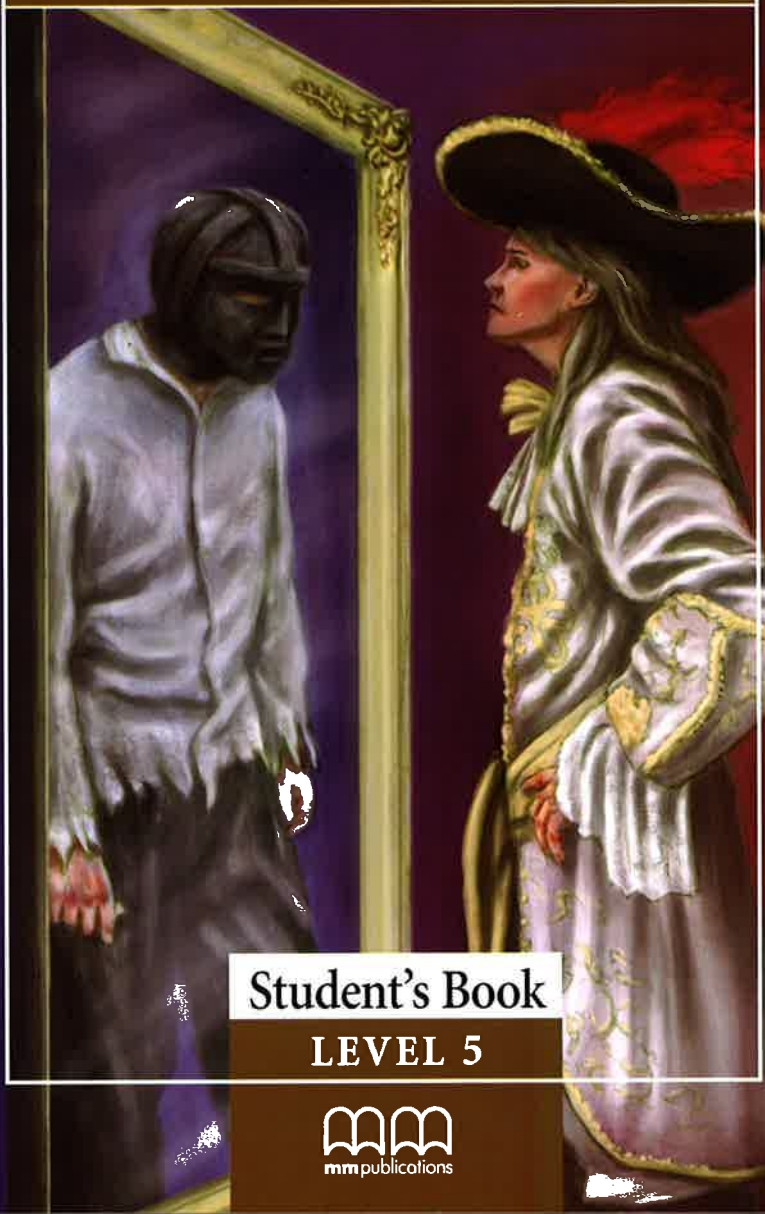
GRADED READERS

THE MAN IN THE IRON MASK

ALEXANDRE DUMAS



Student's Book

LEVEL 5

mm publications

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CHAPTER 1

ARAMIS STOOD AT THE WINDOW OF HIS APARTMENT AND WATCHED as the Duchess, Madame de Chevreuse, stepped out of her carriage. The Duchess had sent a letter to Aramis a few days earlier, informing him that she had a very important matter to discuss with him. She claimed to have certain documents in her possession which could be very harmful to one of his closest friends.

Aramis had met the Duchess several years before, when he was a musketeer serving in the Queen's guard. He knew that she was a cunning and manipulative woman; he also knew that she had lost the support of the royal family and that she was very close to bankruptcy. Whatever Madame de Chevreuse wanted to discuss, it definitely had something to do with money.

The Duchess knocked on the door and Aramis walked slowly across the room to open it.

"Good day, my dear Duchess," he said with a smile.

"How do you do, my dear Aramis," replied Madame de Chevreuse.

"It's been a long time," said Aramis as he led the Duchess to the sitting room.

"Too long," said the Duchess. "I hear you are the Bishop of Vannes now."

Aramis laughed lightly. "Yes. My musketeer days are long gone."

Aramis offered the Duchess some tea and asked her about her family.

"My children are fine, I suppose," said the Duchess. "They don't speak to me any more, not since they took practically everything I own, including my home."

"How terrible, dear Duchess," said Aramis.

"Terrible indeed," said the Duchess. "Actually, Aramis, that's why I've come to see you today."

"Oh really?" said Aramis, raising an eyebrow.

"The truth is that I am in serious debt, and as a result I have been forced to turn to questionable means to earn a living…"

The Duchess waited for Aramis to respond, but he said nothing.



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She cleared her throat and continued: "Anyway, I have acquired some important papers from Monsieur Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the King's adviser. The papers prove that Monsieur Nicolas Fouquet, the King's trusted treasurer, has been stealing money from the State - 30 million francs to be exact. I know that you and Fouquet are friends, and I'm sure you'd like to protect his reputation… So I'll give you the papers for five hundred thousand francs."

"Five hundred thousand francs!" exclaimed Aramis. "You want me to buy the papers from you for five hundred thousand francs? Madame, I'm afraid you have wasted your time coming here today. In the first place, we all know that Colbert is a weasel who will stop at nothing to harm Fouquet in order to take his place as treasurer. And secondly, Fouquet is an honourable man who would never steal from the State, so I'm quite sure the papers you have are false."

The Duchess looked annoyed. "You won't buy the papers then?"

"Absolutely not."

"I see. Then, perhaps I should speak to the Queen Mother; I'm sure I can persuade her to help me out."

"I strongly doubt that," said Aramis.

"Do not underestimate me, Aramis," said the Duchess. "The Queen Mother and I used to be best friends - we may have had our differences in the past, but I'm quite capable of winning her over again."

"Well then, perhaps you should be on your way," said Aramis through his teeth.

The Duchess glared at Aramis and got up to leave. The Bishop showed her to the door and then slammed it shut behind her.

But Aramis wasn't really angry with the Duchess; in fact, he was grateful to her. Her greed had given him an opportunity to set his own plan in motion - a plan that would benefit all of France. Aramis decided to pay Nicolas Fouquet a visit as soon as possible.

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"Oh, the pain!" said the Queen Mother as she lay on her bed holding her

chest. Her lady-in-waiting, Madame de Motteville, was sitting anxiously at her bedside. "I think I'm having another attack," groaned the Queen Mother.

Madame de Motteville frowned. "Your Majesty, do you remember when you first started experiencing these pains?" she asked.

"Yes," said the Queen Mother with a sigh. "It was on the fifth of September, twenty-three years ago…"

Madame de Motteville looked puzzled. "But that's the day your Majesty gave birth to a son, a glorious son named Louis, who is now the ruler of our land."

The Queen Mother cried out and then buried her face in her hands. "Yes… that was a day of great joy, followed by great sorrow… Oh, the pain!"

Just then, the two women heard a knock at the door.

"The remedy!" cried Madame de Motteville, jumping up excitedly.

"What remedy?" asked the Queen Mother.

"Oh, I met a nun at the market yesterday who was selling herbal medicines - I told her that you suffer from nervous attacks," said Madame de Motteville. "The nun said that she had a special remedy that might help you and she offered to come see you today."



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The Queen Mother frowned. "All right, let her in," she said.

Madame de Motteville opened the door and a masked woman entered the room.

"Your Majesty," said the woman as she bowed her head slightly.

The Queen Mother looked surprised. "Why are you wearing that mask?" she asked.

"All will be revealed soon, your Majesty," said the nun. "But, first, I would like to talk to you in private."

The masked woman glanced at Madame de Motteville, who, in turn, glanced at the Queen Mother. The Queen Mother hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly sent away her lady-in-waiting.

"Your Majesty, you will be happy to know that your illness can be cured very easily," said the nun.

"That's good to hear," said the Queen Mother.

"I know that your nervous attacks began when your son, the King, was born…"

"Yes…"

"And I know that there is a secret surrounding the birth of your son…" The nun paused for a moment. "It's a secret very few people know… On that day, twenty-three years ago, you gave birth not to one son, but two - identical twins named Louis and Philippe!"

The Queen Mother looked horrified. She started to speak but the nun held up her hand.

"Let me finish," she said. "When the King heard the news, he was amazed. He was concerned that having two heirs to the throne would only lead to trouble for France. His exact words were: 'One prince is peace and safety for the State; two competitors are civil war and anarchy!' So one son became King and the other was hidden away… Your Majesty, it is my opinion that your nervous attacks are caused by your guilt!"

The Queen Mother's face was as pale as death. "How do you know all this?" she whispered.

"Because, old friend, I was there!" said the Duchess as she removed her mask.

The Queen Mother gasped. "Madame de Chevreuse!"



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