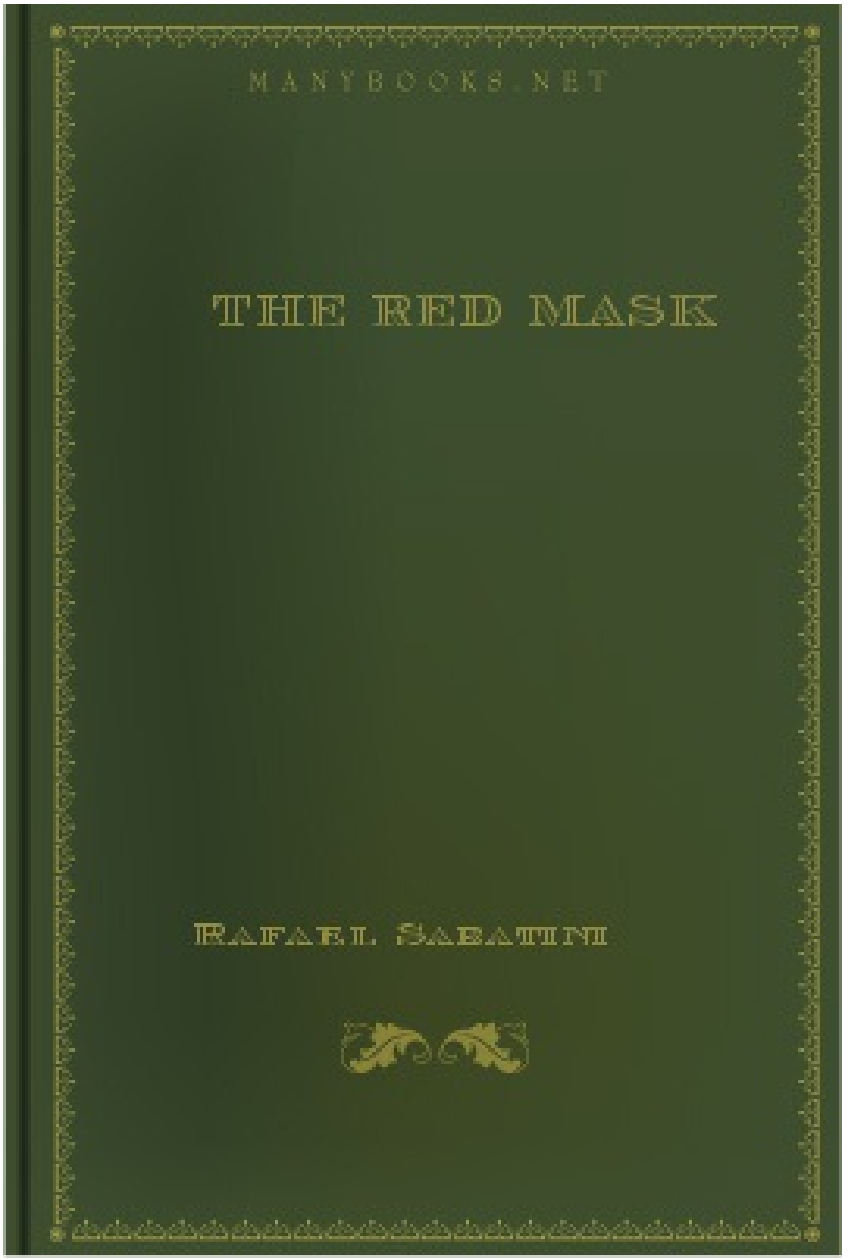
RAFAEL SABATINI

The Red Mask



The Red Mask

by Rafael Sabatini

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During the last year of his reign, it was a common thing for Mazarin to repair to the masques given by the King at the Louvre.

In a long domino, the ample folds of which cloaked his tall, lean figure beyond all recognition, it was his custom to mingle in the crowd--all unconscious of his presence--in the hope of gleaning through the channels of court gossip some serviceable information.

These visits to the Louvre were kept a profound secret from all save Monsieur André, the valet who dressed him, and myself, the captain of his guards, who escorted him.

It was usual upon such occasions for the Cardinal to retire to his own apartments, under the pretence of desiring to be a-bed at an earlier hour. Once screened from the gaze of the curious, he would prepare for the ball, and when he was ready, André would summon me from the ante-chamber. On the night in question, however, I was startled out of the reverie into which I had lapsed whilst watching two pages throwing at dice and discussing the arts of the practice, by the Cardinal's own voice uttering my name:

"Monsieur de Cavaignac,"

At the sound of the rasping voice, which plainly told me that his Eminence was out of humour, one of the lads sat precipitately upon the dice, to hide from his master's eyes the unholy nature of their pastime, whilst I, astonished at the irregularity of the proceedings, turned sharply round and made a profound obeisance.

One glance at Mazarin told me there was trouble. An angry flush was upon his sallow face, and his eyes glittered in a strange, discomforting manner, whilst his jewelled fingers tugged nervously at the long pointed beard which he still wore, after the fashion of the days of his late Majesty, Louis XIII.

"Follow me, Monsieur," he said; whereupon, respecting his mood, I lifted my sword to prevent its clanking, and passed into the study,

which divided the bedroom from the ante-chamber.

Suppressing with masterly self-control, the anger that swelled within him, Mazarin held out to me a strip of paper.

"Read," he said laconically, as if afraid to trust his voice with more.

Taking the paper as I was bid, I gazed earnestly at it, and marvelled to myself whether the Cardinal's dotage was upon him, for, stare as I would, I could detect no writing.

Noting my perplexity, Mazarin took a heavy silver candlestick from the table, and placing himself at my side, held it so as to throw a strong light upon the paper. Wonderingly, I examined it afresh, and discovered this time the faint impression of such characters as might have been written with a pencil upon another sheet placed over the one that I now held.

With infinite pains, and awed at what I read, I had contrived to master the meaning of the first two lines, when the Cardinal, growing impatient at my slowness, set down the candlestick and snatched the paper from my hand.

"You have seen?" he asked.

"Not all, your eminence," I replied.

"Then I will read it to you; listen."

And in a slightly shaken monotone he read out to me the following words:--

"The Italian goes disguised to-night to attend the King's masque. He will arrive at ten, wearing a black silk domino and a red vizor."

Slowly he folded the document, and then, turning his sharp eyes upon me.

"Of course," he said, "you do not know the handwriting; but *I* am well acquainted with it; it is that of my valet, André."

"It is a gross breach of confidence, if you are certain that it alludes to your Eminence," I ventured, timidly.

"A breach of confidence, Chevalier!" he cried in derision. "A breach of confidence! I took you for a wiser man. Does this message suggest nothing more than a breach of confidence to you?"

I started, aghast, as his meaning dawned upon me, and noting this,

"Ah, I see that it does," he said, with a curious smile. "Well, what do you say now?"

"I scarcely like to word my thoughts, Monseigneur," I answered.

"Then I will word them for you," he retorted. "There is a conspiracy afoot."

"God forbid!" I cried, then added quickly; "Impossible! your Eminence is too well beloved."

"Pish!" he answered, with a frown; "you forget, de Cavaignac, this is the Palais Mazarin, and not the Louvre. We need no courtiers here."

"Twas but the truth I spoke, Monseigneur," I expostulated.

"Enough!" he exclaimed, "we are wasting time. I am assured that he is in league with one, or may be more, foul knaves of his kidney, whose purpose it is--well, what is the usual purpose of a conspiracy?"

"Your Eminence!" I cried, in horror.

"Well?" he said, coldly, and with a slight elevation of the eyebrows.

"Pardon me for suggesting that you may be in error. What evidence is there to show that you are the person to whom that note alludes?"

He gazed at me in undisguised astonishment, and may-be pity, at my dullness.

"Does it not say, '*the Italian*'?"

"But then, Monseigneur, pardon me again, you are not the only Italian in Paris; there are several at court--Botillani, del'Asta de Agostini, Magnani. Are these not all Italians? Is it not possible that the note refers to one of them?"

"Do you think so?" he inquired, raising his eyebrows.

"*Ma foi*, I see no reason why it should not."

"But does it not occur to you that in such a case there would be little need for mystery? Why should not André have mentioned his name?"

"The course of leaving out the name appears to me, if Monseigneur will permit me to say so, an equally desirable one, whether the party conspired against, be your Eminence or a court fop."

"You argue well," he answered, with a chilling sneer. "But come with me, de Cavaignac, and I will set such an argument before your eyes as can leave no doubt in your mind. *Venez.*"

Obediently I followed him through the white and gold folding-doors into his bedroom. He walked slowly across the apartment, and pulling aside the curtains he pointed to a long black silk domino lying across

the bed; then, putting out his hand, he drew forth a scarlet mask and held it up to the light, so that I might clearly see its colour.

"Are you assured?" he asked.

I was indeed! Whatever doubts there may have been in my mind as to Monsieur André's treachery were now utterly dispelled by this overwhelming proof.

Having communicated my opinion to his Eminence, I awaited, in silence, his commands.

For some moments he paced the room slowly with bent head and toying with his beard. At last he stopped.

"I have sent that knave André upon a mission that will keep him engaged for some moments yet. Upon his return I shall endeavour to discover the name of his accomplice, or rather," he added scornfully, "of his master. I half-suspect--" he began, then suddenly turned to me, "Can you think of any one, Cavaignac?" he enquired.

I hastened to assure him that I could not, whereat he shrugged his shoulders in a manner meant to express the value he set upon my astuteness.

"*Ohimè!"* he cried bitterly, "how unenviable is my position. Traitors and conspirators in my very house, and none to guard me against them!"

"Your Eminence!" I exclaimed, almost indignantly, for this imputation to one who had served him as I had done was cruel and unjust.

He shot a sharp glance at me from under his puckered brows, then softening suddenly, as he saw the look upon my face, he came over to where I stood, and placing his soft white hand upon my shoulder,

"Forgive me, Cavaignac," he said gently, "forgive me, my friend, I have wronged you. I know that you are true and faithful--and the words I spoke were wrung from me by bitterness at the thought that one upon whom I have heaped favours should so betray me--probably," he added bitterly, "for the sake of a few paltry *pistoles*, even as Iscariot betrayed *his* Master."

"I have so few friends, Cavaignac," he went on, in a tone of passing sadness, "so few that I cannot afford to quarrel with the only one of whom I am certain. There are many who fear me; many who cringe to me, knowing that I have the power to make or break them--but none who love me. And yet I am envied!" and he broke into a short bitter laugh, "Envied. 'There goes the true King of France' say noble and simple, as they doff their hats and bow low before the great and puissant Cardinal Mazarin. They forget my fortes but they denounce my foibles, and envying, they malign me, for malice is ever the favourite mask of envy. They envy me, a lonely old man amid all the courtiers who cringe like curs about me. Ah; Cavaignac, 'twas wisely said by that wise man, the late Cardinal Richelieu, that often those whom the world most envies, stand most in need of pity."

I was deeply moved by his words and by the low tone, now sad, now fierce, in which they were delivered--for it was unusual for Mazarin to say so much in a breath, and I knew that André's treachery must have stricken him sorely.

It was not for me to endeavour by argument to convince him that he was in error; moreover, I knew full well that all he said was true, and being no lisping courtier, to whom the art of falsehood comes as naturally as that of breathing, but a blunt soldier who spoke but what was in my heart, I held my peace.

With those keen eyes of his he read what was in my mind; taking me

by the hand, he pressed it warmly.

"Thanks, my friend, thanks!" he murmured, "you at least are true, true as the steel you wear and honour, and so long as this weak hand of mine can sway men's fortunes, so long as I live, you shall not be forgotten. But go now, Cavaignac, leave me; André may return at any moment, and it would awaken his suspicions to find you here, for there are none so suspicious as traitors. Await my orders in the ante-chamber, as usual."

"But is it safe to leave your Eminence alone with him?" I cried, in some concern.

He laughed softly.

"Think you the knave is eager to enjoy the gibbet he has earned as Montfaucon?" he said. "Nay, have no fear, it will not come to violence."

"A rat at bay is a dangerous foe," I answered.

"I know, I know," he replied, "and so I have taken my precautions--unnecessary as I think them--*voyez!*" and as he opened his scarlet robe I beheld the glitter of a shirt of mail beneath.

"'Tis well," I replied, and, bowing, I withdrew.

In the dark and silent ante-chamber--for the pages and their ungodly toys were gone when I returned--I paced slowly to and fro, musing sadly over all that the Cardinal had said, and cursing in my heart that dog André. So bitter did I feel towards the villainous traitor, that, when at the end of half an hour I beheld him standing before me with a false smile upon his pale countenance, it was only by an effort that I refrained from striking him.

"Here is your domino, Monsieur de Cavaignac," he said, placing a long dark garment upon a chair back.

"Is his Eminence ready?" I inquired, in a surly tone. As my tone was usually a surly one, there was no reason why it should affect André upon this occasion; nor did it.

"His Eminence is almost ready," he replied. "He wishes you to wait in the study."

This was unusual and set me thinking. The conclusion I arrived at was that Mazarin had not yet opened his campaign against the luckless servant, but wished to have me within call when he did so.

Without a word to André I unbuckled my sword, as was my custom, and begged him to take it to my room, since I should have no further use for it that night.

"I cannot, Monsieur de Cavaignac," he answered; "you will pardon me, but his Eminence desired me to return at once. He is feeling slightly indisposed, and wishes me to accompany him to the Louvre to-night."

I was surprised indeed, but I did not betray myself by so much as a look. The ways of the Cardinal were strange and unfathomable, especially where justice was concerned, and I was well accustomed to them.

"Indeed!" I replied, gravely. "I trust that it prove nothing serious."

"God forbid!" cried the hypocrite, as he held the door for me to pass into the study; "think, Monsieur de Cavaignac, think what a loss it would be to France if anything were to happen to Monseigneur."

He crossed himself devoutly and his lips moved as if in prayer.

And I, infected by his pious mood, offered up a prayer to heaven with him, a prayer as fervent as any that my heart had ever formed, a prayer that the torturers might have his weakly body to toy with, before it was finally consigned to the hangman at Montfaucon.

When he had left me in the study, I leisurely donned the domino that he had brought me, and judging by what I knew must be taking place within the bedchamber that I should have to wait some little time, I seated myself and listened attentively for any sounds that might pierce the tapestried walls.

But strain my ears as I would, all that I caught was a piteous wail of the words:

"*Je le jure!*" followed by the Cardinal's laugh--so dreadful, so pitiless, so condemning--and the one word, "Forsworn!" then all became silent again.

I accounted for this by the knowledge that the Cardinal seldom raised, but rather lowered his voice, when angered, whilst André, aware of my vicinity, would probably take pains to keep his expostulations from my ears.

At length the door opened, and a figure emerged, clad in a black domino, the hood of which was so closely drawn over his head that I could not see whether he wore a mask or not. Behind him came another similarly clad, and so completely does a domino conceal the outlines of a figure that I did not know which was the Cardinal and which the valet, since they were both, more or less, of the same height. Nor, for that matter, would it have been possible to discern whether they were men or women.

"Are you there, Cavignac?" said Mazarin's voice.

"Here, your Eminence," I cried, springing up.

He who had spoken turned his face upon me, and a pair of eyes flashed at me through the holes of a scarlet mask.

I stood dumbfounded for a moment as I thought of the risk he was thus incurring. Then, remembering that he wore a shirt of mail, I grew easier in my mind.

I glanced at the other silent figure standing beside him with bent head, and wondered what had taken place. But I was given no time to waste in thinking, for as I rose--

"Come, Cavaignac," he said, "put on your mask and let us go." I obeyed him with that promptitude which twenty years of soldiering had taught me, and, throwing open the door of the ante-chamber, I led the way across to a certain panel with which I was well acquainted. A secret spring answered promptly to my touch, and the panel swung back, disclosing a steep and narrow flight of stairs.

Down this we proceeded swiftly, André first, for I cared not to risk being pushed, which would have entailed a broken neck. I followed close upon his heels, whilst the Cardinal brought up the rear. At the bottom I opened another secret door, and passing through, we emerged into the vestibule of a side and rarely-used entrance to the Palace Mazarin.

The next moment we stood in the silent and deserted street.

"Will you see if the carriage is waiting, Cavaignac," said the Cardinal.

I bowed, and was on the point of executing his command, when, laying his hand upon my armé

"When we reach the Louvre," he said, "you will follow at a distance,

lest by standing too close to me you should excite suspicion, and," he added, "on no account speak to me. Now see to the coach."

I walked rapidly to the corner of the Rue St Honoré, where I found an old-fashioned vehicle, such as is used by the better bourgeoisie, in waiting.

With a whistle I aroused the half-slumbering driver, and bidding him sharply hold himself in readiness, I returned to his Eminence.

In silence I followed the two masked figures down the dark, slippery street, for it had rained during the day, and the stones were damp and greasy. The old coachman stood aside for us to enter, little dreaming that the eyes that scanned him through the scarlet mask were those of the all-powerful Cardinal.

He whipped up his horses, and we started off at a snail's pace, accompanied by a plentiful rumbling and jolting, particularly distasteful to one accustomed, as I was, to the saddle.

It was not, however, a long drive to the Louvre, and I was soon relieved, as the coach came to a standstill in a bye-street, as usual.

Alighting, I held my arm to the Cardinal, but, disregarding it, he stepped heavily to the ground unaided, followed by André, on whom I kept a sharp eye, lest the knave should attempt to run.

I followed them at a distance of some eight yards, as I had been ordered, marvelling as I went what could be the Cardinal's plan of action.

We elbowed our way through a noisy dirty rabble, whom a dozen of the King's Guards could scarcely keep from obstructing the side entrance--used only by privileged individuals--in their curiosity to see

the fanciful costumes of the maskers.

It was close upon midnight when we entered the ball-room. His Majesty, I learnt, had already withdrawn, feeling slightly indisposed; therefore I concluded that if there was any serious conspiracy afoot, the blow--which otherwise might have been restrained by the King's presence--could not be long in falling.

Scarcely had we advanced a dozen paces, when my attention was drawn to a tall, thin man, of good bearing, dressed after the fashion of a jester of the days of the third or fourth Henry. He wore a black velvet tunic, which descended to his knees, with a hood surmounted by a row of bells; it was open in front, disclosing a doublet of yellow silk heavily slashed with red. In keeping with this he wore one red and one yellow stocking, and long pointed shoes of untanned leather.

The suit of motley admirably became his tall, lithe figure, and, in the light of that night's events, I have often marvelled why he had chosen so conspicuous a disguise. At the time, however, I thought not of the figure he cut, but watched uneasily the manner in which he followed the Cardinal with his eyes, and, strange to tell, Mazarin returned his gaze with interest.

For some moments I observed his movements closely, and, certain that he was the man to whom André had betrayed his master's disguise, I drew instinctively nearer to the Cardinal.

Presently I lost sight of him in the glittering throng; then, as the musicians struck up a gay measure, the centre of the room was cleared for the dancers, and we were crushed rudely into a corner among the onlookers, he appeared suddenly before us once more.

His Eminence was just in front of me, and within arm's length of the jester; André stood motionless at my side, so motionless that I

thought, for a moment, that Mazarin must be mistaken.

There was a sudden lurch in the crowd, and, simultaneously, I heard a voice ring out loud and clear above the music, the hum of voices and the shuffling of the dancers' feet:

"Thus perish all traitors to the welfare of France!"

At the sound of those words, which sent a chill through my blood, I glanced quickly towards the jester and beheld the glitter of steel in his uplifted hand. Then, before any one could seize the murderer's arm, it had descended with terrific force, and the knife was buried in the Cardinal's breast.

Heedless of the soft low laugh which escaped the Judas beside me, I stood horror-stricken, yet confident in my mind that the shirt of mail worn by Mazarin would have resisted the poignard.

As I saw him, however, fall backwards, without so much as a groan, into the arms of a bystander; as I saw the red blood spurt forth and spread in a great shiny stain upon the black domino, a wild inarticulate cry escaped my lips.

"Notre Dame!" I shrieked the next moment, "You have killed him!" And I would have sprung forward to seize the murderer, when suddenly a strong nervous hand was laid upon my shoulder, and a well-known voice, at the sound of which I stood as if bound by a spell, whispered in my ear:

"Silence, fool! Be still."

The music had ceased suddenly, the dancing had stopped and a funereal hush had fallen upon the throng as it pressed eagerly around the murdered man.

Contrary to my expectations, the assassin made no attempt to escape, but removing his vizor, he showed us the features of that notorious court bully, the Compte de St. Augére--a creature of the Prince de Condé. He folded his arms leisurely across his breast and stood regarding the silent crowd about him with a diabolical smile of scorn upon his thin lips.

Then, as a light gradually broke upon my mind, the masked figure beside me which I had hitherto regarded as André, moved swiftly forward and pulling back the hood from the head of the victim, removed the red mask.

I craned my neck and beheld, as I had expected, the pallid face of the valet set already in the unmistakable mould of the rigor mortis.

Presently a murmur went round the assembly breathing the words "The Cardinal!"

I looked up and saw Mazarin, erect, unmasked, and silent. From him I turned my eyes towards St. Augére; he had not yet met the Cardinal's gaze, and to him the whisper of the crowd had a different meaning; so he smiled on in his quiet scornful way until Mazarin awakened him to realities.

"Is this your handiwork, Monsieur de St. Augére?"

At the sound of that voice, so cold and terrible in its menace, the fellow started violently; he turned to the Cardinal, a look of pitiable terror coming into his eyes. As their glances met, the one so stern and steady, the other furtive and craven, St. Augére seemed as one suddenly smitten with ague; he darted a hurried glance at the victim, and as he beheld André, his face became as ashen as that of the corpse.

"You do not answer," Mazarin pursued; "there is no need, I saw the blow, and you still hold the dagger. You are I doubt not"--oh, the irony of his words! "you are, I doubt not, surprised to see me here. But I heard of this and it was my intention to foil your purpose and to punish you, false noble that you are. Methinks, Monsieur, that you have wrought sufficient evil in your life without culminating it by so dastardly a deed as this. That you should have stooped to stab a poor defenceless valet, whom you considered below the dignity of your sword, this--fallen as you are--I had scarcely expected from one whose veins are fed by the blood of the St. Augéres. And to think," he continued in accents of withering scorn, "that you should attempt to throw upon your deed the glamour of patriotism! What harm has this poor wretch done France? Speak up! Have you naught to say?"

But rage, despair, and shame had choked the Count's utterance, and were fighting a mighty battle in his soul. So violent, that as the Cardinal paused to wait for his reply, his lips twitched convulsively for a moment, then, staggering forward he fell prone upon the ground, in a swoon.

"Call the guard, Monsieur de Cavaignac," said Mazarin to me. "That man has committed his last crime. A week in a dungeon of the Bastille and the companionship of a holy father, may fit him for a better life beyond the scaffold."

"You see," said his Eminence, an hour later, as we stood alone in his study. "if I had allowed the world to know for whom St. Augére's blow was intended, the world would have sympathised, as it always does, with a luckless conspirator; would, mayhap, have loved me less. Again, there are always fanatics ready to copy such acts as these, and had they known that what has ended in the death of an obscure valet was an attempt against the life of Mazarin--I am afraid that some murderer's knife would have cut short my existence before the appointed time."

"As it is," he went on, with a wave of the hand, "St. Augére meets the doom of a cowardly traitor; he dies, regretted by none, for a deed of surpassing loathsomeness. As for André, his death has been too easy."

"How comes it, Monseigneur," I asked, "that he gave no warning to his confederate, made no attempt to defend himself."

"Can you not guess?" he said, smiling, "When I had forced the confession of his treason from him I bound his arms to his side and pressed a gag into his mouth, which I removed together with his mask."

"But the mask?" I cried.

Again he smiled.

"How dull you are; I changed it whilst you were seeing to the coach."

"Why did you conceal the fact from me, Monseigneur?" I cried. "Did you mistrust me?"

"No, no, not that," he said, "I thought it wiser; you might have betrayed my identity by a show of respect. But go, leave me, Cavaignac, it grows late."

I made my bow, and, as I retired, I heard him muttering to himself the words of St. Augére: "Thus perish all traitors to the welfare of France." And with a chuckle he added: "How little he guessed the truth of what he said."
