

# **THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK**

**by Alexandre Dumas**

# Table of Contents

[Chapter I. The Prisoner.](#)

[Chapter II. How Mouston Had Become Fatter without Giving Porthos Notice Thereof, and of the Troubles Which Consequently Befell that Worthy Gentleman.](#)

[Chapter III. Who Messire Jean Percerin Was.](#)

[Chapter IV. The Patterns.](#)

[Chapter V. Where, Probably, Moliere Obtained His First Idea of the Bourgeois Gentlehomme.](#)

[Chapter VI. The Bee-Hive, the Bees, and the Honey.](#)

[Chapter VII. Another Supper at the Bastile.](#)

[Chapter VIII. The General of the Order.](#)

[Chapter IX. The Tempter.](#)

[Chapter X. Crown and Tiara.](#)

[Chapter XI. The Chateau de Vaux-le-Vicomte.](#)

[Chapter XII. The Wine of Melun.](#)

[Chapter XIII. Nectar and Ambrosia.](#)

[Chapter XIV. A Gascon, and a Gascon and a Half.](#)

[Chapter XV. Colbert.](#)

[Chapter XVI. Jealousy.](#)

[Chapter XVII. High Treason.](#)

[Chapter XVIII. A Night at the Bastile.](#)

[Chapter XIX. The Shadow of M. Fouquet.](#)

[Chapter XX. The Morning.](#)

[Chapter XXI. The King's Friend.](#)

Chapter XXII. Showing How the Countersign Was Respected at the Bastile.

Chapter XXIII. The King's Gratitude.

Chapter XXIV. The False King.

Chapter XXV. In Which Porthos Thinks He Is Pursuing a Duchy.

Chapter XXVI. The Last Adieux.

Chapter XXVII. Monsieur de Beaufort.

Chapter XXVIII. Preparations for Departure.

Chapter XXIX. Planchet's Inventory.

Chapter XXX. The Inventory of M. de Beaufort.

Chapter XXXI. The Silver Dish.

Chapter XXXII. Captive and Jailers.

Chapter XXXIII. Promises.

Chapter XXXIV. Among Women.

Chapter XXXV. The Last Supper.

Chapter XXXVI. In M. Colbert's Carriage.

Chapter XXXVII. The Two Lighters.

Chapter XXXVIII. Friendly Advice.

Chapter XXXIX. How the King, Louis XIV., Played His Little Part.

Chapter XL: The White Horse and the Black.

Chapter XLI. In Which the Squirrel Falls,—the Adder Flies.

Chapter XLII. Belle-Ile-en-Mer.

Chapter XLIII. Explanations by Aramis.

Chapter XLIV. Result of the Ideas of the King, and the Ideas of D'Artagnan.

Chapter XLV. The Ancestors of Porthos.

Chapter XLVI. The Son of Biscarrat.

[Chapter XLVII. The Grotto of Locmaria.](#)

[Chapter XLVIII. The Grotto.](#)

[Chapter XLIX. An Homeric Song.](#)

[Chapter L: The Death of a Titan.](#)

[Chapter LI. Porthos's Epitaph.](#)

[Chapter LII. M. de Gesvres's Round.](#)

[Chapter LIII. King Louis XIV.](#)

[Chapter LIV. M. Fouquet's Friends.](#)

[Chapter LV. Porthos's Will.](#)

[Chapter LVI. The Old Age of Athos.](#)

[Chapter LVII. Athos's Vision.](#)

[Chapter LVIII. The Angel of Death.](#)

[Chapter LIX. The Bulletin.](#)

[Chapter LX. The Last Canto of the Poem.](#)

[Epilogue.](#)

[Footnotes](#)

## 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, 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 as to say, "Very good"; and signed to him with his hand to lead the way. Baisemeaux advanced, and Aramis followed him. It was a calm and lovely starlit 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 the liberty of earth was a luxury beyond their reach. It might have been said that the alteration effected in Baisemeaux extended even to the prisoners. The turnkey, the same who, on Aramis's first arrival had shown himself so inquisitive and curious, was now not only silent, but 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 descending 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 respect 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 leathern 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 evening meal. 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.

“You desired a confessor?” replied Aramis.

“Yes.”

“Because you were 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 so?” said Aramis.

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

“Not even of the hair-cloth, 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 am listening."

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 sinewy limbs of one-and-twenty chance to 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 perfumes, 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 is so necessary to life!"

"Well, monsieur," returned the prisoner; "draw near to the window; it is open. Between high heaven and earth the wind whirls on its waftages of hail and lightning, exhales its torrid mist 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 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, which lights up the hangings of my bed and floods the very floor. This luminous square increases from ten o'clock till midday, and decreases from one till three slowly, as if, having hastened to my presence, it sorrowed at bidding me farewell. When its last ray disappears I have enjoyed its presence for five hours. Is not that sufficient? I have been told that there are unhappy beings who dig in quarries, and laborers who toil in mines, 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 each other 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, whose silvery rays were stealing through my brain."

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 young man; "there remains but 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 perfect warmth, 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 are forgetting 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 ask nothing better," returned the young man.

"I am your confessor."

"Yes."

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

"My whole desire 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 such a 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 the harness, but through the joints of it.

“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 but a little more deeply 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 bade 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, leaving it for me to 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 ambitious?" said he suddenly to the prisoner, aloud, without preparing him for the alteration.

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

"Ambition," replied Aramis, "is the feeling which prompts a man to desire more—much more—than he possesses."

"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; that is all I ask."

"An ambitious man," said Aramis, "is one who covets that which 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, but if I dared, I would take your hand and 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 do not be astonished that I am mistrustful, since you suspect me of knowing what I do not know.”

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 still withhold, 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 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 that he called himself the Abbe d’Herblay. I was astonished that the abbe 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 abbe, afterwards 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 abbe, this bishop, this confessor, *here*—he, who has risked everything to visit you, to-morrow would behold the steely glitter of the executioner’s axe in a dungeon more gloomy, more obscure than yours.”

While listening to these words, delivered with emphasis, the young man had raised himself on his couch, and was now gazing 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 afterwards with another.” He hesitated.

“With another, 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 then 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, then I was comparatively free, although in a very narrow sense—a house I never quitted, a garden surrounded with walls I could not climb, these constituted my residence, but you know it, as you have been there. In a word, being accustomed to live within these bounds, I never cared to leave them. And so you will understand, monsieur, that having never seen anything of the world, I have nothing left to care for; and therefore, if you relate anything, you will be obliged to explain each item to me as you go along.”

“And I will do so,” said Aramis, bowing; “for it is my duty, monseigneur.”

“Well, then, begin by telling me who was my tutor.”

“A worthy and, above all, an honorable gentleman, monseigneur; fit guide for both body and soul. Had you ever any reason to complain of him?”

“Oh, no; quite the contrary. But this gentleman of yours often used to tell me that my father and mother were dead. Did he deceive me, or did he speak the truth?”

“He was compelled to comply with the orders given him.”

“Then he lied?”

“In one respect. Your father is dead.”

“And my mother?”

“She is dead *for you*.”

“But then she lives for others, does she not?”

“Yes.”

“And I—and I, then” (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 indeed be powerful, to be able to shut up in the Bastille a child such as I then was.”

“He is.”

“More powerful than my mother, then?”

“And why do you ask that?”

“Because my mother would have taken my part.”

Aramis hesitated. “Yes, monseigneur; more powerful than your mother.”

“Seeing, then, that my nurse and preceptor were carried off, and that I, also, was separated from them—either they were, or I am, very dangerous to my enemy?”

“Yes; but you are alluding to a peril from which he freed himself, by causing the nurse and preceptor to disappear,” answered Aramis, quietly.

“Disappear!” cried the prisoner, “how did they disappear?”

“In a very sure way,” answered Aramis—“they are dead.”

The young man turned pale, and passed his hand tremblingly over his face. “Poison?” he asked.

“Poison.”

The prisoner reflected a moment. "My enemy must indeed have been very cruel, or hard beset by necessity, to assassinate those two innocent people, my sole support; for the worthy gentleman and the poor nurse had never harmed a living being."

"In your family, monseigneur, necessity is stern. And so it is necessity which compels me, to my great regret, to tell you that this gentleman and the unhappy lady have been assassinated."

"Oh, you tell me nothing I am not aware of," said the prisoner, knitting his brows.

"How?"

"I suspected it."

"Why?"

"I will tell you."

At this moment the young man, supporting himself on his two elbows, drew close to Aramis's face, with such an expression of dignity, of self-command and of defiance even, that the bishop felt the electricity of enthusiasm strike in devouring flashes from that great heart of his, into his brain of adamant.

"Speak, monseigneur. I have already told you that by conversing with you I endanger my life. Little value as it has, I implore you to accept it as the ransom of your own."

"Well," resumed the young man, "this is why I suspected they had killed my nurse and my preceptor—"

"Whom you used to call your father?"

"Yes; whom I called my father, but whose son I well knew I was not."

"Who caused you to suppose so?"

"Just as you, monsieur, are too respectful for a friend, he was also too respectful for a father."

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