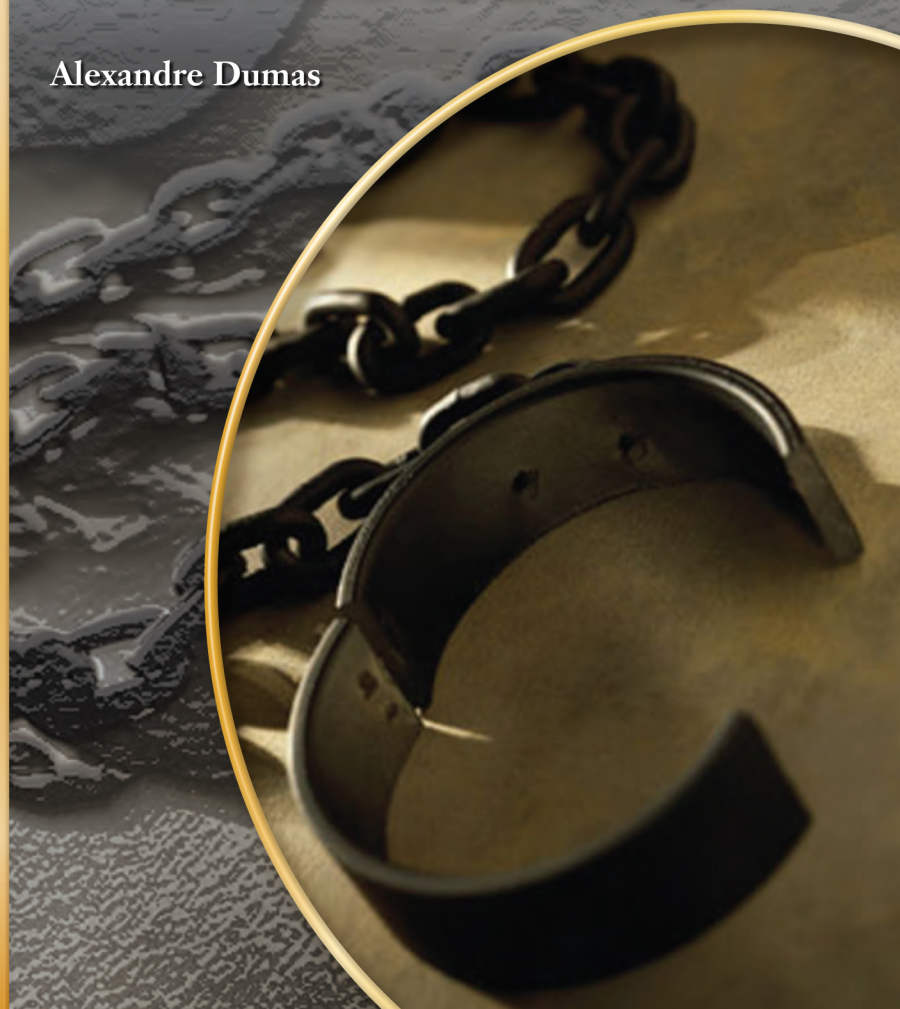


THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

Alexandre Dumas

TIMELESS CLASSICS



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The Prisoner

As a young man, Aramis was a musketeer in the king's service. In those days, he and his friends, Athos and Porthos, were known as the three musketeers. Later, they were joined by a fourth, named D'Artagnan. Their motto, "All for one and one for all," had become famous. The musketeers knew they could count on each other for anything.

Now the four men were more or less retired. They had gone on to live quieter lives. Aramis was now a bishop in the Catholic church. He wanted to be pope—and he had a plan to make that happen! But first, he needed to get the king on his side.

At that time, Louis the Fourteenth was the king of France. He was a selfish man who made very bad decisions. For the smallest mistakes,

he sent people to the Bastille, a terrible prison. A man named Seldon was a good example. All Seldon had done was write two lines of poetry that made fun of the king. Now he was in prison for life! When the king's advisers begged him to set the poor man free, he always refused. Others were in the Bastille for equally minor things.

Louis the Fourteenth didn't know about one prisoner in the Bastille, however. The jailers knew this prisoner as Marchiali. He was a young man, 23 years old—the same age as the king. He'd been imprisoned in the Bastille for eight years.

One evening, Aramis came to the Bastille to have dinner with Baisemeaux, the jailer. Because Baisemeaux had formerly been a musketeer, he and Aramis were friends.

Earlier, Aramis had bribed a guard to take a message to Marchiali. The message told Marchiali to ask for a priest to hear his confession that night. It was a rule that any such request must be honored. The request came to Baisemeaux when Aramis arrived. Since Aramis was now a bishop, he could hear the confession. So Baisemeaux had no

choice but to lead Aramis to Marchiali's cell. He called for a guard to go with them.

Aramis followed Baisemeaux and the guard across the courtyard. It was a beautiful, starry night. Their footsteps echoed on the stones of the terraces. The clinking of the keys on the guard's belt could be heard in the towers. The sound reminded the prisoners that liberty was out of their reach.

After entering one of the towers, Aramis, Baisemeaux, and the guard started toward the basement. They climbed down the stairs, and Baisemeaux moved toward the prisoner's cell. Aramis reached out and stopped him. "The rules do not allow anyone but a priest to hear the prisoner's confession," he said.

Baisemeaux bowed, and Aramis told the jailer to close the door behind him. He waited a moment to make sure Baisemeaux and the guard had left. Then he put his lantern on the table and looked around.

A young man lay resting on the bed. According to custom, the prisoner was in the dark. At the hour of curfew, he was required to blow out his lamp. The prisoner kept his

clothes on a leather chair near the bed. A little table—without pens, books, paper, or ink—stood near the window. The plates of food on the table showed that he had hardly touched his last meal. Picking up his lantern, Aramis walked toward the bed. The young man sat up.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Didn’t you ask for a priest?”

“Yes, but it was obviously *you* who told me to do so. Why have you come?”

“I have something very important to tell you,” Aramis said.

“I’m listening,” the young man replied.

Aramis was struck with the easy majesty of the young man’s manner.

“Tell me—do you regret the loss of your liberty?” Aramis asked.

“What do you call liberty?” the prisoner replied.

Aramis laughed. “What do *I* call liberty? The flowers, the air, light, the stars—and the happiness of going wherever I want!”

The young man smiled sadly. “Look,” he said. “I have in that vase two roses gathered today from the prison garden. If flowers mean

liberty, then I am free, for I have them. And the air comes through the bars of my window. In spring and summer, it caresses my face. In winter, it provides rain. Sometimes I stand on this chair, with my arms around the bars of the window. I imagine that I'm flying free in the wide expanse.

“And light! I have what is *better* than light! I have the sun—a friend who comes to visit me each day. I've heard there are people who work in mines who never see the sun at all. As for the stars, they all are alike except for size and brightness. I can see one beautiful star from my bed. The only thing I lack is the freedom to go wherever I want.”

Aramis smiled. “I can help you with that, if you'll let me,” he said. “But first I must know that you trust me. I should tell you that if the king knew I was here, I wouldn't see the morning!”

While listening to Aramis, the young man studied him closely. “Now I remember you,” he said. “Long ago, you came to the house where I was living. You brought a fine lady to visit me. I was told that she was a lady of the court.

Once, I saw her with you and once with an older man, about 45 years old. These are the only persons I have ever seen, other than my tutor and my nurse. Except, of course, for the jailer and the guards here. By the way, do you know how my tutor and my nurse are? I was very close to them at one time, and I miss them dearly.”

“I’m very sorry to tell you that they have disappeared.”

“*Disappeared!* But how?”

“In the surest possible way,” answered Aramis. “Your tutor and your nurse are both dead. They were poisoned.”

The prisoner thought for a moment. “My enemy must be very cruel indeed! Those two innocent persons never harmed a living soul! But I am not surprised.”

“Oh—and why are you not surprised?” Aramis asked.

The young man then told Aramis what had happened just before he was imprisoned. He had overheard his tutor and his nurse, Perronnette, talking about a letter. Just after it arrived, the letter had been blown out of

the tutor's hand by a sudden gust of wind. And it had landed in the well! It was very important to get the letter back, for it was from the queen. Every time the queen came to visit, she would burn all the letters she had sent the month before. If a letter was missing, the tutor and the nurse would be suspected of hiding it. Because the letters contained secrets, this would be punishable by death! Listening to his tutor's story, the young man realized that the lady who had visited him was the queen! But why did she write letters? And why were her visits so secret?

The young man was confused. And who was *he*, really? His tutor and the nurse called him Philippe, but that didn't explain much. He decided the letter might give him a clue. While the tutor and Perronnette ran off to get help, Philippe went down the well himself. He got the letter and brought it back to his room. It didn't answer all his questions. But he now knew that, for some reason, he was very important to the queen.

Later the tutor and Perronnette found the letter in Philippe's room! They were very

upset. They felt they had no choice but to tell the queen what had happened. The next day, Philippe was locked up in the Bastille. That was all Philippe knew.

Now Aramis told Philippe the whole story. Some 23 years earlier, the queen had given birth to twin boys. The older of the two would be the next king of France. King Louis the Thirteenth feared that the younger boy might cause trouble. To prevent any argument about who would be the next king, he wanted to kill the younger boy. The mother and the midwife, Perronnette, begged for the boy's life. Finally, the king agreed to let him grow up—as long as he lived away from the palace. If he ever found out who he was, he'd be locked up in the Bastille for life. The king said it was “all for the good of France.” *Philippe was the twin brother of the boy who would become King Louis the Fourteenth!*

The young man had never seen a mirror. He had never even heard of one. Now Aramis showed Philippe a mirror. Then he showed him a picture of King Louis the Fourteenth. The faces were identical in every way!



Aramis told Philippe his plan to get him out of the Bastille. Then Philippe could take the king's place on the throne, and Louis would take Philippe's place in the Bastille. It was "all for the good of France," Aramis explained. Philippe would be a better king—and he could also help Aramis become pope! Together, they would have great power.

Philippe told Aramis that he had no desire to be king. All he wanted was his freedom. Aramis said it was up to him. In any case, he would soon return to get him out.