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The Man
in the
Iron Mask

Alexandre Dumas

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ROGER CELESTIN

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK



Alexandre Dumas

*Revised and Updated Translation
by Jacqueline Rogers*

*With an Introduction
by Roger Celestin
and an Afterword
by Jack Zipes*



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Alexandre Dumas (1802–70) was born in Picardy, France, the son of a general in Napoleon's army who died when Dumas was four years old. Although impoverished, he was self-educated and moved to Paris at the age of twenty to become a writer. After several extremely successful plays, he turned to writing novels, including *The Three Musketeers* (1844), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844–45), and *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1848–50). In 1840, he married the actress Ida Ferrier, but was well-known for his numerous affairs and fathering illegitimate children, including a son who became the novelist Alexandre Dumas *fils*. After the successful publication of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, he built his own lavish Château de Monte Cristo. Soon bankrupt, he was forced to flee to Belgium to escape his creditors. His travels included a trip to Russia, then one to Italy, where he joined the fight for its unification. He died penniless but optimistic, saying of death, "I shall tell her a story, and she will be kind to me."

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Introduction

The Man in the Iron Mask is the final installment of *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, the third and last volume of the *Musketeers* trilogy begun by Alexandre Dumas in the mid-1840s. *The Three Musketeers*, the first and best-known volume of the trilogy, was published in 1844, and followed by *Twenty Years After* (1845) and *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, serialized in the newspaper *Le Siècle* between 20 October 1847 and 12 January 1850, and published in book form in 1850.

When *The Man in the Iron Mask* begins, in the year 1661, it has been a long time since the Musketeers Athos, Porthos, Aramis, and d'Artagnan met and sealed their encounter in words that would become a paean to friendship, youth, and adventure: "All for one and one for all!" When the four first met, the year was 1635 and Louis XIII sat on the throne of France, even if the real power lay in the hands of Cardinal Richelieu. At that time, the Musketeers were like so many young men from the provinces who had "come up to Paris" to make a name for themselves. A passage from *The Three Musketeers* depicts them in that dual condition common to the vast majority of those who had come to the capital: impetuous youth and meager finances. Early in their friendship, they have been reduced to seek as many invitations as possible in order to fill their starving bellies:

Our four friends had fallen into embarrassment. For some time, Athos supported the association with his private means. Porthos succeeded him, and thanks to one of those disappearances to which they were accustomed, he was able to provide for the common wants for a fortnight. When it came to the turn of Aramis, he performed his part with good grace, and procured a few pistoles by selling some theological books. . . . At last when everything was about to fail, a final effort was made, and eight pistoles were got together, with which Porthos gambled. Unfortunately, he was out of luck, and lost the whole besides incurring a debt of honor of twenty-five pistoles. The embarrassment became distress; and the starving friends

were to be seen with their valets trying to pick up a dinner wherever they could find one. For Aramis had always advised that one should sow dinners in prosperity so as to reap them in adversity. Athos was invited to dine four times, and each time took his three friends and their valets. Porthos had six opportunities of doing the same, and Aramis had eight. As for d'Artagnan, who knew no one in the capital, he found only a breakfast of chocolate at the house of a priest from his province, and a dinner from a cornet of Guards. He led his army to the priest's house, where they devoured two months' provisions; and they also performed wonders at the cornet's house. d'Artagnan considered himself as humiliated at being able to offer but one repast and a half—for the breakfast only counted half—in exchange for the feasts procured by Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.

This passage takes us back to a time of potentiality and energy, of young men on the brink of adventure and fame, even if reduced to scrounging around Paris for their next meal. The struggles with the nefarious cardinal and his assorted henchmen, the saving of the queen's reputation—the famous affair of the necklace—the wild gallops to catch up with enemies or to evade pursuers, the countless duels and brawls, and the honors bestowed upon them by the very powerful, all still lie in the future. By comparison, *The Man in the Iron Mask*, although not lacking in dire situations and heroic deeds, is pervaded by a crepuscular even if cathartic quality: Time has passed, and something is ending. As one commentator put it, "Dumas' Invincibles suddenly become mortal: they outlive the day when companionship and courage were enough to solve simple problems. . . . They have been undermined from within by age and regret and, from without, are assailed by irresistible forces" (David Coward, "Introduction to *The Man in the Iron Mask*": New York, Oxford University Press, 1988, p. xiv).

This last installment of the *Muskeeter* cycle, set during the Musketeers' waning years and in the years of youth and consolidation of Louis XIV's reign, can be considered Alexandre Dumas' *Time Regained* (the title of the last volume of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*). This comparison between the final book of Proust's modernist masterpiece, considered by many to be the closing epiphany to one of the greatest

novels ever written, and the last volume of Dumas' mid-nineteenth-century popular swashbuckling romance is justified. True, one belongs to the more rarefied world of "great literature" while, throughout the *Musketeer* saga, and indeed in his oeuvre in general, Dumas was mainly concerned with swiftly, effectively, and dramatically steering his plot, the crucial component of "popular literature." Many of his novels, the *Musketeers* cycle and *The Count of Monte Cristo* most famously, were in fact commissioned by the new cheap newspapers that appeared in France in the mid-nineteenth century and that published novels in serialized form. The encounter between this new medium and Dumas' storytelling skills was indeed the source of the several fortunes made and spent by the author of what Dumas, comparing his novelistic work to Balzac's own epic cycle, the "Human Comedy," called his "Drama of France," a series of novels that would do no less than cover the history of France itself. As the great French historian Jules Michelet wrote about Dumas, "He taught the people of France more history than all the historians put together." Nonetheless, keeping readers interested in "what happens next," the proverbial cliff-hanger, was Dumas' crucial objective as a serialized novelist and it dictated his style. *The Man in the Iron Mask* is no exception. So that when we think of Marcel Proust's famously long, complex sentences, and his exquisitely layered descriptions of mood and character, comparing his *Time Regained* and *The Man in the Iron Mask* with its terse, rapid dialogues and almost frenzied pace can seem an odd proposition indeed. Ultimately, however, what justifies this comparison is the sense of closure deriving from the position of these two volumes at the end of vast frescoes, and their common concern with the passing of an era, the passing of Time itself. In Proust's *Time Regained*, this concern forms the very thematic core of the novel and is linked to the discovery of a writer's vocation; in Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask*, it imposes itself at the end of a saga whose heroes, characters we have met in the flower of youth, have arrived at the end of their turbulent, swashbuckling lives.

Thirty-five years have thus passed since we first met d'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. Now the starving young blades of *The Three Musketeers* have become men of substance. Aramis is bishop of Vannes and, more secretly, the superior general of the Jesuits, with his eye on the papacy itself; Porthos, now the wealthy Baron du Vallon, lives on his estate; Athos, the

Comte de la Fère, lives on his own estate with his son, Raoul, the Vicomte de Bragelonne. d'Artagnan, the only one who is still in active service, is captain of the King's Musketeers, Louis XIV's personal guards.

The year 1661 is a crucial year in the history of France as it sets the stage for Louis XIV's personal government and his subsequent transformation into the Sun King. There had been constant revolts against the crown throughout his father's reign, most notoriously the Fronde, a rebellious movement of nobles and of the parliament. After Louis XIII's death in 1643, the threat of a takeover by one of the factions that formed the Fronde was real. Nevertheless, Louis' widow, Anne of Austria, and Cardinal Mazarin, who had been appointed prime minister, succeeded in defeating the rebellion over the next decade and in keeping the throne of France for Louis XIV, who was only five years old at the time of his father's death. Until 1661, the real master of France was Cardinal Mazarin, who was also rumored to be the queen's lover and even, secretly, her husband. While there is no documented corroboration of this theory, the queen regent and the cardinal—prime minister certainly wielded the royal power while the future Sun King, often humiliated by their tutelage, was obliged to follow their decisions. Still, Mazarin's policies and strategy—dictated by a cold, calculating vision of power and politics—were directed at making France the dominant kingdom in Europe, and in this respect at least, he became Louis' true mentor. The other powerful figure of the period was Nicolas Fouquet, superintendent of finances. Fouquet amassed a fortune in this position, the only one to rival Mazarin's wealth. By the time Mazarin died in 1661, Louis XIV, then a young man in his early twenties, had been trained by his mentor to deal ruthlessly with opposition and to assume the full power of his position. Already he had gathered the nobility of France around him, keeping it occupied in a ceaseless and meticulously choreographed etiquette: the king's awakening and breakfast, his other meals, his hunts, his costumed balls and fireworks, an entire array of activities centered around pleasure . . . and the king. Keeping up with the court's peregrinations from one château to another and with the demands of court life, the nobles could scarcely organize into another Fronde. The memories of that rebellion and of his own humiliations also explain Louis' first official act after Mazarin's death: He abolished the position of prime minister hitherto occupied by the cardinal and formed a

king's council, composed of three men whom he could trust absolutely. Fouquet, the richest man in France, hoped to belong to this new body, but in fact his star was already on the decline as the king, relying on men like Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a rival of Fouquet, was already planning his arrest. Rather than please the future Sun King, the fête offered to Louis by his superintendent of finances at the latter's luxurious château at Vaux early on in the novel only reminds the king of the poor state of his own wealth compared to Fouquet's seemingly limitless opulence. The stage is set for the arrest, and this historical occurrence is intertwined by Dumas with another plotline that gives the novel its name: the presence in the notorious Bastille of a man in an iron mask. Dumas did not invent this man; he actually existed, as entered in the unofficial register kept by the deputy governor of the Bastille, Etienne du Junca, about his successor:

M. de Saint-Mars, formerly Governor of the prisons of Pignerol in Piedmont, Exiles in the Alps, and the island of Sainte-Marguerite off the coast of Cannes, arrived in Paris to take command of the Bastille. He brought with him, "in his litter," a long-term prisoner "whom he kept masked at all times and whose name is not spoken." On 19 November 1703, the unknown prisoner, after a short illness "still masked with a mask of black velvet . . . died this day at half past ten in the evening; he who had been so long a captive was buried on Tuesday at four in the afternoon, 20th November, in the cemetery of Saint-Paul in this parish. In the register of deaths was entered a name, also unknown." A marginal note in du Junca's hand adds: "I have since learnt that he was named in the Register as M. de Marchiel and that 40 livres were paid for his funeral." The entry in the burial register for 19 November records the death of "Marchioly, aged forty-five years, or thereabouts, [who] departed this life in the Bastille."

(Coward, xvii)

The dates do not coincide, since Dumas' prisoner has already been in the Bastille for a few years as the novel opens in 1661, whereas, according to the historical register, he arrives with the new governor on "19 November 1703," and, of course, rather than iron, the mask worn by the mysterious prisoner is made of black velvet. As for his "true" identity—Dumas' proposition,

which will not be revealed here—the few years' discrepancy do not stop him from placing this prisoner at the heart of the intrigues taking place in the French court in 1661. These intrigues will, of course, involve all four Musketeers once again, even if this time around they are far from being on the same side. d'Artagnan is torn between his allegiance to a certain chivalrous ideal embodied for him by Fouquet and his allegiance to the king, while Aramis has no such scruples.

Mixing fact and fiction, roaming freely through the vast store of French history, "from Caesar's invasion of the Gauls to the invasion of the French Republic in Europe," as Dumas summarizes it, fusing the various strands into an exciting, seamless whole—this is the heart of Dumas' technique as a writer of historical fiction, the genre he borrowed from Walter Scott but which he reinvented as the French historical novel. Not absolute historical accuracy but the ability to bring history to life even at the cost of some inaccuracy is essential to Dumas' technique, for, as he once famously asked: "What is history? A nail on which I hang my novels."

The "nail" is thus Louis XIV's definitive consolidation of his power and the events surrounding this development. What Dumas "hangs on" these events is, essentially, the involvement of the Musketeers in various capacities, all converging on the mysterious prisoner. As the novel begins, Aramis is conversing with the "man in the iron mask," who has been held for six years now in the notorious Bastille. At the time the novel takes place, the Bastille had not yet fallen to the crowds of the Revolution of 1789, but it had already acquired its reputation as a grim prison fortress from which prisoners sometimes never returned. What makes the mysterious prisoner exceptional is not the duration of his imprisonment, but the very mystery surrounding his identity and the horrible iron mask he will eventually be forced to wear. When Aramis visits him in his cell in the first chapter, we are introduced to the plot that has led to his arrest, one that could involve the highest reaches of power, as the prisoner is beginning to understand:

"And I, I—" the young man looked sharply at Aramis, "am compelled to live in the obscurity of a prison?"

"Alas! I fear so."

"And that, because my presence in the world would lead to the revelation of a great secret?"

“Certainly, a very great secret.”

“My enemy must be powerful, to be able to shut up in the Bastille a child such as I then was.”

“He is.”

Who is “he”? And did the man in the iron mask ever *really* exist? While the answer to the first question is given by Dumas in *The Man in the Iron Mask*, to the second question, he leaves us to our own devices, commenting on his method as the inventor of the French historical novel and on our propensity as readers to believe in events that thrill us, and in people who move us, even if we are not sure that they ever really existed:

There is something I don't know how to do. A book or a play set in places I have not seen. To write *Christine*, I went to Fontainebleau; to write *Henri III*, I went to Blois; to write the *Musketeers*, I went to Boulogne and to Béthune; to write *Monte Cristo*, I went back to the Catalans in Marseille and to the Chateâu d'Îf. . . . This gives an air of authenticity and truth to what I do, and the characters in specific places grow in such a way that some people end up believing that they've existed.

Perhaps this belief in characters who have existed only in their author's imagination, but have succeeded in growing in our own, is the sign of great literature, popular or not.

—Roger Celestin

Note to the Reader

The Man in the Iron Mask is part three of the historical romance *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, which is the last novel in Alexandre Dumas' *Musketeer* cycle consisting of *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and *Twenty Years After* (1845). In order to understand the context for Aramis' visit to the prisoner in the Bastille, the opening scene in our present volume, it will be important to summarize some of the preceding events that have a bearing on the action in *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

These events take place largely during 1660–61, when King Louis XIV has begun a flirtation with Madame Henrietta, sister of Charles II of England and wife of the Duc d'Orleans, younger brother of Louis XIV. Henrietta is very much in love with Louis, but he takes a liking to one of her attendants, Louise de la Vallière. This affair infuriates Henrietta, who does all she can to sabotage it. At the same time, this affair is a tragedy for Raoul de Bragelonne, son of Athos, Comte de la Fère, one of the original three Musketeers. Raoul had actually been engaged to Louise, and when he asks the king to consent to their marriage, Louis refuses and sends Raoul to England.

At this point Henrietta undermines Louis' command and orders Raoul to return to Paris because she believes Raoul will marry Louise and she will have the king to herself. In addition, she orders Louise to leave her service. Louise, confused and distressed, decides to enter a convent. But now d'Artagnan intercedes on behalf of Louis XIV and convinces Louise to return to the court, where she takes her quarters with M. de Saint-Aignan, the king's favorite. Since there is a trapdoor in M. de Saint-Aignan's apartments, Louis is able to have many secret rendezvous with Louise, and the two are blissful. Nevertheless, Raoul cannot believe that Louise has betrayed him, and once he discovers what has occurred, he has a breakdown, causing his father, Athos, to visit Louis XIV and berate him for his undignified conduct.

In the meantime, another former Musketeer, Aramis, who is now general of the Jesuits and has close ties to Spain, is seeking to overthrow Louis by revealing a secret that threatens his

monarchy—a secret locked away in the dungeon of the Bastille. Aramis even has his eye on becoming pope and will stop at nothing to fulfill his ambitious dreams, even if it means deceiving his friend Porthos, the gentle giant of a Musketeer. Aramis is convinced that Fouquet, the superintendant of finances, who needs money to keep up his luxurious lifestyle, will help him and has taken sides with him against Colbert, who is being helped by the Duchesse de Chevreuse, the former Marie Michon, an old friend of the Musketeers. She wants to have a reconciliation with Anne of Austria and plans Fouquet's downfall when he refuses to give her money for some incriminating letters that reveal how corrupt he is.

While all these intrigues are in the process of developing, d'Artagnan, the most noble of the Musketeers and the most loyal servant of Louis XIV, begins to suspect that his good friend Aramis is up to mischief. And this is where our novel begins, for Aramis is indeed about to reveal to the prisoner of the Bastille who he is, and just as all the intrigues at the court resemble deceptive moves in an intricate chess game, each step that the cunning Aramis takes from this point on in the action will be geared to checkmate Louis XIV.

—*Jack Zipes*

**THE MAN IN THE
IRON MASK**

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Chapter I

THE PRISONER

Since Aramis's singular transformation into a confessor of the Order, Baisemeaux was no longer the same man. Up to that period, Aramis had been for the worthy governor a prelate whom he respected and a friend to whom he owed a debt of gratitude; but now he felt himself an inferior, and that Aramis was his master. He lighted a lantern, summoned a turnkey, and said, returning to Aramis:

"I am at your orders, monseigneur."

Aramis merely nodded his head, as much as to say, "Very good," and motioned to him to lead the way. Baisemeaux started out, and Aramis followed him. It was a beautiful, starry night; the steps of the three men resounded on the flags of the terraces, and the clinking of the keys hanging from the jailer's belt was heard up to the top of the towers, as if to remind the prisoners that liberty was out of their reach. The change in Baisemeaux seemed to have spread even to the prisoners. The turnkey, the same who, on Aramis's first arrival, had shown himself so inquisitive and curious, had now become not only silent, but even impassible. He held his head down, and seemed afraid to keep his ears open. Thus they reached the basement of the Bertaudière, the two first stories of which were climbed silently and somewhat slowly; for Baisemeaux, though far from disobeying, was far from exhibiting any eagerness to obey. On arriving at the door Baisemeaux moved to enter the prisoner's chamber; but Aramis, stopping him on the threshold, said:

"The rules do not allow the governor to hear the prisoner's confession."

Baisemeaux bowed, and made way for Aramis, who took the lantern and entered; and then motioned to them to close the door behind him. For an instant he remained standing, listening whether Baisemeaux and the turnkey had retired; but as soon as he was assured by the sound of their dying footsteps that they had left the tower, he put the lantern on the table and gazed