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Book Reviews: Electronic Books Section

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FEATURED BOOK : REVIEW 1

AN IMPORTANT BOOK

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Rating : 9.5
★★★★★★★★★½ (9.5/5)

The Man in the iron mask (Celebrated Crimes series) *by* Alexandre Dumas (E-book format: Adobe Acrobat®).
Rogue Publishing, 228 Glen Street, Marlborough, MA 01752-1955, USA. http://www.roguepublishing.com. Contact: info@roguepublishing.com.

Category: Nonfiction, Genre: History/true crime, Page count: 33, File size: 274k. Estimated Download Times: with 28.8 kbps - 2 Min 42 Sec; with 56 kbps - 1 Min 24 Sec, with Cable/DSL - 10 Sec. Price: $1.50 electronic copy

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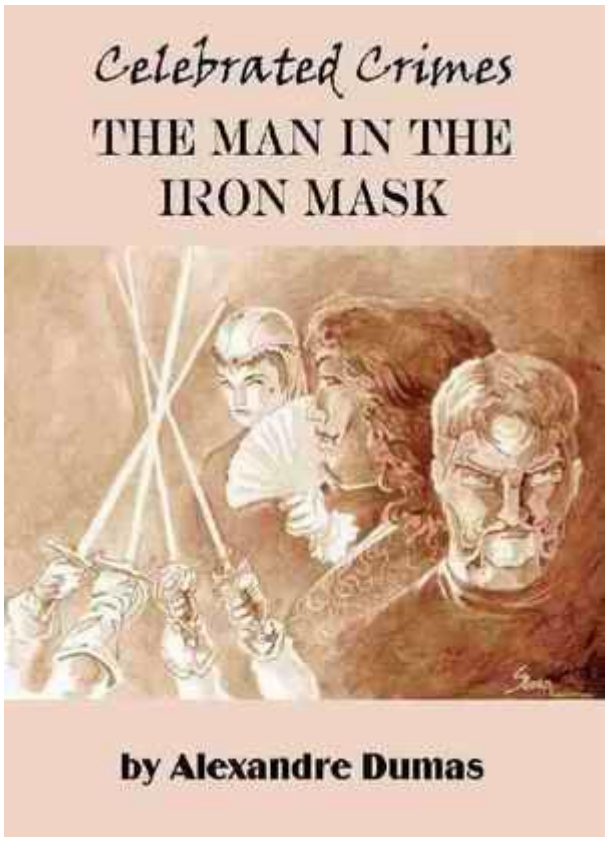

I had better start this review with two somewhat embarrassing confessions, firstly this is my first ever book review and secondly I have never in my life read Alexandre Dumas famous work 'the man in the iron mask', I do of course know the story well but have always thought it a work of complete fiction. It's obvious that I was woefully mistaken in this belief and the details made known in this book reveal a story that a work of mere fiction would have to go very far to even attempt to replicate.

Truth is stranger than fiction after all and in this case the truth is as concealed as the prisoner himself.

Although this publication is approximately 170 years old it is, in this reviewers opinion a very exact and modern text, it was written by Dumas not only to illustrate the inspiration for his novel but to present to the reader a complete overview of every theory known to that date of the unfortunate circumstances, parentage and identity of the 'man in the iron mask'.

He achieves this by attempting to educate the reader as to every possibility, credible or otherwise that has been presented in the past as to the prisoner's identity and the cause for such extraordinary punishment, Some of the theories seem to hold water not only according to the law of probabilities but verified as best as possible with written and verbal testimony. Others blatantly do not. And the list of possible candidates who have been put forward for our scrutiny, and arguments for and against includes: -

...Dumas sets before us the double question of not only who the prisoner was, but also why was he relentlessly subjected to this torturous isolation until the moment of his death, an isolation that persisted years, unnecessarily, after the regime that imprisoned him had ceased to even exist...

- Prince Giafer (son of Louis XIV of France),
- The duke of Monmouth (son of king Charles II of England),

- The heir to the duke of Buckingham,
- Oliver Cromwell's son Richard
- An un-named nobleman considered the real father of Louis XIV,
- The Duc de Beaufort,
- The duke of Mantua's secretary named as matthioli, but who might also be known as;
- Girolamo Magni
- And finally Nicolas Fouquet.

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Who ever the prisoner may have been, one constant thread is the respect and consideration shown to him by his life long jailer (Saint Mars) and minister (Louvois) and how this unswerving admiration stands as testament not only to his high rank but also to his innocence.

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The one thing that is evident is that this is a very tangled web and as most of its players had a vested interest in maintaining the clandestine affairs of state, let alone suffer pain of death for betrayal of the secret, it is difficult to assess in retrospect the validity of their affidavits.

...Dumas also quotes many other prominent dignitaries of the day. Most of whom had their own secret agenda or reluctance to speak forthrightly on the issue for fear of reprisal. And this fear was unmistakably absolute; he writes that even from the very first day of the prisoner's incarceration, a servant who was in possession of the secret was killed by an escort on the journey to Ormus, and his face so disfigured by dagger thrusts he could not be recognised...

He quotes sources from a wealth of prominent participants in the event, from M. St Mars the prisoner's personal jailer form the moment of his interment on the isle of Ormus (Sainte Marguerite), then the fortress of Ispahan until finally the Bastille where the prisoner died in 1704. To secret memoirs from an un-named nobleman who was party to the deceit of an un-witting heir, who, through suspicion and intelligence eventually found evidence that he himself was the brother of the king of France (Louis XIV) and subsequently imprisoned alongside his ward for his inadvertent disclosure of his wards probable parentage.

Dumas also quotes many other prominent dignitaries of the day. Most of whom had their own secret agenda or reluctance to speak forthrightly on the issue for fear of reprisal. And this fear was unmistakably absolute; he writes that even from the very first day of the prisoner's incarceration, a servant who was in possession of the secret was killed by an escort on the journey to Ormus, and his face so disfigured by dagger thrusts he could not be recognised. A likewise example is an occasion when the prisoner scratched his name on the back of a plate and threw it out of the window down to the beach below, the plate fell into the hands of a servant who rushed it to the commandant hoping for praise or reward, needless to say both the plate and the servant were never seen, heard or spoken of again.

This threat of death wasn't restricted to the servants either, the prisoner himself was often reminded that should he utter even the subtlest hint of his true identity both he and the listener would share the same grisly fate.

The resultant effect in me after reading this text has produced more questions than answers. As the author states in his closing statement:

'Our task has been limited to that of an examining judge at a trial, and we feel sure that our readers will not be sorry that we have left them to choose amid all the conflicting explanations of the puzzle. No consistent narrative that we might have concocted would, it seems to us, have been half as interesting to them as to allow them to follow the devious paths opened up by those who entered on the search for the heart of the mystery.'

And I for one completely agree with his statement, I have now gone from never reading '*The man in the iron mask*' to wishing to investigate further modern texts on this fascinating conundrum, I for one would dearly love to get my hands on his skull and attempt, if possible to reconstruct his features to compare with contemporary portraits of the time, and who wouldn't! If you will permit me the pun. Who was that masked man?

--Nigel Cockerton



-Nigel Cockerton

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