

DUMAS
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IRON MASK
(AN ESSAY)

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For nearly one hundred years this curious problem has exercised the imagination of writers of fiction – and of drama, and the patience of the learned in history. No subject is more obscure and elusive, and none more attractive to the general mind. It is a legend to the meaning of which none can find the key and yet in which everyone believes. Involuntarily we feel pity at the thought of that long captivity surrounded by so many extraordinary precautions, and when we dwell on the mystery which enveloped the captive, that pity is not only deepened but a kind of terror takes possession of us. It is very likely that if the name of the hero of this gloomy tale had been known at the time, he would now be forgotten. To give him a name would be to relegate him at once to the ranks of those commonplace offenders who quickly exhaust our interest and our tears. But this being, cut off from the world without leaving any discoverable trace, and whose disappearance apparently caused no void – this captive, distinguished among captives by the unexampled nature of his punishment, a prison within a prison, as if the walls of a mere cell were not narrow enough, has come to typify for us the sum of all the human misery and suffering ever inflicted by

unjust tyranny.

Who was the Man in the Mask? Was he rapt away into this silent seclusion from the luxury of a court, from the intrigues of diplomacy, from the scaffold of a traitor, from the clash of battle? What did he leave behind? Love, glory, or a throne? What did he regret when hope had fled? Did he pour forth imprecations and curses on his tortures and blaspheme against high Heaven, or did he with a sigh possess his soul in patience?

The blows of fortune are differently received according to the different characters of those on whom they fall; and each one of us who in imagination threads the subterranean passages leading to the cells of Pignerol and Exilles, and incarcerates himself in the Iles Sainte-Marguerite and in the Bastille, the successive scenes of that long-protracted agony will give the prisoner a form shaped by his own fancy and a grief proportioned to his own power of suffering. How we long to pierce the thoughts and feel the heart-beats and watch the trickling tears behind that machine-like exterior, that impassible mask! Our imagination is powerfully excited by the dumbness of that fate borne by one whose words never reached the outward air, whose thoughts could never be read on the hidden features; by the isolation of forty years secured by two-fold barriers of stone and iron, and she clothes the object of her contemplation in majestic splendour, connects the mystery which enveloped his existence with mighty interests, and persists in regarding the prisoner as sacrificed for the preservation of some dynastic secret involving the peace of

the world and the stability of a throne.

And when we calmly reflect on the whole case, do we feel that our first impulsively adopted opinion was wrong? Do we regard our belief as a poetical illusion? I do not think so; on the contrary, it seems to me that our good sense approves our fancy's flight. For what can be more natural than the conviction that the secret of the name, age, and features of the captive, which was so perseveringly kept through long years at the cost of so much care, was of vital importance to the Government? No ordinary human passion, such as anger, hate, or vengeance, has so dogged and enduring a character; we feel that the measures taken were not the expression of a love of cruelty, for even supposing that Louis XIV were the most cruel of princes, would he not have chosen one of the thousand methods of torture ready to his hand before inventing a new and strange one? Moreover, why did he voluntarily burden himself with the obligation of surrounding a prisoner with such numberless precautions and such sleepless vigilance? Must he not have feared that in spite of it all the walls behind which he concealed the dread mystery would one day let in the light? Was it not through his entire reign a source of unceasing anxiety? And yet he respected the life of the captive whom it was so difficult to hide, and the discovery of whose identity would have been so dangerous. It would have been so easy to bury the secret in an obscure grave, and yet the order was never given. Was this an expression of hate, anger, or any other passion? Certainly not; the conclusion we must come to in regard

to the conduct of the king is that all the measures he took against the prisoner were dictated by purely political motives; that his conscience, while allowing him to do everything necessary to guard the secret, did not permit him to take the further step of putting an end to the days of an unfortunate man, who in all probability was guilty of no crime.

Courtiers are seldom obsequious to the enemies of their master, so that we may regard the respect and consideration shown to the Man in the Mask by the governor Saint-Mars, and the minister Louvois, as a testimony, not only to his high rank, but also to his innocence.

For my part, I make no pretensions to the erudition of the bookworm, and I cannot read the history of the Man in the Iron Mask without feeling my blood boil at the abominable abuse of power – the heinous crime of which he was the victim.

A few years ago, M. Fournier and I, thinking the subject suitable for representation on the stage, undertook to read, before dramatising it, all the different versions of the affair which had been published up to that time. Since our piece was successfully performed at the Odeon two other versions have appeared: one was in the form of a letter addressed to the Historical Institute by M. Billiard, who upheld the conclusions arrived at by Soulavie, on whose narrative our play was founded; the other was a work by the bibliophile Jacob, who followed a new system of inquiry, and whose book displayed the results of deep research and extensive reading. It did not, however, cause me to change my opinion.

Even had it been published before I had written my drama, I should still have adhered to the idea as to the most probable solution of the problem which I had arrived at in 1831, not only because it was incontestably the most dramatic, but also because it is supported by those moral presumptions which have such weight with us when considering a dark and doubtful question like the one before us. It will, be objected, perhaps, that dramatic writers, in their love of the marvellous and the pathetic, neglect logic and strain after effect, their aim being to obtain the applause of the gallery rather than the approbation of the learned. But to this it may be replied that the learned on their part sacrifice a great deal to their love of dates, more or less exact; to their desire to elucidate some point which had hitherto been considered obscure, and which their explanations do not always clear up; to the temptation to display their proficiency in the ingenious art of manipulating facts and figures culled from a dozen musty volumes into one consistent whole.

Our interest in this strange case of imprisonment arises, not alone from its completeness and duration, but also from our uncertainty as to the motives from which it was inflicted. Where erudition alone cannot suffice; where bookworm after bookworm, disdaining the conjectures of his predecessors, comes forward with a new theory founded on some forgotten document he has hunted out, only to find himself in his turn pushed into oblivion by some follower in his track, we must turn for guidance to some other light than that of scholarship;

especially if, on strict investigation, we find that not one learned solution rests on a sound basis of fact.

In the question before us, which, as we said before, is a double one, asking not only who was the Man in the Iron Mask, but why he was relentlessly subjected to this torture till the moment of his death, what we need in order to restrain our fancy is mathematical demonstration, and not philosophical induction.

While I do not go so far as to assert positively that Abbe Soulavie has once for all lifted the veil which hid the truth, I am yet persuaded that no other system of research is superior to his, and that no other suggested solution has so many presumptions in its favour. I have not reached this firm conviction on account of the great and prolonged success of our drama, but because of the ease with which all the opinions adverse to those of the abbe may be annihilated by pitting them one against the other.

The qualities that make for success being quite different in a novel and in a drama, I could easily have founded a romance on the fictitious loves of Buckingham and the queen, or on a supposed secret marriage between her and Cardinal Mazarin, calling to my aid a work by Saint-Mihiel which the bibliophile declares he has never read, although it is assuredly neither rare nor difficult of access. I might also have merely expanded my drama, restoring to the personages therein their true names and relative positions, both of which the exigencies of the stage had sometimes obliged me to alter, and while allowing them to fill the same parts, making them act more in accordance with historical

fact. No fable however far-fetched, no grouping of characters however improbable, can, however, destroy the interest which the innumerable writings about the Iron Mask excite, although no two agree in details, and although each author and each witness declares himself in possession of complete knowledge. No work, however mediocre, however worthless even, which has appeared on this subject has ever failed of success, not even, for example, the strange jumble of Chevalier de Mouhy, a kind of literary braggart, who was in the pay of Voltaire, and whose work was published anonymously in 1746 by Pierre de Hondt of The Hague. It is divided into six short parts, and bears the title, 'Le Masque de Fer, ou les Aventures admirables du Prre et du Fils'. An absurd romance by Regnault Warin, and one at least equally absurd by Madame Guenard, met with a like favourable reception. In writing for the theatre, an author must choose one view of a dramatic situation to the exclusion of all others, and in following out this central idea is obliged by the inexorable laws of logic to push aside everything that interferes with its development. A book, on the contrary, is written to be discussed; it brings under the notice of the reader all the evidence produced at a trial which has as yet not reached a definite conclusion, and which in the case before us will never reach it, unless, which is most improbable, some lucky chance should lead to some new discovery.

The first mention of the prisoner is to be found in the 'Memoires secrets pour servir a l'Histoire de Perse' in one 12mo

volume, by an anonymous author, published by the ‘Compagnie des Libraires Associes d’Amsterdam’ in 1745.

“Not having any other purpose,” says the author (page 20, 2nd edit.), “than to relate facts which are not known, or about which no one has written, or about which it is impossible to be silent, we refer at once to a fact which has hitherto almost escaped notice concerning Prince Giafer (Louis de Bourbon, Comte de Vermandois, son of Louis XIV and Mademoiselle de la Valliere), who was visited by Ali-Momajou (the Duc d’Orleans, the regent) in the fortress of Ispahan (the Bastille), in which he had been imprisoned for several years. This visit had probably no other motive than to make sure that this prince was really alive, he having been reputed dead of the plague for over thirty years, and his obsequies having been celebrated in presence of an entire army.

“Cha-Abas (Louis XIV) had a legitimate son, Sephi-Mirza (Louis, Dauphin of France), and a natural son, Giafer. These two princes, as dissimilar in character as in birth, were always rivals and always at enmity with each other. One day Giafer so far forgot himself as to strike Sephi-Mirza. Cha-Abas having heard of the insult offered to the heir to the throne, assembled his most trusted councillors, and laid the conduct of the culprit before them – conduct which, according to the law of the country, was punishable with death, an opinion in which they all agreed. One of the councillors, however, sympathising more than the others with the distress of Cha-Abas, suggested that Giafer should be

sent to the army, which was then on the frontiers of Feidrun (Flanders), and that his death from plague should be given out a few days after his arrival. Then, while the whole army was celebrating his obsequies, he should be carried off by night, in the greatest secrecy, to the stronghold on the isle of Ormus (Sainte-Marguerite), and there imprisoned for life.

“This course was adopted, and carried out by faithful and discreet agents. The prince, whose premature death was mourned by the army, being carried by unfrequented roads to the isle of Ormus, was placed in the custody of the commandant of the island, who, had received orders beforehand not to allow any person whatever to see the prisoner. A single servant who was in possession of the secret was killed by the escort on the journey, and his face so disfigured by dagger thrusts that he could not be recognised.

“The commandant treated his prisoner with the most profound respect; he waited on him at meals himself, taking the dishes from the cooks at the door of the apartment, none of whom ever looked on the face of Giafer. One day it occurred to the prince to scratch, his name on the back of a plate with his knife. One of the servants into whose hands the plate fell ran with it at once to the commandant, hoping he would be pleased and reward the bearer; but the unfortunate man was greatly mistaken, for he was at once made away with, that his knowledge of such an important secret might be buried with himself.

“Giafer remained several years in the castle Ormus, and was

then transported to the fortress of Ispahan; the commandant of Ormus having received the governorship of Ispahan as a reward for faithful service.

“At Ispahan, as at Ormus, whenever it was necessary on account of illness or any other cause to allow anyone to approach the prince, he was always masked; and several trustworthy persons have asserted that they had seen the masked prisoner often, and had noticed that he used the familiar ‘tu’ when addressing the governor, while the latter showed his charge the greatest respect. As Giafer survived Cha-Abas and Sephi-Mirza by many years, it may be asked why he was never set at liberty; but it must be remembered it would have been impossible to restore a prince to his rank and dignities whose tomb actually existed, and of whose burial there were not only living witnesses but documentary proofs, the authenticity of which it would have been useless to deny, so firm was the belief, which has lasted down to the present day, that Giafer died of the plague in camp when with the army on the frontiers of Flanders. Ali-Homajou died shortly after the visit he paid to Giafer.”

This version of the story, which is the original source of all the controversy on the subject, was at first generally received as true. On a critical examination it fitted in very well with certain events which took place in the reign of Louis XIV.

The Comte de Vermandois had in fact left the court for the camp very soon after his reappearance there, for he had been banished by the king from his presence some time before for

having, in company with several young nobles, indulged in the most reprehensible excesses.

“The king,” says Mademoiselle de Montpensier [*Memoires de Mademoiselle de Montpensier*, vol. xliii. p. 474., of *Memoires Relatifs d’Histoire de France*, Second Series, published by Petitot), “had not been satisfied with his conduct and refused to see him. The young prince had caused his mother much sorrow, but had been so well lectured that it was believed that he had at last turned over a new leaf.” He only remained four days at court, reached the camp before Courtrai early in November 1683, was taken ill on the evening of the 12th, and died on the 19th of the same month of a malignant fever. Mademoiselle de Montpensier says that the Comte de Vermandois “fell ill from drink.”

There are, of course, objections of all kinds to this theory.

For if, during the four days the comte was at court, he had struck the dauphin, everyone would have heard of the monstrous crime, and yet it is nowhere spoken of, except in the *‘Memoires de Perse’*. What renders the story of the blow still more improbable is the difference in age between the two princes. The dauphin, who already had a son, the Duc de Bourgogne, more than a year old, was born the 1st November 1661, and was therefore six years older than the Comte de Vermandois. But the most complete answer to the tale is to be found in a letter written by Barbezieux to Saint-Mars, dated the 13th August 1691: —

“When you have any information to send me relative to the prisoner who has been in your charge for twenty years, I most earnestly enjoin on you to take the same precautions as when you write to M. de Louvois.”

The Comte de Vermandois, the official registration of whose death bears the date 1685, cannot have been twenty years a prisoner in 1691.

Six years after the Man in the Mask had been thus delivered over to the curiosity of the public, the ‘*Siecle de Louis XIV*’ (2 vols. octavo, Berlin, 1751) was published by Voltaire under the pseudonym of M. de Francheville. Everyone turned to this work, which had been long expected, for details relating to the mysterious prisoner about whom everyone was talking.

Voltaire ventured at length to speak more openly of the prisoner than anyone had hitherto done, and to treat as a matter of history “an event long ignored by all historians.” (vol. ii. p. 11, 1st edition, chap. xxv.). He assigned an approximate date to the beginning of this captivity, “some months after the death of Cardinal Mazarin” (1661); he gave a description of the prisoner, who according to him was “young and dark-complexioned; his figure was above the middle height and well proportioned; his features were exceedingly handsome, and his bearing was noble. When he spoke his voice inspired interest; he never complained of his lot, and gave no hint as to his rank.” Nor was the mask forgotten: “The part which covered the chin was furnished with steel springs, which allowed the prisoner to eat without

uncovering his face.” And, lastly, he fixed the date of the death of the nameless captive; who “was buried,” he says, “in 1704., by night, in the parish church of Saint-Paul.”

Voltaire’s narrative coincided with the account given in the ‘Memoires de Peyse’, save for the omission of the incident which, according to the ‘Memoires’, led in the first instance to the imprisonment of Giafer. “The prisoner,” says Voltaire, “was sent to the Iles Sainte-Marguerite, and afterwards to the Bastille, in charge of a trusty official; he wore his mask on the journey, and his escort had orders to shoot him if he took it off. The Marquis de Louvois visited him while he was on the islands, and when speaking to him stood all the time in a respectful attitude. The prisoner was removed to the Bastille in 1690, where he was lodged as comfortably as could be managed in that building; he was supplied with everything he asked for, especially with the finest linen and the costliest lace, in both of which his taste was perfect; he had a guitar to play on, his table was excellent, and the governor rarely sat in his presence.”

Voltaire added a few further details which had been given him by M. de Bernaville, the successor of M. de Saint-Mars, and by an old physician of the Bastille who had attended the prisoner whenever his health required a doctor, but who had never seen his face, although he had “often seen his tongue and his body.” He also asserted that M. de Chamillart was the last minister who was in the secret, and that when his son-in-law, Marshal de la Feuillade, besought him on his knees, de Chamillart being on his

deathbed, to tell him the name of the Man in the Iron Mask, the minister replied that he was under a solemn oath never to reveal the secret, it being an affair of state. To all these details, which the marshal acknowledges to be correct, Voltaire adds a remarkable note: “What increases our wonder is, that when the unknown captive was sent to the Iles Sainte-Marguerite no personage of note disappeared from the European stage.”

The story of the Comte de Vermandois and the blow was treated as an absurd and romantic invention, which does not even attempt to keep within the bounds of the possible, by Baron C. (according to P. Marchand, Baron Crunynge) in a letter inserted in the ‘Bibliothèque raisonnée des Ouvrages des Savants de l’Europe’, June 1745. The discussion was revived somewhat later, however, and a few Dutch scholars were supposed to be responsible for a new theory founded on history; the foundations proving somewhat shaky, however, – a quality which it shares, we must say, with all the other theories which have ever been advanced.

According to this new theory, the masked prisoner was a young foreign nobleman, groom of the chambers to Anne of Austria, and the real father of Louis XIV. This anecdote appears first in a duodecimo volume printed by Pierre Marteau at Cologne in 1692, and which bears the title, ‘The Loves of Anne of Austria, Consort of Louis XIII, with M. le C. D. R., the Real Father of Louis XIV, King of France; being a Minute Account of the Measures taken to give an Heir to the Throne of France,

the Influences at Work to bring this to pass, and the Denouement of the Comedy’.

This libel ran through five editions, bearing date successively, 1692, 1693, 1696, 1722, and 1738. In the title of the edition of 1696 the words “Cardinal de Richelieu” are inserted in place of the initials “C. D. R.,” but that this is only a printer’s error everyone who reads the work will perceive. Some have thought the three letters stood for Comte de Riviere, others for Comte de Rochefort, whose ‘Memoires’ compiled by Sandras de Courtilz supply these initials. The author of the book was an Orange writer in the pay of William III, and its object was, he says, “to unveil the great mystery of iniquity which hid the true origin of Louis XIV.” He goes on to remark that “the knowledge of this fraud, although comparatively rare outside France, was widely spread within her borders. The well-known coldness of Louis XIII; the extraordinary birth of Louis-Dieudonne, so called because he was born in the twenty-third year of a childless marriage, and several other remarkable circumstances connected with the birth, all point clearly to a father other than the prince, who with great effrontery is passed off by his adherents as such. The famous barricades of Paris, and the organised revolt led by distinguished men against Louis XIV on his accession to the throne, proclaimed aloud the king’s illegitimacy, so that it rang through the country; and as the accusation had reason on its side, hardly anyone doubted its truth.”

We give below a short abstract of the narrative, the plot of

which is rather skilfully constructed: —

“Cardinal Richelieu, looking with satisfied pride at the love of Gaston, Duc d’Orleans, brother of the king, for his niece Parisiatis (Madame de Combalet), formed the plan of uniting the young couple in marriage. Gaston taking the suggestion as an insult, struck the cardinal. Pere Joseph then tried to gain the cardinal’s consent and that of his niece to an attempt to deprive Gaston of the throne, which the childless marriage of Louis XIII seemed to assure him. A young man, the C. D. R. of the book, was introduced into Anne of Austria’s room, who though a wife in name had long been a widow in reality. She defended herself but feebly, and on seeing the cardinal next day said to him, ‘Well, you have had your wicked will; but take good care, sir cardinal, that I may find above the mercy and goodness which you have tried by many pious sophistries to convince me is awaiting me. Watch over my soul, I charge you, for I have yielded!’ The queen having given herself up to love for some time, the joyful news that she would soon become a mother began to spread over the kingdom. In this manner was born Louis XIV, the putative son of Louis XIII. If this instalment of the tale be favourably received, says the pamphleteer, the sequel will soon follow, in which the sad fate of C. D. R. will be related, who was made to pay dearly for his short-lived pleasure.”

Although the first part was a great success, the promised sequel never appeared. It must be admitted that such a story, though it never convinced a single person of the illegitimacy

of Louis XIV, was an excellent prologue to the tale of the unfortunate lot of the Man in the Iron Mask, and increased the interest and curiosity with which that singular historical mystery was regarded. But the views of the Dutch scholars thus set forth met with little credence, and were soon forgotten in a new solution.

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