

Chapter VII *Out Of The Tomb*

As events unfolded with frightful rapidity in distant Natal, a series of brief and tragic events occurred thousands of miles from there, in England, right in the heart of London!

During the night of June 18, the habitual silence of the giant cemetery located northeast of the city was disturbed by the sound of stealthy steps and strange comings and goings.

On a dark, narrow path, surrounded by cypresses, which whispered gloomily under the wind's caress, a shadow could be seen, walking slowly.

This shadow was that of a woman; tall, fair, with a distinguished stride. One could have easily said that she had the bearing of a queen.

The woman clearly knew the sinister place that she was visiting. With her delicate hands, she'd tried to open a vault that she undoubtedly had assumed to be unlocked. However, it was closed with a heavy lock. She didn't exhaust herself with useless efforts, but turned to a set of tools, which she hoped would achieve her purpose. When that failed, the woman fell prey to an inexpressible despair.

What was the goal of this strange woman, whose bearing and style unmistakably indicated her aristocratic origin?

In the middle of her attempts, the mysterious woman suddenly stopped, suppressing an anguished cry. Someone was walking not far away...

Who, besides herself, would wander in a cemetery at this late hour?

A thick silhouette was outlined amongst the tombs; it was that of a robust and stocky man who walked slowly, holding a heavy pickaxe in his hand.

The man gave a sudden start when he saw the woman, and stopped in front of her without saying a word, amazed by this apparition. He was dressed all in black, but his clothing was adorned with silver braids and metal buttons.

The woman immediately recognized that she was dealing with an employee of the cemetery, perhaps a night watchman or a gravedigger.

"By God! Madam," said the man, "I'm extremely astonished to find you here, and, as I don't have the honor of your acquaintance, I'd be happy to know—who are you? You can't ignore the regulations that forbid any person from outside the cemetery's staff from being here outside visiting hours. My duty is to take you to the guardhouse where you'll be asked to..."

Was the woman dealing with an intractable civil servant? Or was she in the presence of the type of person who was touched by those who were in pain, and whom a pretty woman's prayers might succeed in moving?

"Forgive me, sir," she murmured, "and don't condemn me... Alas! I know that I'm guilty... But there's an explanation, and I'm sure that, when I've told it to you, you'll reconsider your decision to take me to the guardhouse... I'd prefer to die than undergo such a disgrace."

"It's not a question of dying, lady, but merely of providing me with something that will justify your presence!"

The woman drew a breath. She indicated the vault.

"This gate," she asked. "It's locked. Why isn't it open?"

"It's indeed locked, as coffins were unloaded here yesterday afternoon."

"I know, that's why I came, that's why I'm desperate."

"But why?"

With rapid words, clipping her sentences, moving closer and closer to the gravedigger, as if she wanted to convince him of her sincerity by her sheer presence, the woman recounted her story with barely a breath.

“The last coffin that they took down into that vault is that of a relative, a friend... Someone I love... Whom I loved more than everything in the world! A dreadful mistake has been made. They left a very important document with him inside his coffin and... I want to believe that you’ll help me... I came here intending to open the coffin and remove that document!”

The man shrugged his shoulders.

“Impossible,” he said simply.

“Oh! Please don’t tell me that,” she exclaimed. “It would mean my death. It would cause the most horrible tragedy that it’s possible to imagine in this world... Please, sir, since it’s in your power, unlock this gate, so that I may open that coffin!”

“It’s quite forbidden! Anyone infringing this order would be severely punished.”

Despite the rather unencouraging words, the woman gave a small, triumphant smile.

Discreetly, she took a small purse from her bag, which she slipped into the gravedigger’s hand.

“I swear to you,” she said, “that no one will know anything about it.”

Assuredly, a struggle was taking place within the gravedigger’s conscience. After a long hesitation, he finally gave in to the woman’s increasingly passionate pleas.

From a bunch of keys, he took one, which threw back the lock’s bolt.

The gate opened and the two entered, descending slowly into the icy vault.

There were several coffins lined up next to each other, deposited there temporarily as they awaited their final burial.

The woman wandered unsteadily step amidst the sinister boxes, until a moonbeam that lit up the vault’s inside led her to a large casket, on the lid of which was fixed a metal plate, as large as a visiting card. On it was engraved a simple name:

Tom Bob

She pointed to it.

Resolved to keep his word, the gravedigger used his knife to remove the screws that barely kept the oaken lid shut.

Then Death appeared!

It was a man of about 40, with a calm and rested face, jet-black hair with a mere hint of silver on the temples.

He appeared to be merely asleep, and his limbs didn’t have a corpse’s usual rigidity.

“Hurry up, Ma’am,” said the gravedigger.

The woman threw herself on her knees near the opened casket and, before the gravedigger had recovered from his surprise, she poured the crimson contents of a vial hidden in the hollow of her hand onto the dead man’s lips. The gravedigger cried in astonishment.

“What’s this, Ma’am?” he asked. “What are you doing?”

He didn’t continue. The spectacle which he witnessed was so unexpected, so extraordinary, so terrifying that the poor man fell backward and collapsed with a thud onto another coffin, deprived of all feeling—even his fear had evaporated.

A few seconds after the corpse’s lips had been moistened, he appeared to return to life! His eyelids moved, his mouth quivered, his arms shook...

And, finally, he stood up.

“Lady Beltham,” whispered Fantômas, “thank you. I waited for you... for more than an hour.”

The woman was, indeed, Lady Beltham, who’d undertaken the fearsome task of opening Tom Bob’s coffin.

“You were already awake?” she asked.

“For an hour,” said the man who had returned from the dead. “I heard you, but I couldn’t make the slightest movement! If my mind lived, my body was still trapped in the most appalling catalepsy.”

“Tom,” begged Lady Beltham, “let’s go... Let’s flee this terrible place!”

The man whose coffin had been labeled with the celebrated name of “Tom Bob” slowly raised himself. Suddenly, he noticed the unconscious gravedigger.

“What’s he doing here?” he asked harshly.

Lady Beltham explained the tragic incident of the locked gate and the fortunate fate that had sent the gravedigger. She stressed the irreparable misfortune that would have resulted if he had refused to unlock the vault.

Fantômas, however, who slowly felt his strength and power returning, said nothing, but remained thoughtful.

“The gravedigger,” he finally said slowly, “is an unfortunate witness to my resurrection...”

Lady Beltham interrupted him. She had an alarmed look. She knew his intentions.

“Mercy, Tom,” she pleaded. “Mercy for him!”

However, Fantômas wasn’t listening.

With appalling cold-bloodedness and indomitable will, he leaned over the unfortunate gravedigger’s body. The concussion had been violent; the man hadn’t yet regained consciousness.

Fantômas smiled. His strong, muscular hands fastened around the gravedigger’s neck. Then, for a very long time, his fingers tightened, his thumbs squeezing the carotid and tracheal arteries.

The unfortunate gravedigger didn’t make a movement in revolt. A slight death rattle could barely be heard escaping from his throat. His head fell backwards, while his lips turned white and his eyes rolled into his head.

Lady Beltham, terrorized by this cruel, wanton act, accomplished with such monstrous coldness, had dropped to the rocky flagstones that made up the floor of the vault.

With her eyes enlarged with terror, she watched her lover mercilessly kill the gravedigger.

Then, Fantômas, his Herculean strength fully restored, grabbed the corpse and, carrying the dead man with both arms, deposited it in the very coffin that he, himself, had just left moments before.

The horrible act accomplished, the villain screwed the lid back onto the casket with fevered haste—and soon, order was restored to the funeral crypt. Not a sound pierced the darkness!

Inside the coffins, lined up against each other, there was henceforth none but the dead... the truly dead!

The night was still not over when Fantômas and Lady Beltham found themselves opposite each other in a small, secluded house in the London suburbs.

However, the blonde woman was still struggling against the emotions that tortured her.

Fantômas, always methodical and careful, had devoted himself to more practical matters; he had meticulously washed and dressed in new, clean clothes, and was now ready to leave.

“Tom,” begged Lady Beltham, alarmed at his intentions, “you’re leaving me, me, who just saved you?”

“I also saved you,” retorted Fantômas, “and I’ll save you again, but a man, even a man like me, has only his word... And I’ve sworn to uphold it!”

“What are you planning to do?” asked Lady Beltham, frightened.

“To see Juve,” declared Fantômas, “to whom I made a promise to return Fandor. I made an appointment with Juve for three days after my death.”¹

“You plan to return Fandor to Juve,” she said. “But do you only know where he is?”

“Yes, I do, Madame, and I’ll be true to my word. Also, by returning Fandor, I might secure from my foes the reprieve I need to accomplish the work I’ve been planned for now 15 years.”

“Tom,” exclaimed Lady Beltham again, “is it possible? The secret that you once confided in me... Is it true?”

“It’s the truth, Madame... And no matter what happens, never forget that, above all things, all human feelings, all emotions, all dramas, there’s no more powerful love than this love...”

“And this love is?” questioned Lady Beltham.

“Paternal love!” replied Fantômas.

The man called “Tom Bob,” who had just miraculously escaped from a horrible death, wasn’t only, as most people believed, the most well-known of Scotland Yard’s detectives and a member of the Council of Five. He was, and had always been, Fantômas!

In the course of his latest adventures, the London Police, who believed him to be a doctor who had murdered his wife, had imprisoned Fantômas—for a crime of which he was actually innocent! Fantômas, under a borrowed name, had been sentenced to death by hanging.

Naturally, the Council of Five had rigged the execution so that Fantômas was able to avoid death. However, even though he had escaped from the gallows, Fantômas had fallen into the hands of his sworn enemy, Inspector Juve of the French Sûreté. Indeed, Fantômas, mistaken for dead, had been led, alive, to Juve’s refuge, a London house he had rented expressly to imprison Fantômas.

¹ Fantômas’ bargain with Juve was, of course, made in the conclusion of the previous volume, *Le Pendu de Londres* [*The Hanged Man of London*].

The outlaw had no desire to remain at the mercy of his formidable enemy. So he had pretended to poison himself before Juve's very eyes. In anticipation, he had taken the precaution of telling his mistress, Lady Beltham, that he would revive in three days, and that she should make sure that someone came to help him escape from the vault where they would confine his body.

Juve, having witnessed the so-called suicide of Fantômas, had nevertheless not been fooled by it.

He knew the madman's subtlety, his extraordinary audacity. He was perfectly aware that, as far as Fantômas was concerned, one could expect anything!

Juve had watched Fantômas on his death's bed, and had not lost sight of him when he had been laid in his coffin, convinced that, at any moment, even as he came ever closer to the grave, Fantômas would find a means to awaken and attempt to flee.

Yet, nothing like that had occurred and Juve had seen Fantômas properly entombed under the name "Tom Bob." He had attended his funeral, forcing him to believe in the reality of Fantômas' death.

But his was still a relative belief, rather than an absolute conviction, because Fantômas' last words had been: "Juve... in three days."

Juve, despite everything he had witnessed, awaited the expiration of his adversary's deadline with tremendous anxiety. And, in truth, Juve hoped that Fantômas would rise from the dead because, if revived, the villain would be able to tell him where Fandor was. Perhaps Fantômas would even help him find the journalist, for whom he seemed to have an incomprehensible sympathy.

Incomprehensible? Not entirely. Juve knew that, if Fantômas had spared Fandor until now, it was because he had a need for him, and perhaps even a need for Juve, because of something that was buried deep in Fantômas' heart.

It was a terrible secret that the outlaw didn't even acknowledge to himself, but that Juve, ever the policeman, had guessed.

So, despite everything, trusting in Fantômas' word, Juve ardently hoped to see him at their rendezvous.

It was for this reason that Juve had not wanted the approaches to the cemetery watched, knowing full well that the one that would save Fantômas, that is to say Lady Beltham, would not intervene if she knew that her lover would rise from the dead only to fall into his opponent's hands. Having counted the days, Juve now counted the hours.

The evening came. With the night nearly over, the third day would soon be over; the deadline fixed by Fantômas would end.

Would Juve see his foe again?

Of course, his decision was made: if Fantômas did not return, Juve would go to the cemetery himself and, after telling Scotland Yard what he knew, would have the coffin opened.

However, Juve wasn't yet ready to say anything, didn't want to act before the deadline's expiration.

It was 7:00 p.m. In one hour, the Sûreté Inspector would be free to act.

Juve paced in the small room he occupied in his London hotel. Gripped by a powerful emotion, he surveyed his surroundings.

Suddenly, his whole body trembled.

He heard a discreet rapping at the door.

In a voice strangled with emotion, he said: "Enter."

The door opened.

Fantômas appeared.