[illegible] 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."

Alex Dumas was a consummate warrior and a man of great conviction and moral courage. He was renowned for his strength, his swordsmanship, his bravery, and his knack for pulling victory out of the toughest situations. But he was known, too, for his profane back talk and his problems with authority. He was a soldier's general, feared by the enemy and loved by his men, a hero in a world that did not use the term lightly.

But then, by the wiles of conspiracy, he found himself imprisoned in a fortress and poisoned by unknown enemies, without hope of appeal and forgotten by the world. It was no accident that his fate sounds like that of a young sailor named Edmond Dantès, about to embark on a promising career and marry the woman he loves, who finds himself a pawn in a plot he never imagined, locked away without witnesses or trial in the dungeon of an island fortress called the Château d'If. But unlike the hero of his son's novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alex Dumas met no benefactor in the dungeon to lead him to escape or to a hidden treasure. He never learned the reason for his trials, for his abrupt descent from glory to suffering. I had come to Villers-Cotterêts to find the truth of what befell this most passionate defender of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."

In his own lifetime General Dumas was a legendary figure. Official histories of the period often pause to relate some colorful anecdote about him David Johnson, in his book *The French Cavalry, 1792–1815*, writes of the general's early career, "In addition to being a first-class soldier, Dumas was possibly the strongest man in the French army. . . . In the riding school he liked to stand up in the stirrups, take hold of an overhead beam, and lift himself and his horse bodily off the ground." A more plausible story that appears in multiple histories relates that he once fought three duels in one day, winning all three despite being gashed in the head—almost certainly the basis for one of the best-known and most comic scenes in *The Three Musketeers*, in which D'Artagnan challenges Porthos, Athos, and Aramis to duels on the same afternoon (the scene ends happily—"All for one and one for all!"—as a real enemy appears).

Alex Dumas first came to the army's attention when, still a lowly corporal, he single-handedly captured twelve enemy soldiers and marched them back to his camp. Not long afterward, he led four horsemen in an attack on an enemy post manned by over fifty men—Dumas alone killed six and took sixteen prisoner. As a Parisian society journalist in the early nineteenth century summed up, "Such brilliant conduct, on top of a manly physiognomy and extraordinary strength and stature, secured his quick promotion; it wasn't long before his talents proved he deserved it."

As his star rose, Alex Dumas was not one to give orders and then hang back in safety while his subordinates did the dangerous work: he led his troops by going out ahead of them. One of his commanding officers once remarked to him, "My dear Dumas, you make me tremble every time I see you mount a horse and gallop off at the head of your dragoons. I always say to myself, 'It's impossible for him to return in one piece if he keeps going at this pace.' What would become of me if you let yourself get killed?"

Even when Dumas became a general, commanding thousands of troops, he always preferred to lead small units on special operations where he could use his wits and outsized physical skills to prevail. As general-in-chief of the Army of the Alps, roughly the equivalent of a four-star general today, Dumas put on spiked boots and led his men up seemingly impregnable ice cliffs at night to surprise an Austrian battery that seemed as unassailable as the guns of Navarone. He captured the enemy's matériel and turned their own guns against them, forcing immediate surrender. He took not only 1,700 prisoners and over forty artillery pieces but Mont Cenis, the key to the Alps.

When they were still both generals in the French Revolution, Napoleon celebrated Alex Dumas's deeds in the classical terms favored at the time, proclaiming him the incarnation of Horatius Cocles, the ancient hero who saved the Roman Republic by keeping invading barbarians from crossing the Tiber. (French revolutionaries, like American ones, lived in a world of classical allusions—everyone referred to George Washington as Cincinnatus.)

When Napoleon launched the French invasion of Egypt, Dumas went as his cavalry commander, but it was there that the two very different soldiers came to loathe each other. The clash was ideological—Dumas saw himself as a fighter for world liberation, not world domination—but it was also personal.

"Among the Muslims, men from every class who were able to catch sight of General Bonaparte were struck by how short and skinny he was," wrote the chief medical officer of the expedition. "The one, among our generals, whose appearance struck them more was . . . the General-in-Chief of the cavalry, Dumas. Man of color, and by his figure looking like a centaur, when they saw him ride his horse over the trenches, going to ransom prisoners, all of them believed that he was the leader of the expedition."

AT over six feet, with an athletic physique, Alex Dumas cut a dashing figure among the French elite. But how was it that he could enter the elite—and indeed be celebrated as a national hero—at a time when the basis of French wealth was black slavery in the colonies?

The life of General Alex Dumas is so extraordinary on so many levels that it's easy to forget the most extraordinary fact about it: that it was led by a black man, in a world of whites, at the end of the eighteenth century. His mother, Marie Cessette Dumas, was a slave, and he himself was sold into bondage briefly by his own father, an aristocratic fugitive who needed to pay his passage back to France. But by the time he was twenty, Alex had also made it to France and been educated in the classics, philosophy, fine manners, riding, dancing, and dueling. A life of Parisian parties, theaters, and boudoirs ended after a falling-out with his father, and he enlisted as a horseman in the service of the queen. This was in 1786, on the eve of the French Revolution, and when that storm came Dumas seized his chance and began a meteoric ascent through the ranks of the new revolutionary army. He rose to command entire divisions and armies. It would be 150 years before another black officer in the West would rise so high.

The explanations for how such a life had even been possible lie in another forgotten story—that of the world's first civil rights movement. In the 1750s, during the reign of Louis XV, a generation of crusading lawyers went up against one of the most powerful interests in France—the colonial sugar lobby—and won shockingly broad rights for people of color. Slaves taken to France from the colonies brought lawsuits against their masters and won their freedom. (Compare this with the infamous Dred Scott ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, which—in the 1850s—would find that blacks were "so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." The ruling actually contains language mocking the French freedom trials of the previous century.) The French lawsuits were decades earlier than the Somerset case, which launched abolitionism in England.

With the Revolution in 1789, the dream of equality in France suddenly seemed almost limitless. Dumas was not the only black or mixed-race Frenchman to rise up; he rode into battle with the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, the acknowledged master swordsman of Europe (and an acclaimed composer and musician). Like Dumas, the chevalier was of mixed race: his mother had been a freed slave. When the Revolution broke out, the chevalier formed a corps of mounted cavalry known as the Légion Noire, the Black Legion, and recruited Dumas to be his second in command.

By the time he was thirty-one, Dumas had been promoted to general, having earned almost universal admiration from every officer and soldier who fought beside him. A Prussian-raised French officer who openly proclaimed a "horror of negroes" (not to mention an "invincible antipathy for Jews") nevertheless wrote that General Dumas "might be called the best soldier in the world."

The story of General Dumas brilliantly illuminates the first true age of emancipation: a single decade during which the French Revolution not only sought to end slavery and discrimination based on skin color but also broke down the ghetto walls and offered Jews full civil and political rights, ending a near-universal discrimination that had persisted since ancient times. General Alexandre Dumas, wrote a French historian at the end of the nineteenth century, "was a living emblem of the new equality."

Much has been made of the beginnings of abolitionism in the British world and the question of equality during the American Revolution, but the life of Alex Dumas shows that it was the French Revolution that was the first unbridled age of emancipation, and its complex web of dreams and disappointments would underlie the history of freedom and prejudice for the next two centuries. This revolutionary age of racial emancipation introduced much of the world to modern ideas of human freedom—the idea that all men, regardless of religion or race, deserve equal rights, opportunities, respect—but it also spurred the backlash of modern racism and modern anti-Semitism, which fused older prejudices with the new political and scientific idealogies.

During the days of the Terror, Dumas showed a restraint and humanity that could have cost him his command, or even his life. At a time when the most radical defenders of liberty, equality, and fraternity committed atrocities in the name of these ideals, he never shrank from protecting any victim, no matter what his or her background or ideological complexion. Sent to suppress the royalist uprising in the west of France, the Vendée—the darkest hour of the French Revolution—General Dumas risked his career to oppose

the bloodshed he saw all around him. Later, a pro-royalist writer would write, of this "generous republican," that Dumas was one of those rare generals who were "always ready bravely to sell their lives on the battleground, but resolved to break their swords rather than consent to the role of executioners."

Dumas—the son of a marquis and of a slave—had the unique perspective of being from the highest and lowest ranks of society at once. A true idealist, he did not cease to espouse his views once they'd fallen from favor. His capture and imprisonment in an enemy fortress where he languished for two years—until he was released into an even more agonizing labyrinth of betrayal in his own country, by his own side— foretold what would become of the ideals of equality and fraternity, especially for France's men and women of color. And Dumas's birthplace, Saint-Domingue, would have a violent revolution and reemerge as Haiti, to be ostracized by the white nations and moved from the center of the world economy to its desperate margins.

THE dizzying rise and downfall of General Dumas haunt his son's memoir. "I worshipped my father," the novelist writes. "I love him still with as tender and as deep and as true a love as if he had watched over my youth and I'd had the blessing to go from child to man leaning on his powerful arm."

His father had a fairy-tale romance with his mother, Marie-Louise Labouret, a white woman from a respectable bourgeois family; they fell in love when he rode in to protect her town from violence during the first months of the Revolution. This was how the Dumas family came to be based in Villers-Cotterêts; Marie-Louise's father, Claude Labouret, an innkeeper, had grown prosperous from the increased tourist trade the swinging House of Orléans had attracted to the town. Marie-Louise's father's only condition for his daughter's marriage was that Dumas, then still a private in the Queen's Dragoons, receive his first promotion and attain the rank of sergeant. When Dumas returned for his fiancée's hand, he was four ranks higher. He and Marie-Louise would go on to have three children, of which Alexandre, the writer, would be the last and their only son.

In fiction, his father most directly inspired Dumas's novel *Georges*, where a young man of mixed race from a French sugar colony makes his way to Paris, becomes a great swordsman, and returns to the island to avenge a long-ago racial insult (itself an almost exact retelling of a searing incident from his father's youth).

By the end of the novel, Georges has married the woman of his dreams, proven himself superior to the whites in courage and skill, fought duels, rescued damsels, and led a failed slave uprising, which sends him to the scaffold, although he is saved at the last minute by his brother, a mulatto slave-ship captain. Georges has many aspects of Edmond Dantès, the Count of Monte Cristo, who would follow him into print a few months later. Georges remembers everything with an encyclopedic obsession. When he returns to confront the white people who have wronged his family, he profits at every turn by the fact that they live only in the present. The past is not alive to them the way it is to Georges; they do not remember—and thus do not see the reality of things. That reality is the dream Georges has come to embody: that a black man can become a nobleman and be better educated and more talented and powerful than the white plantation owners.

The author of *The Count of Monte Cristo* provided the standard account of the novel's origin. (Notably absent from it. the fact that Alex Dumas's disreputable uncle Charles, on his father's side, once used a Caribbean island called "Monte Cristo" to smuggle sugar and slaves). The novel's main plotline, Dumas once wrote in an essay, was based on a gruesome true-crime story taken from the police archives of Paris, about a man who suffered false political imprisonment after being betrayed by a group of jealous friends After serving seven years behind bars, the man was released when the government changed hands and proceeded to hunt down his old friends and murder them in cold blood. There are many details from this account that Dumas used, but the main character could not be farther from the deadly but ultimately humane count.

The essay ends with the novelist signaling that his various explanations might be mere talk and obfuscation: "And now, everyone is free to find another source for *The Count of Monte Cristo* than the one I give here," he wrote, "but only a very clever man will find it." It's impossible to know what the novelist hoped to inspire when he challenged his clever reader to "find another source for *The Count of Monte Cristo,*" but it seems likely he hoped someone might one day guess another origin for his wronged hero. He had already

transformed his father's character into the avenging mulatto justice-crusader "Georges," but the true-crime story he'd fastened on next offered the chance to universalize his father's struggles. By applying something of Alex Dumas's character to Edmond Dantès, he transformed a criminal—the equivalent of a modern serial killer—into a representative of the universal drive for justice.

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Dumas would give his betrayed protagonist not only the fate of his father's final years but also a fictional taste of a dark sort of triumph. In the novel's hero you can see the premise of every modern thriller from Batman comics to *The Bourne Identity*. No other adventure novel of the nineteenth century carries its resonance After escaping the dungeon and securing the treasure of Monte Cristo, Dantès builds a luxurious subterranean hideout in the caves of the island. He becomes a master of all styles of combat, though he mainly uses his mind to defeat his enemies, bending the law and other institutions to his superhuman will. Knowing that the world is violent and corrupt, the Count becomes a master of violence and corruption—all with the goal of helping the weakest and most victimized people of all. The Count is the first fictional hero to announce himself as a "superman," anticipating Nietzsche—not to mention the birth of comics—by many years.*

The writer Dumas grew up in a very different world from that of his father—a world of rising, rather than diminishing, racism. His fellow novelist Balzac referred to him as "that negro." After the success of *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo,* critics launched an endless, damaging public attack on Dumas, mocking his African heritage. He was a black-skinned tropical weed in the literary soil of France, one declared: "Scratch Monsieur Dumas's hide and you will find the savage . . . a Negro!"

Newspaper artists in the 1850s depicted the novelist with a succession of racist clichés, mocking his literary efforts. One well-known caricature shows Dumas leaning over a hot stove on which he is boiling his white characters alive: his popping eyes glare demonically at a musketeer he is lifting to his impossibly huge lips, apparently about to sample the European's flesh. The

* The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, writing at the height of the Nietzschean vogue in the early twentieth century, went so far as to declare that "many self-proclaimed Nietzscheans are nothing other than . . . Dumasians who, after dabbling in Nietzsche, 'justified' the mood generated by the reading of *The Count of Monte-Cristo* "

writer was only one-quarter black, while his father had been half, but attitudes had dramatically sunk since the late eighteenth century, when his father's African heritage had been an object of admiration.

The novelist tried to make light of the racist insults, but they must have stung. The greatest sin of all, however, was that his father, General Alex Dumas, was forgotten. The son never managed to discover the full truth about his father, or to restore his place in the history books. But he avenged his father in another way, by creating fictional worlds where no wrongdoer goes unpunished and the good people are watched over and protected by fearless, almost superhuman heroes—heroes, that is, a lot like Alex Dumas.

I read thousands of letters about and by General Dumas in the Château de Vincennes, the Bastille-like fortress that is now home to France's military archives. After passing life-size portraits of Napoleon and a chandelier made from hundreds of blunderbuss pistols, I sat surrounded by old veterans researching their regiments, shuffling onionskin pages and reading typed twentieth-century reports, as I read through stacks of elaborately handwritten documents on heavy parchment paper that told the story of the French Revolution as a spectacle of never-ending combat.

The exquisite handwriting that I would come to know as Alex Dumas's often spoke in surprisingly blunt language about his hopes for the future, about his frustrations with the army, and about his faith in the ideals for which he was fighting. The noble-heartedness and fierce physical courage that had made him one of his era's finest soldiers is evident even in piles of bureaucratic daily military reports. Dumas's mocking of army procedure, blistering warnings to those who abused civilians, and trash-talking takedowns of cowardly desk generals often made me laugh out loud. His goodwill toward his fellow soldiers and his willingness to sacrifice everything for the cause of the rights of man and the citizen, no matter who or what stood in his way, sometimes brought me nearly to tears.

Although I found his service records, his dispatches from the field, and the anecdotes about him in nineteenth-century military histories, I could find out little about General Alex Dumas the man—no love letters, no memoir,

not even a will. It was as though he had been effaced by the celebrity of his son and grandson, who had both borne his name. Even the term "Dumas *père*" ("Dumas the father"), as the novelist is known in France, erases the existence of General Dumas: it distinguishes the novelist only from "Dumas *fils*" ("Dumas the son"), a playwright who wrote the drama on which Verdi based *La Traviata*. Indeed, I discovered that the Alexandre Dumas Museum in Villers-Cotterêts, though "dedicated to the life and works of the Three Dumas," was mainly a collection honoring the novelist, with a medium-sized room dedicated to the playwright and a small room dedicated to the general. The small room contained a few portraits, some letters about his battlefield exploits, and a lock of his curly black hair.* My great hope for understanding General Dumas was that the museum safe would contain personal letters, the deathbed papers, the documents that were really important to him, which his widow, Marie-Louise, would have passed on to his son.

The museum sold a booklet describing its founding, written with the sort of zeal for bureaucratic detail North Americans find hard to fathom. As I read about more than a decade of jockeying between the town, the region, and the central government over the status of the Dumas family artifacts, I despaired of my own situation: it could take the town's bureaucracy months, if not years, to agree on a protocol for opening the safe. They were in no hurry. The artifacts had accumulated over the decades in the museum's second-floor offices, and the only person who had known or cared about them was now gone.

As February turned to March, Deputy Mayor Dufour told me whenever I called that he was looking into the matter and seeing what the town intended to do about the safe. He told me he would know in two days. Then another two days. Then ten days. Then I had trouble reaching him on the phone. I came and went from Villers to Paris, then back to New York and back to Paris.

With my growing number of visits, I found out that there were still some partisans of General Dumas around. They called themselves the Association of the Three Dumas, or simply the Dumasians. It was not a big group—mainly a core of a dozen old-timers who considered themselves devotees of courage, camaraderie, and the Dumas spirit. They gathered at Le Kiosque, a little restaurant combined with a used book shop. The establishment was run by a Monsieur Goldie, whose gunmetal French growl was laced with Portuguese-Scottish, and whose grandfathers, both from families based in British India, had somehow landed here after many adventures. I attended the Dumasians' annual convention, where I met an Iranian lady from Maryland who was translating the Dumas oeuvre into Farsi. The association's newly elected president was a dapper international executive who had gotten sucked into the whole thing because he happened to buy a little castle, on the outskirts of town, that General Dumas had rented in 1804; he currently lived in Almaty, Khazakstan, but made sure to return to Villers-Cotterêts to preside over the convention.

The real head, and heart, of the association, though, was a former wine salesman who had just stepped down after founding and leading it for many years. His name was François Angot, and his family were the official huntsmen of the town, keeping alive the tradition that had for centuries made the nearby Retz Forest the destination of royals. Like the new head of the association, Angot had also become involved with the three Dumas via a real-estate transaction—in his case just after World War II, when his father happened to buy the house where General Dumas died. (When Angot's father was forced to sell the house, in the early 1960s, he tried to convince the town to buy it, but there had not been enough interest, and then the new owner, a dentist, put up a locked gate and a sign telling curiosity-seekers not to stop. It was then that Angot had decided the three Dumas needed an association to support their memory in the town.)

Angot had to walk everywhere on crutches because of a car accident. He moved much faster than I did because when he wanted to make some distance, he swung his body furiously forward, then planted the crutches far ahead of him, then swung forward, then planted far ahead. It was like a wild pendulum, an athletic event. And he never tired of showing me Dumasian details in every corner of the town—even the ordinary bars and taverns, with neon and sports and pinup posters on the walls, displayed a stock portrait of the novelist Alexandre Dumas.

Angot quoted lines from *The Three Musketeers* as if it were Shakespeare, and I saw anew the power of the stories to inspire someone to carry on

*I later visited a Parisian shop in the shadow of the Luxembourg Palace, where I learned much about the oddly brisk market in revolutionary and Napoleonic hair clippings

jauntily, no matter how broken down his horse. He announced his politics as *legitimiste*—supporting not just monarchy but Bourbon monarchy, the most far-gone cause—yet he never had an unkind word to say about anyone. His romanticizing of the *Ancien Régime*, complete with fleur-de-lis ascots and letter openers, was balanced by his unbridled love for the ultra-republican, democratic General Dumas, whom he esteemed as the greatest man in the greatest family.

We discussed countless times how I might solve "the problem of the safe." Consulting a safe expert, I had been told there would be few alternatives to somehow blowing it open. This would require a specialist—a sapper, a locksmith, or even a safe-cracker, not to mention permission. But how was this to be accomplished without the cooperation of the town?

Angot was undaunted on my behalf. "What's an adventure without a little danger?" he said with a gleam in his eye.

I came to suspect that Deputy Mayor Dufour wasn't exactly unsympathetic to the problem, either—he just wasn't a convert to the cause. Someone told me that before he was named deputy mayor in charge of culture, his main cultural interest had been cars and motorcycles. It was not clear whether he had ever read a novel by his town's favorite son. So Dufour needed to become a Dumas fan in the broadest sense. After consulting with the Dumasians, I invited him to a lavish lunch at Le Kiosque, where, over several courses with different wines and Cognac, which in French style he commented on extensively, I explained more fully why examining the papers inside the safe was so important to the town's heritage, and even to France itself. The safe might reveal the truth behind some of literature's most beloved stories, Villers-Cotterêts's contribution to world culture, and the fact that his nation had broken down race barriers years ahead of its time

Gradually the deputy mayor became animated, even excited: "One for all, Monsieur Reiss!" he said, raising a glass. "We must open that safe!" He shook my hand warmly when he excused himself to rush back to his deputy-mayoral business. I had a new ally, at least until the buzz wore off.

I took it as an invitation to crack the safe—for history, for destiny, for whatever the hell was inside it—and wasted no time. I found a locksmith in the regional capital who said he had experience in such things, and arranged a rendezvous when the museum was closed. I confirmed the plan with the deputy mayor, who brought up the matter of a donation—2,000 euros, in cash, *s'il vous plaît*—to a General Alexandre Dumas Memorial Safe Fund.

The next day, the locksmith showed up at the museum with cases full of drills and other equipment The deputy mayor arranged for two policemen to be posted in the museum's courtyard, along with the security guard. The safe was in a corner of an upstairs storage room, strewn with cardboard boxes, old clothes, bits of imitation classical pottery, and an assortment of semi-intact department-store mannequins that made me think of revolutionary decapitation. Immediately beside the safe was a bisected mannequin—its upper half sported a tricolor bandolier, of the kind French officials wear at state occasions; its lower half, perched next to it, was clad in a pair of men's white briefs.

The locksmith took off his leather jacket and neatly laid out his drills. He examined the safe and carefully positioned an electronic instrument. "It's all about the spot," he said. "You just have to know where to make the hole."

Then things proceeded the way they do in the movies—finding the place with a stethoscope, drilling, drilling again, click-click, listen, tap, drill, listen . . . He had found the spot! The final sparks flew as he pressed his weight into the drill, and I held my breath.

The door swung open and revealed stack upon stack of paper—seven or eight feet of battered folders, boxes, parchments, and onionskin documents collected over the years by Elaine. All of it related to Alexandre Dumas—father, son, or grandson—but I needed to tear through it looking only at what related to the original: General Dumas. According to my agreement with the deputy mayor, I had just two hours to photograph whatever I could, then the policemen standing guard outside would take possession of the safe's contents and remove it to who knew where, for who knew how long. I took out a camera with a big lens and got to work.