

The Count of Monte Cristo (by Alexandre Dumas)

The eponymous count is the protagonist in this epic tale of romance, political intrigue and revenge. Not only is he extremely intelligent and learned - and unusually and profoundly knowledgeable about affairs in foreign lands - he is also charming and charismatic and utterly inscrutable. When he suddenly and unexpectedly materializes onto the Parisian social scene, he astonishes the aristocracy with his extravagance, wealth and influence. However, it isn't long after his appearance that French high society is rocked by a series of unfortunate events and stunning revelations. Could there be any connection between these events and the emergence of this mysterious figure?

The story depicts the exciting and eventful, but often tortuous, life of Edmond Dantes. The novel begins when Dantes is a dashing young man, and a successful and popular sailor. He is about to be promoted to captain at an unusually young age and he is the envied, soon-to-be-married fiancé of Mercedes, the beauty of Marseilles and the object of desire of many men. However, it is one of life's more unfortunate truisms that success breeds resentment, and the case is certainly no less true here as Dante unwittingly makes enemies of jealous acquaintances and powerful men.

And so it is that Edmond Dantes is framed by his enemies and thrown into prison on a small, rocky island in the infamous Châteaux d' If, a maximum-security institution for the most dangerous and hardened criminals. The story is set in the political turmoil of early 19th century France. The king is in the process of consolidating his position and Napoleon has been exiled from the country. Royal forces are in a state of high alert and suspected supporters of the previous regime are being dealt with severely. It is under these circumstances that Dantes is framed, his enemies cynically taking full advantage of the uncertainty and atmosphere of distrust pervading the country at that time.

Dantes is innocent and completely unaware of the machinations behind his arrest. At first he is confused and bewildered, but this turns into bitterness and rage as he slowly realizes the full extent of his predicament. During his time in prison he meets a knowledgeable priest who he befriends, and in the short time they are together, they become very close and together they formulate a plan to escape. However, the priest dies before he gets a chance to escape himself; but not before divulging a most wonderful and fantastic secret – the location of a fabulous treasure hoard, hidden on a desolate, nondescript island somewhere out at sea. So Dantes escapes alone, and because of the circumstances in which he escapes, he is believed to have perished and is presumed dead.

But when Dantes returns to Marseilles, he finds that his beloved Mercedes has married and that his father has died – and in pitiful circumstances. He quickly retraces the events leading up to his shock imprisonment and realizes that his life has been completely ruined. He has lost all those he cared for most and he is an escaped convict to boot, albeit one who is innocent and presumed dead.

After this, no more is ever heard of the man once known as Edmond Dantes. But one thing is clear: he will exact justice on the perpetrators, however long it takes. And they will be made to suffer.