”

“Retire?” the man said with a start. “How can I have a moment’s peace knowing that Fantômas is on board!”

“Sssssh!” Cortez placed a finger to his lips, as much to calm the man as to silence him. “Be calm in the knowledge that Emile Cortez is here, and will protect the lives of you and every passenger on board this ship. My father was a daring but cautious man, full of strength and self-sacrifice—qualities, I dare say, that have been passed on to his son.”

“I will rest easier,” the man said. “Knowing that you are on the job.”

“Come,” Cortez said, standing and offering his arm to the man. “We should go below. A pretty fix I’ll be in to be tossed overboard by the wind before having the opportunity to make my arrest!”

“Much thanks for the conversation, Señor Cortez,” the man said, shaking the other’s hand.

“The pleasure was all mine, Señor... Señor...” Cortez laughed. “My apologies, my friend. I fear I have spoken only of myself all evening, and have neglected to ask you your name.”

“Dollon,” the man answered. “Jacques Dollon.”

“Dollon,” Cortez repeated, eyeing the man carefully. “Your name is familiar. Have we met before this evening?” The ship pitched once again before the man called Dollon had a chance to answer. “Come,” Cortez said. “It’s getting dangerous here in the open air.”

His need for companionship temporarily sated, Cortez entered his stateroom and turned on a small oil lamp. He then opened a large steamer trunk resting at the foot of his bed and drew out a sheaf of paper—each page containing details on Fantômas’ crimes and exploits. After tossing the pile on the bed, he drew out an envelope of photographs—each one depicting one of Fantômas’ many disguises and portraits of his confederates—an obese woman named Big Ernestine and a sinister-looking fellow with the sobriquet “Guillotine.”

Cortez withdrew a pair of spectacles from his shirtfront, then stripped off his jacket and tie before dropping to the bed, kicking off his shoes and resting with his head against the wall. Once again, he began poring over the evidence procured through the good will of Monsieur Havard of the Paris Sûreté. Here were all the gory details of Fantômas’ devilish past-times—on one page, the hideous story of the Marquise de Langrune, her throat cut so deeply that her head was virtually separated from her neck. On another, Cortez reviewed the case of Lord Beltham—his body discovered locked in a steamer trunk that narrowly avoided being shipped to Australia. Each detail was more bloody and gruesome than the last. Within the

pile of photographs was a picture of Etienne Rambert, the disguise Fantômas took in order to assassinate the Marquise. Beneath that was a portrait of the once-famous actor Valgrand, imprisoned and guillotined in place of the master criminal. And there, at the bottom of the pile, was a picture of Jacques Dollon, the unfortunate young man who...

Jacques Dollon. A horrible thought suddenly dawned on Cortez. *For the love of God, the name of the artist was Jacques Dollon.*

The door to Cortez's stateroom flew open, hitting the wall with a bang. Before the Spaniard could register what was happening, an arm clad in black cloth smashed the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Cortez tried to rise from the bed, but a hand pressed hard against his mouth, pushing him backwards and pressing his head against the wall. Cortez grimaced in pain and his right arm reached up to grab the intruder's wrist, his left arm groping hopelessly for his spectacles which had fallen to the floor during the struggle. By this time, the other hand of the intruder had found Cortez's throat and was squeezing, cutting off the stale air to his lungs. Cortez continued to struggle, but the two powerful arms held him fast, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he found himself staring into the familiar dark eyes of his deck chair companion—eyes surrounded by a hood of black cloth.

"What a shame," the intruder whispered, barely audible over the roaring winds that had begun violently tossing the ship. "Written out of the drama before the close of the first act. What would your father say?" A tear fell from Cortez's eye onto the strong black-clad hand. "Perhaps he'd say 'Such a shame that Barcelona lost its one true champion.'" Still holding on to his captive, the intruder kicked the door closed.

A few minutes later, a man clad head to toe in black exited the room, dragging behind him a steamer trunk of considerable weight. After making sure that he was safe from prying eyes, the man carried the trunk into the stairwell, up the stairs, then exited on deck. The waves were tossing, and several times the man in black had to take one hand off the trunk and steady himself against the railing. Eventually, the ship settled, and the man picked up the trunk, balanced it on the railing, then tipped it overboard and watched as it crashed into the tossing waves.

The next morning, the man who had called himself Jacques Dollon stood on the upper deck, staring down at the bow of the ship while hundreds of passengers disembarked into the New York Harbor. He observed the passengers from first and second-class easing their way through the officers of the Port Authority without having to show any paperwork, while the hundreds of disheveled and dirty passengers from steerage were being forced into a queue while stern-faced authorities demanded identification and letters before sending them off to Ellis Island.

Of course, he thought to himself, *only the wealthy—those who can afford luxurious passage—have the advantage of not having to identify themselves.* It was a curious thought, and the man calling himself Jacques Dollon made his way down to the bow of the ship and prepared to exit. After easing his way into the mass of people waiting to leave the harbor, he looked out onto the New York City skyline. *How,* he wondered to himself, *can so much dirt and filth erupt from a city that is so... new?*

Eventually, the man found himself at the front of the line, where he offered the officer in charge his identification. "Good morning, Mr. Cortez," the officer said after examining the man's paperwork. "Welcome to New York City."

And with that, the man—who now went by the name of Emile Cortez—found himself in the new world. And by the time the ship's crew discovered the bloodstained bed sheets in Emile Cortez's room, a man with a head full of plans and a pocket full of gold teeth had disappeared among the huddled masses of Manhattan.

Fantômas had arrived in America.