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THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

ALEXANDRE
DUMAS

Introduction by Robert L. Hillerich

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE MAN
IN THE
IRON MASK

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Introduction

Alexandre Dumas is best known as the creator of those devil-may-care heroes, the three musketeers. One might wonder how their author could see even these colorful soldiers-of-fortune through some forty-four volumes of free-wheeling romance, intrigue, and battle. On the other hand, a glance at Alexandre's parentage suggests that he could hardly have done otherwise. His father was the greatest swashbuckler of them all.¹

This father, Alexandre Davy de la Pailleterie, was the mulatto son of a French marquis. He refused aid from his father and enlisted in the Queen's Dragoons as a private under the name of his mother, Dumas. During the French Revolution he was promoted, within twenty months, from private to commander-in-chief of the Army of the Western Pyrenees. The General's exploits more than rival those of Porthos: a giant of a man, he could toss a hesitant soldier bodily over a wall, crush a steel helmet between his hands or a horse between his legs.

Headstrong in battle, he frequently outstripped his men. In one engagement he single-handedly routed an entire Austrian division, earning the name *schwartzter Teufel* (Black Devil). This same impetuous nature which made his reputation in battle was his

¹ A fascinating account of Dumas *pere*, his father, and his son is presented in *The Titans* by Andre Maurois (New York: Harper, 1957).

undoing as a commander of armies. Combined with a simple frankness and strong humanitarian feelings, this impetuosity soon put the General in Napoleon's disfavor. He died a poor and broken man, at the age of forty-four, just four years after the birth of Alexandre.

Alexandre Dumas was born in 1802. He soon began to show many of the characteristics of his father: physical size, intelligence, a love of action, and, above all, a free and romantic spirit. By the age of six, young Dumas had read the Bible, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Arabian Nights*, and a number of volumes of mythology. Despite this early start, he could not be considered bookish; much of his later youth was spent in the outdoors he loved, hunting and roaming in the woods.

The meager income earned by Alexandre's mother barely enabled the two of them to subsist. As soon as he was old enough, Dumas added to the family income by working as a lawyer's messenger. It was during this early period that two important events occurred in his life: he attended a traveling-company presentation of *Hamlet* in his village of Villers-Cotterets, and he made the acquaintance of Adolphe de Leuven, an aspiring playwright and devotee of the theater. His desire whetted by this taste of theater, Alexandre resolved to seek his fortune in Paris.

Through one of the few friends of his father, Alexandre was granted a job as copy boy for the Duc d'Orleans. By the age of twenty he had written three plays and had received as many rejections. However, he added to his list of friends and tutors one Lassagne, chief clerk for the Duc d'Orleans and a talented critic of literature and the theater.

Lassagne and de Leuven were gifted mentors and rebels against the classic tradition. Dumas, although largely innocent of the classic tradition, recognized the need for emotion—the human element—in drama. The break-through came when the young Romantic was twenty-seven, with the success of his first accepted play *Henri III et sa cour*. *Christine*, his subsequent effort, was saved from almost certain failure by a post-first-night revision. With the aid of Victor Hugo and de Vigny, the play was salvaged into a moderate success.

Within the year, Dumas' reputation was made with the overwhelming success of *Anthony*. The tremendous response to this play brought money and fame—fame that placed Dumas as an

equal with Hugo and almost destroyed their friendship. Thereafter, success followed success.

The theatrical conquests of Dumas were equaled only by the number of his feminine conquests. His natural son, the young Alexandre who was born during the early years in Paris, was well cared for, as was the child's mother and the mother of Dumas himself. However, despite the extent of his income, Dumas was never to become wealthy because of the many women he loved and supported during his life.

While Dumas had written some historical books and accounts of his travels, including impressions from a sojourn with Garibaldi, it was not until 1844 that he firmly demonstrated himself as a novelist. By this time, the historical novel as a genre was established; Hugo and de Vigny, among others, had seen to that. It remained for Dumas to inject his own flavor of romance and adventure—humanity—to the type. This he did, in eight volumes, with *The Three Musketeers*.

It is doubtful that any author equaled the productivity of Dumas in his next eight years. He had found his place, and it seemed that he was determined to include all of French history in his scope. Over one hundred volumes were published between 1844 and 1851. Obviously no man could do this alone; hence, Dumas gained the reputation as Dumas and Company, manufacturers of novels.

The criticism was, in part, due to jealousy. Many novels of the period were run first as serials in the newspapers. Because of his popular appeal, Dumas had a monopoly with his stories in the French newspapers. This control cut off the income of established as well as new writers of the day.

The criticism was in part true. Dumas did have collaborators, as did most major writers of his day; in fact, Dumas was not above hiring the better ones away from Hugo, de Vigny, or Balzac. From all we know, however, it is not true that Dumas merely bought and signed the manuscripts of his collaborators. The best evidence in support of this statement is the fact that most of these collaborators, at one time or another, attempted without success to produce novels on their own. They were the plot sketchers and the character inventors, but it took the master himself to breathe life into the raw material. A particularly

bilious accusation, fought through the courts, brought forth the judgment of libel that Dumas sought against one accuser.

The novels of Dumas, especially those dealing with the musketeers, have universal appeal. They express artlessly the author's boundless *joie de vivre*, his love of action, strength, and generosity. On the other hand, the many one and two word paragraphs probably reflect the influence of the newspaper serialization, since authors were paid by the line, regardless of the number of words.

In no other way did Dumas show an awareness of money: he earned fortunes and he threw them away. He was often hounded by creditors, and he died a poor man. Likewise, while in his lifetime he was the superior in popularity and even the envy of the great Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, and de Vigny, today he is not classed as their literary equal. He was the man of action and adventure, not the refiner of literary works. His fondest wish—to be admitted to the French Academy—was never achieved by himself; it was gained by his son, Alexandre Dumas *fils*.

While he was the author of some three hundred volumes, Alexandre Dumas *pere* is best known for his series on the musketeers. *The Three Musketeers* (1844) was originally published in eight volumes. This was followed by *Twenty Years After* (1845) in ten volumes, and *The Viscount Bragelonne* (1848-50) in twenty-six volumes. Interspersed among these volumes were the numerous Monte Cristo books.

The Man in the Iron Mask is a sequence lifted from the latter part of *The Viscount Bragelonne*. It begins in the mature years of the musketeers and follows them to the end. In this volume, we again admire the quiet Athos, the strong and simple Porthos, the devious Aramis, and the highly principled and impetuous captain of the king's musketeers, d'Artagnan.

The Man in the Iron Mask is an intrigue, initiated by the scheming Aramis, which places the friends in opposite camps and dearly tests their principles against their camaraderie. Each, however, lives a full life in the eyes of Dumas, and each achieves what is important to him. Not even a king's musketeer could ask for more.

Dumas himself seems to be telling us what he deems important in a man, as he speaks through d'Artagnan near the end of the

book. This indomitable musketeer, audacious even in his humbled concession, says to his king:

"Do not imagine that I bear malice; no, you have tamed me, as you say; but it must be confessed that in taming me you have lessened me,—by bowing me, you have convicted me of weakness. If you knew how well it suits me to carry my head high, and what a pitiful mien I shall have while scenting the dust of your carpets! Oh Sire, I regret sincerely, and you will regret as I do, those times when the King of France saw in his vestibules all those insolent gentlemen, lean, always swearing—cross-grained mastiffs, who could bite mortally in days of battle. Those men were the best of courtiers for the hand which fed them—they would lick it; but for the hand that struck them, oh! the bite that followed." *

ROBERT L. HILLERICH, M.S., Ed.D.

* From Chapter 53, "King Louis XIV"

Chapter 1 — THE PRISONER

Since Aramis' singular transformation into a confessor of the order, Baisemeaux was no longer the same man. Up to that period, the place which Aramis had held in the worthy governor's estimation was that of 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 himself lighted a lantern, summoned a turnkey, and said, returning to Aramis:

"I am at your orders, monseigneur."

Aramis merely nodded his head, as much to say, "Very good," and signed to him with his hand to lead the way. Baisemeaux advanced, and Aramis followed him. It was a beautiful starry night; the steps of three men resounded on the flags of the terraces, and the clinking of the keys hanging from the jailer's girdle made itself heard up to the stories of the towers, as if to remind the prisoners that liberty was out of their reach. It might have been said that the alteration effected in Baisemeaux had extended itself even to the prisoners. The turnkey, the same who, on Aramis' 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. In this wise they reached the basement of the Bertaudiere, the two first stories of which were mounted silently and somewhat slowly; for Baisemeaux, though far from disobeying, was far from exhibiting any eagerness to obey. On arriving at the door Baisemeaux showed a disposition 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 signed 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 around. On a bed of green serge, similar in all respects to the other beds in the Bastille, save that it was newer, and under curtains half-drawn, reposed a young man, to whom we have already once before introduced Aramis. According to custom, the prisoner was without a light. At the hour of curfew he was bound to extinguish his lamp, and we perceive how much he was favored

in being allowed to keep it burning, even till then. Near the bed a large leather armchair, with twisted legs, sustained his clothes. A little table—without pens, books, paper, or ink—stood neglected in sadness near the window; while several plates, still unemptied, showed that the prisoner had scarcely touched his recent repast. Aramis saw that the young man was stretched upon his bed, his face half-concealed by his arms. The arrival of a visitor did not cause any change of position; either he was waiting in expectation or was asleep. Aramis lighted the candle from the lantern, pushed back the armchair, and approached the bed with an evident mixture of interest and respect. The young man raised his head.

“What is it?” said he.

“Have you not desired a confessor?” replied Aramis.

“Yes.”

“Because you are ill?”

“Yes.”

“Very ill?”

The young man gave Aramis a piercing glance, and answered: “I thank you.” After a moment’s silence, “I have seen you before,” he continued.

Aramis bowed.

Doubtless, the scrutiny the prisoner had just made of the cold, crafty, and imperious character stamped upon the features of the bishop of Vannes was little reassuring to one in his situation, for he added:

“I am better.”

“And then?” said Aramis.

“Why, then, being better, I have no longer the same need of a confessor, I think.”

“Not even of the haircloth, which the note you found in your bread informed you of?”

The young man started; but before he had either assented or denied Aramis continued:

“Not even of the ecclesiastic from whom you were to hear an important revelation?”

“If it be so,” said the young man, sinking again on his pillow, “it is different; I listen.”

Aramis then looked at him more closely, and was struck with the easy majesty of his mien, one which can never be acquired unless Heaven has implanted it in the blood or heart.

“Sit down, monsieur,” said the prisoner. Aramis bowed, and obeyed.

“How does the Bastille agree with you?” asked the bishop.

"Very well."

"You do not suffer?"

"No."

"You have nothing to regret?"

"Nothing."

"Not even your liberty?"

"What do you call liberty, monsieur?" asked the prisoner, with the tone of a man who is preparing for a struggle.

"I call liberty the flowers, the air, light, the stars, the happiness of going whithersoever the nervous limbs of twenty years of age may wish to carry you."

The young man smiled, whether in resignation or contempt it was difficult to tell.

"Look," said he, "I have in that Japanese vase two roses gathered yesterday evening in the bud from the governor's garden; this morning they have blown and spread their vermilion chalice beneath my gaze; with every opening petal they unfold the treasures of their perfume, filling my chamber with a fragrance that embalms it. Look, now, on these two roses; even among roses these are beautiful, and the rose is the most beautiful of flowers. Why, then, do you bid me desire other flowers when I possess the loveliest of all?"

Aramis gazed at the young man in surprise.

"If *flowers* constitute liberty," sadly resumed the captive, "I am free, for I possess them."

"But the air!" cried Aramis; "air so necessary to life!"

"Well, monsieur," returned the prisoner, "draw near to the window; it is open. Between heaven and earth the wind whirls on its storms of hail and lightning, wafts its warm mists, or breathes in gentle breezes. It caresses my face. When mounted on the back of this armchair, with my arm around the bars of the window to sustain myself, I fancy I am swimming in the wide expanse before me."

The countenance of Aramis darkened as the young man continued:

"Light I have; what is better than light? I have the sun, a friend who comes to visit me every day, without the permission of the governor or the jailer's company. He comes in at the window, and traces in my room a square the shape of the window, and which lights up the hangings of my bed down to the border. This luminous square increases from ten o'clock till midday, and decreases from one till three slowly, as if, having hastened to come, it sorrowed at leaving me. When its last ray disappears I have enjoyed its presence for four hours. Is not that sufficient?"

I have been told that there are unhappy beings who dig in quarries, and laborers who toil in mines, and who never behold it at all."

Aramis wiped the drops from his brow.

"As to the stars, which are so delightful to view," continued the young man, "they all resemble one another, save in size and brilliancy. I am a favored mortal, for if you had not lighted that candle you would have been able to see the beautiful stars which I was gazing at from my couch before your arrival, and whose rays were playing over my eyes."

Aramis lowered his head; he felt himself overwhelmed with the bitter flow of that sinister philosophy which is the religion of the captive.

"So much, then, for the flowers, the air, the daylight, and the stars," tranquilly continued the man; "there remains but my exercise. Do I not walk all day in the governor's garden if it is fine—here if it rains? in the fresh air if it is warm; in the warm, thanks to my winter stove, if it be cold? Ah, monsieur, do you fancy," continued the prisoner, not without bitterness, "that men have not done everything for me that a man can hope for or desire?"

"Men!" said Aramis. "Be it so; but it seems to me you forget Heaven."

"Indeed I have forgotten Heaven," murmured the prisoner, with emotion; "but why do you mention it? Of what use is it to talk to a prisoner of Heaven?"

Aramis looked steadily at this singular youth, who possessed the resignation of a martyr with the smile of an atheist.

"Is not Heaven in everything?" he murmured, in a reproachful tone.

"Say, rather, at the end of everything," answered the prisoner firmly.

"Be it so," said Aramis; "but let us return to our starting-point."

"I desire nothing better," returned the young man.

"I am your confessor."

"Yes."

"Well, then, you ought, as a penitent, to tell me the truth."

"All that I wish is to tell it you."

"Every prisoner has committed some crime for which he has been imprisoned. What crime, then, have *you* committed?"

"You asked me the same question the first time you saw me," returned the prisoner.

"And then, as now, you evaded giving me an answer."

"And what reason have you for thinking that I shall now reply to you?"

"Because this time I am your confessor."

"Then, if you wish me to tell what crime I have committed, explain to me in what a crime consists. For as my conscience does not accuse me, I aver that I am not a criminal."

"We are often criminals in the sight of the great of the earth, not alone for having ourselves committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed."

The prisoner manifested the deepest attention.

"Yes, I understand you," he said, after a pause; "yes, you are right, monsieur; it is very possible that in that light I am a criminal in the eyes of the great of the earth."

"Ah! then you know something," said Aramis, who thought he had pierced not merely through a defect in, but through the joints of the harness.

"No, I am not aware of anything," replied the young man; "but sometimes I think—and I say to myself——"

"What do you say to yourself?"

"That if I were to think any further I should either go mad or I should divine a great deal."

"And then—and then?" said Aramis impatiently.

"Then I leave off."

"You leave off?"

"Yes; my head becomes confused, and my ideas melancholy; I feel *ennui* overtaking me; I wish——"

"What?"

"I don't know; but I do not like to give myself up to longing for things which I do not possess, when I am so happy with what I have."

"You are afraid of death?" said Aramis, with a slight uneasiness.

"Yes," said the young man, smiling.

Aramis felt the chill of that smile, and shuddered.

"Oh, as you fear death, you know more about matters than you say," he cried.

"And you," returned the prisoner, "who bid me to ask to see you; you, who, when I did ask to see you, came here promising a world of confidence; how is it that, nevertheless, it is you who are silent, and 'tis I who speak? Since, then, we both wear masks, either let us both retain them or put them aside together."

Aramis felt the force and justice of the remark, saying to himself:

"This is no ordinary man; I must be cautious. Are you ambi-

tious?" said he suddenly to the prisoner, aloud, without preparing him for the alteration.

"What do you mean by ambition?" replied the youth.

"It is," replied Aramis, "a feeling which prompts a man to desire more than he has."

"I said that I was contented, monsieur; but, perhaps, I deceive myself. I am ignorant of the nature of ambition; but it is not impossible I may have some. Tell me your mind; 'tis all I wish."

"An ambitious man," said Aramis, "is one who covets what is beyond his station."

"I covet nothing beyond my station," said the young man, with an assurance of manner which for the second time made the bishop of Vannes tremble.

He was silent. But, to look at the kindling eye, the knitted brow, and the reflective attitude of the captive, it was evident that he expected something more than silence—a silence which Aramis now broke.

"You lied the first time I saw you," said he.

"Lied!" cried the young man, starting up on his couch, with such a tone in his voice, and such a lightning in his eyes, that Aramis recoiled in spite of himself.

"I *should* say," returned Aramis, bowing, "you concealed from me what you knew of your infancy."

"A man's secrets are his own, monsieur," retorted the prisoner, "and not at the mercy of the first chance comer."

"True," said Aramis, bowing still lower than before, "'tis true. Pardon me, but to-day, do I still occupy the place of a chance comer? I beseech you to reply, monseigneur."

This title slightly disturbed the prisoner; but nevertheless he did not appear astonished that it was given him.

"I do not know you, monsieur," said he.

"Oh, if I but dared, I would take your hand and would kiss it!"

The young man seemed as if he were going to give Aramis his hand; but the light which beamed in his eyes faded away and he coldly and distrustfully withdrew his hand again.

"Kiss the hand of a prisoner," he said, shaking his head; "to what purpose?"

"Why did you tell me," said Aramis, "that you were happy here? Why, that you aspired to nothing? Why, in a word, by thus speaking, do you prevent me from being frank in my turn?"

The same light shone a third time in the young man's eyes, but died ineffectually away as before.

"You distrust me," said Aramis.

"And why say you so, monsieur?"

"Oh, for a very simple reason; if you know what you ought to know, you ought to mistrust everybody."

"Then be not astonished that I am mistrustful, since you suspect me of knowing what I know not."

Aramis was struck with admiration at this energetic resistance.

"Oh, monseigneur, you drive me to despair!" said he, striking the armchair with his fist.

"And, on my part, I do not comprehend you, monsieur."

"Well, then, try to understand me."

The prisoner looked fixedly at Aramis.

"Sometimes it seems to me," said the latter, "that I have before me the man whom I seek, and then——"

"And then your man disappears—is it not so?" said the prisoner, smiling. "So much the better."

Aramis rose.

"Certainly," said he; "I have nothing further to say to a man who mistrusts me as you do."

"And I, monsieur," said the prisoner, in the same tone, "have nothing to say to a man who will not understand that a prisoner ought to be mistrustful of everybody."

"Even of his old friends," said Aramis. "Oh, monseigneur, you are *too* prudent!"

"Of my old friends?—you one of my old friends—you?"

"Do you no longer remember," said Aramis, "that you once saw, in the village where your early years were spent——"

"Do you know the name of the village?" asked the prisoner.

"Noisy-le-Sec, monseigneur," answered Aramis firmly.

"Go on," said the young man, with an immovable aspect.

"Stay, monseigneur," said Aramis; "if you are positively resolved to carry on this game, let us break off. I am here to tell you many things, 'tis true; but you must allow me to see that, on your side, you have a desire to know them. Before revealing the important matters I conceal, be assured I am in need of some encouragement, if not candor; a little sympathy, if not confidence. But you keep yourself intrenched in a pretended ignorance which paralyzes me. Oh, not for the reason you think; for, ignorant as you may be, or indifferent as you feign to be, you are none the less what you are, monseigneur, and there is nothing—nothing, mark me—which can cause you not to be so."

"I promise you," replied the prisoner, "to hear you without impatience. Only it appears to me that I have a right to repeat the question I have already asked—'Who *are* you?'"

"Do you remember, fifteen or eighteen years ago, seeing at

Noisy-le-Sec a cavalier, accompanied by a lady in black silk, with flame-colored ribbons in her hair?"

"Yes," said the young man; "I once asked the name of this cavalier, and they told me he called himself the Abbé d'Herblay. I was astonished that the abbé had so warlike an air, and they replied that there was nothing singular in that, seeing that he was one of Louis XIII.'s musketeers."

"Well," said Aramis, "that musketeer and abbé, afterward bishop of Vannes, is your confessor now."

"I know it; I recognized you."

"Then, monseigneur, if you know that, I must further add a fact of which you are ignorant—that if the king were to know this evening of the presence of this musketeer, this abbé, this bishop, this confessor, *here*—he, who has risked everything to visit you, would to-morrow see glitter the executioner's ax at the bottom of a dungeon more gloomy and more obscure than yours."

While hearing these words, delivered with emphasis, the young man had raised himself on his couch, and gazed more and more eagerly at Aramis.

The result of his scrutiny was that he appeared to derive some confidence from it.

"Yes," he murmured, "I remember perfectly. The woman of whom you speak came once with you, and twice afterward with another."

He hesitated.

"With another woman, who came to see you every month—is it not so, monseigneur?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who this lady was?"

The light seemed ready to flash from the prisoner's eyes.

"I am aware that she was one of the ladies of the court," he said.

"You remember that lady well, do you not?"

"Oh, my recollection can hardly be very confused on this head," said the young prisoner. "I saw that lady once with a gentleman about forty-five years old. I saw her once with you, and with the lady dressed in black. I have seen her twice since with the same person. These four people, with my master, and old Perronnette, my jailer, and the governor of the prison, are the only persons with whom I have ever spoken, and, indeed, almost the only persons I have ever seen."

"Then, you were in prison?"

"If I am a prisoner here, there I was comparatively free, although in a very narrow sense—a house which I never quitted,