

## CHAPTER 3

### The Assistant Prosecutor

As Edmond departed, old Monsieur Dantes collapsed in a half-faint. He had been in poor health, and the excitement of having Edmond home and about to be married had overtired him. Now the horror of seeing his beloved son marched away between soldiers proved too much.

A chair was brought, and the old man was helped into it. Mercedes rubbed his hands to warm them.

“Dear Father, calm yourself,” she said. “Edmond will return in a short while. You saw

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how he smiled. It is some silly mistake. Perhaps the person responsible for it is apologizing at this moment.”

Monsieur Dantes looked into her eyes. He saw the same fear in them that he knew showed in his own. “No, Mercedes,” he whispered, “I feel something terrible is going to happen to Edmond.”

Hearing the old man speak her own fears, Mercedes turned from him and buried her face in her hands. A sob escaped her.

Seeing the terrified old man and young girl, Caderousse frowned. He tried to remember exactly what had happened at the table outside the inn the day before. It was hard because he had been in a drunken haze. But enough realization of what was going on had come through. He whispered to Danglars, “This is some part of the trick you were going to play, you and Fernand. It is shameful!”

Danglars looked at him coldly. “I know

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nothing about this arrest. Your drinking has confused you. Be quiet!"

Since Monsieur Morrel was an important person, he knew that he might be able to find out the reason for Edmond's arrest. So he had followed the soldiers and their prisoner. Now as he returned to the inn, a worried expression clouded his face. He went straight to Monsieur Dantes and Mercedes. "My friends," he said solemnly, "a very serious charge has been made against Edmond. Someone has accused him of being a secret agent for Napoleon and thus a traitor to the King!"

Meanwhile, in the office of the Assistant Prosecutor, these same accusing words were being said to Edmond Dantes. The Prosecutor himself was ill in bed and had sent his capable assistant, Monsieur Villefort, to deal with the matter. The two men were alone in the room, though soldiers stood on guard outside the door.

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Edmond stared in amazement at the Assistant Prosecutor. "No, sir, I am not a secret agent. I have no political opinions. I am only a sailor, and my concerns are my ship, my father, and my intended wife."

Villefort, older than Edmond by only ten years, was impressed by the sincere way in which Edmond uttered his statement. Villefort also saw intelligence in Edmond's face, though he realized the young man's education was confined to matters of the sea and sailing. Finally, it was of interest to him that he and Edmond shared a coincidence. Both had been celebrating their wedding feasts and had been interrupted in the middle of the festivities. Villefort's mind wandered for a moment to the lovely, rich young noblewoman he was to marry.

Then Villefort brought his thoughts back to his duty. "Tell me, Monsieur Dantes, why did you stop the *Pharaon* at Elba and pick up a

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letter there?"

Edmond told his story so convincingly that Villefort believed him. He asked to see the letter, but Edmond hesitated.

"I have sworn, sir, to give this letter only to the person to whom it is addressed," he explained. "It is a man in Paris."

Edmond's loyalty increased Villefort's admiration for him. It was obvious that the young sailor was a person of honor and that his claim to innocence was completely true. Villefort smiled reassuringly. "I represent the law here and the law commands you to hand over the letter. In doing so, you will not break your word because my soldiers could take it from you by force. Give me the letter with your conscience clear."

At these words Edmond smiled too. "I give you the letter gladly, sir. Though you are the law, you respect a man's honor." From the inside pocket of his jacket Edmond brought

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out a sealed white envelope and handed it to Villefort.

The Assistant Prosecutor turned away from Edmond toward the lamp on his desk so he would have more light by which to read the name on the envelope. Thus Edmond did not see the look of horror which came over Villefort's face when he read the name. Fearing for a moment that he might faint, Villefort steadied himself against his desk. He dared to read the name again and the familiar address in Paris. It still read "TO MONSIEUR NOIRTIER." The letter was addressed to Villefort's *father*!

Villefort had often told himself that one day this moment would happen—the moment when all he had worked for would vanish and he would be disgraced. But lately, as he became rich and attained the position of Assistant Prosecutor, he thought less and less about that moment. The final step into a

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secure life was his engagement to Renee.

He had used his mother's name, Villefort, on coming to Marseilles, so no one connected him with the notorious traitor, Noirtier, who was loyal to Napoleon. Politically, Noirtier had been quiet for years, but as Villefort now read in the letter, his father was to come out of hiding and lead a plot to restore Napoleon to the throne.

As a loyal subject of the King, Villefort could not allow the letter to be delivered, but neither could he bring himself to have his own father arrested. This was not because he loved him, but because he feared that the connection between them would inevitably be revealed. Villefort made his decision quickly, then turned back to Edmond.

"Who has seen this letter beside yourself?" he asked in a calm voice.

Edmond answered with surprise, "I told you, sir. No one has seen it. I myself have not

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read the letter since it was sealed. But no one has even seen the envelope since I received it.”

Inwardly Villefort gave thanks. He also gave thanks for the illness of his superior—an illness which had prevented the Prosecutor from coming to the office today. If *he* had read the letter, Villefort would have been a ruined man. But now, Villefort began to hope. He smiled at Edmond again and lowered his voice.

“I believe you, Dantes. But having this letter as evidence is awkward. It is the only thing that supports the accusation made against you in this note we received.” He handed Edmond the note written by Danglars with his left hand. Though the note was crumpled, Fernand had smoothed it out before he sent it. The signature still read “A Friend,” with no further identification.

Edmond read it and shook his head in bewilderment. “I don’t know who could have written this,” he said.



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Villefort returned the accusation to a folder marked "Edmond Dantes." Then he took up the letter addressed to his father and turned it over in his hands, as if trying to decide a deep problem. Suddenly he winked at Edmond and strode to the fireplace. He tossed the letter into the flames. "I believed you are innocent, Dantes. Therefore I destroy the only evidence that exists against you." As Villefort saw the name "Noirtier" disappear into ashes, his heart beat normally again.

"Thank you, sir," said Edmond. "You are more like my true friend than the King's Prosecutor."

"But now," said Villefort, returning to his desk, "you must take my advice. You must swear never to mention this letter or the name to whom it was addressed. Only you and I know it once existed."

"I swear to tell no one," agreed Edmond eagerly. "If anyone questions me, I will deny

such a letter ever existed."

"Now I must detain you a short while longer until I have written a report," said Villefort, as an afterthought. He rang for the captain of the guards, then said something to him in a low tone of voice so Edmond could not hear. To Edmond he said, "Go with him, Dantes."

Edmond saluted Villefort and followed the captain of the guards with a light heart. He counted himself a lucky man to have had his case heard by the Assistant Prosecutor rather than the Prosecutor. Villefort had said he must only stay "a short while longer." Perhaps in an hour or less he would be back at Mercedes' side.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Chateau d'If

The captain led Edmond across a courtyard and into an unheated building. Its windows were small and barred. As the captain passed, soldiers stood at attention. After walking down two flights of stairs, Edmond was motioned into a bare room, with a table and a cot as its only furnishings. After the captain shut the door, Edmond heard a bolt being drawn. He was a prisoner in a cell. But Edmond was not worried by his situation, for the Assistant Prosecutor himself had declared him innocent. Edmond sat down on the cot

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to wait.

As the hours passed, Edmond consulted his watch more and more anxiously. He was especially concerned that his father and Mercedes would be worrying about him. He kept reminding himself of the kindness and understanding that Villefort had shown.

Finally, six hours later, the bolt was drawn. Four armed soldiers summoned him out. Edmond stepped eagerly into the corridor, but was not led back to Villefort's office as he expected. Instead, he was led upstairs and into the dark street where a carriage waited. Certain that there must be another mistake, Edmond hesitated to climb in. But the soldiers gave him a shove, and he climbed in quickly. Two soldiers placed themselves on either side of him, and the carriage set off.

Soon Edmond began to smell the sea, and he knew they were nearing the docks. In another moment the carriage stopped. Edmond was

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hustled out and pushed toward a waiting rowboat, manned by four men. A soldier waiting on the dock appeared to be in charge. He listened to the instructions whispered by the two soldiers and nodded.

“Where are you taking me?” asked Edmond, now very alarmed. He was sure he had been mistaken for another prisoner. “I am Edmond Dantes.”

“We know,” said the man in charge of the boat. “Get in.” He put a hand on Edmond’s shoulder and forced him to jump down into the boat. He followed Edmond in, then gave the command to shove off.

The only point of light Edmond could see on the water was the lighthouse. But the rowers did not strain their eyes to see in the dark. They pulled steadily and confidently as if the course they rowed was a familiar one.

After his long confinement in the small cell, Edmond was grateful to smell the fresh sea

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air. But why should he be in a rowboat in the middle of the night, going he did not know where?

“Where are you taking me?” he demanded angrily. “Does Monsieur Villefort know what you are doing?”

These questions annoyed the man in charge, for he frowned. “Don’t pretend,” he answered. “You come from Marseilles, don’t you? Everybody knows that pile of rocks.” He gestured toward a dark fortress that they were approaching. It was the only structure on the small, rocky island just outside the harbor.

Edmond looked where he pointed, then turned back with a gasp. “Not the Chateau d’If! Why that is *a prison!*”

At this last statement the man laughed. “And you, my friend, are a *prisoner.*”

“But I am innocent of any crime,” protested Edmond wildly. “I have not even had a trial! Monsieur Villefort released me!”

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The boat scraped against stone steps. One sailor jumped out and tied the boat to a ring cemented to a massive stone wall. With a nod, the man in charge indicated that Edmond was to proceed up the steps. He did so in a daze. At the top of the steps the man in charge kicked at a heavy door. After a wait of some minutes, the door swung open to receive their party. Another door, guarded by two soldiers, barred their way. After a whispered consultation with the boatman, one soldier took Edmond by the elbow and led him through the second doorway.

Thus, on the 28th of February, 1815, Edmond Dantes entered the Chateau d'If.