

← PROLOGUE, PART I →

FEBRUARY 26, 1806

IT was nearly midnight on the night of February 26, 1806, and Alexandre Dumas, the future author of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*, was asleep at his uncle's house. He was not yet four years old. He was staying there because his father was gravely ill and his mother thought it best for him not to be at home. As the clock struck, he was awakened by a loud knock. By the light of a lamp that burned by the bedside, he saw his cousin sit up, visibly frightened. Alexandre got out of bed. He recalled in his memoirs, forty-some years later:

My cousin called to me, "Where are you going?"

"You'll see," I replied quietly. "I'm going to open the door for Daddy, who's coming to say goodbye."

The poor girl jumped out of bed, greatly alarmed, grabbed me as I put my hand on the doorknob, and forced me back to bed.

I struggled in her arms, shouting with all my strength:

"Goodbye, Daddy! Goodbye, Daddy!"

The next morning the adults came to wake the children, and one of them told Alexandre the news that his father had died during the night.

"My daddy is dead," I said. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you won't see him again."

"What do you mean I won't see Daddy again? . . . why won't I see him?"

"Because God has taken him back from you."

"Forever?"

"Forever."

"And you say that I'll never see him again? . . . never at all?"

"Never at all."

"And where does God live?"

"He lives in heaven."

I thought hard about this for a minute. Even as a young child, even deprived of reason, I understood that something irreversible had happened in my life. Then, taking advantage of the first moment when they stopped paying attention to me, I got away from my uncle's and ran straight to my mother's house.

All the doors were open, all the faces were frightened; one felt that Death was there.

I went in without anyone's noticing or seeing me. I found a little room where the weapons were kept; I shouldered a gun that belonged to my father, and which he had often promised to give to me when I got older.

Then, armed with this gun, I climbed the stairs.

On the second floor, I met my mother on the landing.

She had just left the death chamber. . . . her face was wet with tears.

"Where are you going?" she asked me, surprised to see me there, when she thought I was at my uncle's.

"I'm going to heaven!" I replied.

"What do you mean, you're going to heaven?"

"Let me pass."

"And what will you do in heaven, my poor child?"

"I'm going there to kill God, who killed Daddy."

My mother seized me in her arms, squeezing me so tight I thought I would suffocate.

Alexandre Dumas wrote those lines when he had just turned forty-five and had decided it was time to reflect on his life. He never got past chronicling his thirty-first year—which was well before he had published a word as a novelist—yet he spent more than the first two hundred pages on a story that is as fantastic as any of his novels: the life of his father, General Alexandre—

Alex—Dumas, a black man from the colonies who narrowly survived the French Revolution and rose to command fifty thousand men. The chapters about General Dumas are drawn from reminiscences of his mother and his father's friends, and from official documents and letters he obtained from his mother and the French Ministry of War. It is a raw and poignant attempt at biography, full of gaps, omissions, and re-creations of scenes and dialogue. But it is sincere. The story of his father ends with this scene of his death, the point at which the novelist begins his own life story.

For anyone skeptical that a boy so young could recall such details, Dumas responded through the lips of the character Haydée, a white slave, in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Haydée's father died when she was four, betrayed and murdered by one of the main villains in the novel. After speaking movingly of her father, she tells the Count: "I was four years old, but as the events held a supreme importance for me, not one detail has left my mind, not one feature has escaped from my memory."

To remember a person is the most important thing in the novels of Alexandre Dumas. The worst sin anyone can commit is to forget. The villains of *The Count of Monte Cristo* do not murder the hero, Edmond Dantès—they have him thrown into a dungeon where he is forgotten by the world. The heroes of Dumas never forget anything or anyone: Dantès has a perfect memory for the details of every field of human knowledge, for the history of the world and for everyone he has encountered in his life. When he confronts them one by one, he finds that the assassins of his identity have forgotten the very fact that he existed, and thus the fact of their crime.

I undertook the project of reconstructing the life of the forgotten hero General Alexandre Dumas because of that passage in his son's memoirs, which I read when I was a boy and have always remembered.

← PROLOGUE, PART 2 →

JANUARY 25, 2007

“I AM afraid the situation is most delicate,” the deputy mayor was saying to me. “And most unfortunate.”

Fabrice Dufour, the deputy mayor of the cobblestoned town of Villers-Cotterêts, wore a pained expression. He was in charge of the town’s cultural heritage, which, notwithstanding its modest appearance, was considerable. It included a brief moment at the center of power in *Ancien Régime* France, when, upon the death of Louis XIV in 1715, his nephew Philippe, the Duke d’Orléans and regent to the five-year-old Louis XV, decided the court should spend as much time here as possible. This gray little town fifty miles north of Paris acquired an outsized reputation for royal scandal, misbehavior, and debauchery, which in eighteenth-century France was saying something. The early Renaissance château looming over the office where I sat had been the scene of nude dinner parties and large-scale orgies involving bondage, the comingling of royals and townsfolk, and the help of professionals both male and female. These festivities were referred to as “Adam and Eve nights,” and one courtier recalled that, “after the champagne, the lights were turned out and the unclothed company proceeded to indulge in mutual flagellation, seeking their partners as the fortune of the dark dictated and with a thoroughness which diverted His Highness immensely.”

Years later, Louis XVI, the shy and awkward husband of Marie-Antoinette, was said to blush if he so much as heard the town’s name—which he wouldn’t have often after 1723, when the regent died and the focus of court life moved back to Versailles. The town would really only be heard from again because of the man I had come here to learn about, who had

lived and died here around the time of the French Revolution. The very backwater chill of the place, distinct on this raw January day, gave me hope that certain documents I believed existed might still be found here. Behind his desk the deputy mayor was an imposing man. He had a lazy eye that squinted involuntarily and an equally involuntary tendency to smile, slightly, as he spoke.

“Most delicate,” he repeated firmly.

He then said nothing for perhaps thirty seconds, during which he cast meaningful looks at me, the window, and the objects on his desk. I noticed a motorcycle magazine on a side table, next to a pile of brochures about the château. I couldn’t be sure, but it seemed to me the deputy mayor was wearing mascara. His large brown eyes seemed a little too well defined.

He shook his head, smiled, and made a tsk-tsking sound. “Sir, I know you have come all the way from America to see her, but I’m afraid it will be impossible to arrange.”

I began mentally preparing the appropriate speech of protest in French. More than any other culture on earth, the French respect protest, which is why they regularly tie up their crucial industries and institutions in nationwide strikes—but one must protest properly. The deputy mayor spoke again, though, before I could say a word.

“It will be impossible to arrange, sir, because the lady you have come to see is dead.”

I thought perhaps I had misheard. The lady who had agreed to see me, from a local museum—her name was Elaine—had not sounded old. I hadn’t felt I needed to learn her last name, as she was the only person who worked there except a security guard.

“It was very sudden,” said the deputy mayor. I thought he added something about an illness, perhaps cancer, but I wasn’t sure. The shock of the information seemed to bring my French down two levels.

“She didn’t mention anything to me about being sick,” I said, apologetically.

“We are all very shocked and saddened,” the deputy mayor said.

I tried to gather my wits and, after mumbling condolences, to explain about the importance of seeing the papers she’d been keeping: most of them had not seen the light of day for two hundred years, except for the odd

moments when they had been sold by one collector of obscure French historical memorabilia to another, eventually ending up here, in the tiny museum that had a modest endowment for their purchase. I asked if anyone had assumed Elaine's duties; the deputy mayor shook his head. Had anyone inventoried her office? looked through the papers? could I be allowed to look?

"That's just it, none of the documents are in her office," the deputy mayor said. "Elaine was worried about security, and she put everything in a safe. A very big safe, very secure, but when she died she took the combination with her. She told no one. She liked to handle everything herself. We have searched everywhere but have had no luck finding the combination. . . . Sir, I am afraid there is nothing to be done. A few weeks ago, it would have been no problem, but now I am afraid, well, it is most delicate." He squinted at me. "It is tragic."

Though uttered with complete bureaucratic equanimity, the word was well chosen. This bland government office, tucked inside a courtyard next to the notorious old château, was just up the street from the little municipal museum where Elaine had liked to handle everything herself. It was called the Musée Alexandre Dumas. But it was doubtful if more than a handful of visitors to the town realized that the famous author of so many beloved novels, who was born here, had himself been the son of a great man—the original Alexandre Dumas.



THE original Alexandre Dumas was born in 1762, the son of "Antoine Alexandre de l'Isle," in the French sugar colony of Saint-Domingue. Antoine was a nobleman in hiding from his family and from the law, and he fathered the boy with a black slave. Later Antoine would discard his alias and reclaim his real name and title—Alexandre Antoine Davy, the Marquis de la Pailleterie—and bring his black son across the ocean to live in pomp and luxury near Paris. But the boy would reject his father's name, along with his noble title. He would enlist in the French army at the lowest rank, taking the surname "Dumas" from his mother for his enlistment papers. Once he'd risen by his merits to higher rank he would not even sign his name "Alexandre," preferring the blunt and simple form "Alex Dumas."