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THE REFUGEES

By **A. CONAN DOYLE,**
Author of "The Return of Sherlock Holmes"

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CHAPTER III.

WHILE Louis had been afford-
ing his court that which he
had openly stated to be the
highest of human pleasures,
the sight of the royal face, the young
officer of the guard outside had been
very busy passing on the titles of the
numerous applicants for admission and
exchanging usually a smile or a few
words of greeting with them, for his
frank, handsome face was a well
known one at the court. Three years
ago he had been an unknown subaltern
bush fighting with Algonquins and Iro-
quois in the wilds of Canada. An ex-
change had brought him back to France
and into the regiment of Picardy, but
the lucky chance of having seized the
bridle of the king's horse one winter's
day in Fontainebleau when the crea-
ture was plunging within a few yards
of a deep gravel pit had done for him
what ten campaigns might have failed
to accomplish.

A gentleman very richly dressed in
black and silver advanced, as the door
opened, with the assured air of a man
whose rights are beyond dispute. Cap-
tain de Catnat, however, took a quick
step forward, and barred him off from
the door.

"I am very sorry, M. de Vivonne,"
said he, "but you are forbidden the
presence."

"Forbidden the presence! I? You are
mad!" He stepped back with gray face
and staring eyes, one shaking hand
half raised in protest.

"I assure you that it is his order."
"If I could have one word with the
king."

"Unfortunately, monsieur, it is im-
possible."

The angry nobleman stamped his foot
and stared at the door as though he
had some thoughts of forcing a pas-
sage. Then, turning on his heel, he
hastened away down the corridor with
the air of a man who has come to a
decision.

"There, now," grumbled De Catnat
to himself, as he pulled his thick dark
moustache, "he is off to make some
fresh mischief. I'll have his sister here
presently, as like as not, and a pleasant
little choice between breaking my
orders and making an enemy of her
for life. By my faith, here is a lady, as I
feared. Ah, heaven be praised, it is a
friend and not a foe. Good morning,
Mlle. Nanon."

"Good morning, Captain de Catnat."
The newcomer was a tall, graceful
brunette, her fresh face and sparkling
black eyes the brighter in contrast with
her plain dress.

"A note from Mme. de Maintenon
to the king. You will hand it to him,
will you not?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle. And how
is madame, your mistress?"

"Oh, her director has been with her
all the morning, and his talk is very,
very good, but it is also very, very
sad. We are not very cheerful when M. Go-
dot has been to see us. But I forget
monsieur is a Huguenot and knows
nothing of directors."

"Oh, but I do not trouble about such
differences."

"Ah, if monsieur could talk to Mme.
de Maintenon a little! She would con-
vert him."

"I would rather talk to Mlle. Nanon,
but if—"

"Oh!" There was an exclamation, a
whisk of dark skirts, and the soubrette
disappeared down a side passage.

Along the broad lighted corridor wa-
gging a very stately and beautiful
lady, tall, graceful and exceedingly
haughty. The lady was past her
youth, it is true, but the magnificent
curves of her queenly figure, the purity
of her complexion, the brightness of
her deep lashed blue eyes and the clear
regularity of her features enabled her
still to claim to be the most handsome
as well as the most sharp tongued wo-
man in the court of France.

"Ah, it is Captain de Catnat!" said
Mme. de Montespan, with a smile.

"Your humble servant, marquise."

"I am fortunate in finding a friend
here, for there has been some ridicu-
lous mistake this morning."

"I am concerned to hear it."

"It was about my brother, M. de Vi-
vonne. It is almost too laughable to
mention, but he was actually refused
admission to the lever."

"It was my misfortune to have to re-
fuse him, madame."

"You, Captain de Catnat? And by
what right?" She had drawn up her
superb figure, and her large blue eyes
were blazing with indignant astonish-
ment.

"The king's order, madame."

"The king! Is it likely that the king
would cast a public slight upon my
family? From whom had you this pre-
posterous order?"

"Direct from the king through Bon-
nets."

"Absurd! Do you think that the king
would venture to exclude a Mortemart
through the mouth of a valet? Go, tell
the king that I am here and would
have a word with him."

"Impossible, madame. I have been
forbidden to carry a message."

"To carry any message?"

"Any from you, madame."

"Come, captain, you improve. It only
needed this insult to make the thing
complete. You may carry a message to
the king from any adventuror, from
any decayed greatness"—she laughed



He slipped in front of her.

shriilly at her description of her rival—
"but none from Francoise de Mor-
tarm, Marquise de Montespan."

"Such are my orders, madame. It
pains me deeply to be compelled to
carry them out."

"You may spare your protestations,
captain. You may yet find that you
have every reason to be deeply pained.
For the last time, do you refuse to
carry my message?"

"I must, madame."

"Then I carry it myself."

She sprang forward at the door, but
he slipped in front of her with out-
stretched arms.

"For God's sake, consider yourself,
madame!" he entreated. "Other eyes
are upon you."

"Pah! Canaille!" She glanced at the
knot of Switzers, whose sergeant had
drawn them off a few paces and who
stood open eyed, staring at the scene.

"I tell you that I will see the king."

"You will ruin me if you pass."

"And none the less I shall do so."

The matter looked serious. De Cat-
nat was a man of resource, but for
once he was at his wits' end. Mme. de
Montespan's resolution, as it was called
in her presence, or affront, as it was
termed behind her back, was pro-
verbial. If she attempted to force her
way, would he venture to use violence
upon one who only yesterday held the
fortunes of the whole court in the
hollow of her hand and who, with her
beauty, her wit and her energy, might
very well be in the same position to-
morrow? If she passed him, then his
future was ruined with the king, who
never brooked the smallest deviation
from his orders.

"If madame would deign to wait,"
said he soothingly, "the king will be
on his way to the chapel in an instant."

"I think not yet time."

"I think the hour has just gone."

"And why should I wait like a
lackey?"

"It is but a moment, madame."

"No, I shall not wait." She took a
step forward toward the door.

But the guardsman's quick ear had
caught the sound of moving feet from
within, and he knew that he was mas-
ter of the situation. "I will take ma-
dame's message," said he.

"Ah, you have recovered your senses!
Go, tell the king that I wish to speak
with him."

He must gain a little time yet. "Shall
I say it through the lord in waiting?"

"No; yourself."

"Publicly?"

"No, no; for his private ear."

"Shall I give a reason for your re-
quest?"

"Oh, you madden me! Say what I
have told you, and at once."

But the young officer's dilemma was
happily over. At that instant the double
doors were swung open, and Louis
appeared in the opening, strutting for-
ward on his high heeled shoes, his
stick tapping, his broad skirts flap-
ping and his courtiers spreading out be-
hind him. He stopped as he came out
and turned to the captain of the guard.

"You have a note for me?"

"Yes, sire."

The monarch slipped it into the pocket
of his scarlet undervest and was ad-
vancing once more when his eyes fell
upon Mme. de Montespan standing
very stiff and erect in the middle of
the passage. A dark flush of anger
shot to his brow and he walked swiftly
past her without a word, but she turned
and kept pace with him down the cor-
ridor.

"I had not expected this honor, ma-
dame," said he.

"I wished to hear my fate from your
own lips," she whispered. "I can bear
to be struck myself, sire, even by him
who has my heart, but it is hard to
hear that one's brother has been
wounded through the mouths of valets
and Huguenot soldiers for no fault of
his save that his sister has loved too
fondly."

"It is no time to speak of such
things."

"When can I see you,
"In your chamber at 4."
"Then I shall trouble your majesty
no further."

She swept him one of the graceful
courtesies for which she was famous,
and turned away down a side passage
with triumph shining in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV.

LOUIS had walked on to his devo-
tions in no very charitable
frame of mind, as was easily to
be seen from his clouded brow
and compressed lips. He knew his late
favorite well, her impulsiveness, her
audacity, her lack of all restraint when
thwarted or opposed. She was capable
of making a hideous scandal, of turn-
ing against him that bitter tongue
which had so often made him laugh at
the expense of others, perhaps even of
making some public exposure which
would leave him the butt and gossip of
Europe. He shuddered at the thought.
At all costs such a catastrophe must be
averted. And yet how could he cut
the tie which bound them? This wo-
man would struggle hard, fight to the
bitter end, before she would quit the
position which was so dear to her. She
spoke of her wrongs. What were her
wrongings?

In his intense selfishness, nurtured
by the eternal battery which was the
very air he breathed, he could not see
that the fifteen years of her life which
he had absorbed or the loss of the hus-
band whom he had supplanted gave
her any claim upon him. In his view
he had raised her to the highest posi-
tion which a subject could occupy.
Now he was weary of her, and it was
her duty to retire with resignation—
nay, even with gratitude for past fa-
vors. She should have a pension, and
the children should be cared for. What
could a reasonable woman ask for more?

On the whole, his conscience acquit-
ted him. But in this one matter he had
been lax. From the first coming of
him from Spain he had never once per-
mitted her to be without a rival. Now
that she was dead the matter was no
better. One favorite had succeeded
another, and if De Montespan had held
her own so long it was rather from her
audacity than from his affection. But
now Father la Chaise and Bossuet
were ever reminding him that he had
topped the summit of his life and was
already upon that downward path
which leads to the grave. The time
had come for gravity and for calm,
neither of which was to be expected
in the company of Mme. de Montespan.

But he had found out where they
were to be enjoyed. From the day
when De Montespan had introduced the
stately and silent widow as a gover-
ness for his children he had found a
never failing and ever increasing pleas-
ure in her society. For a time he had
thought that her piety and her talk of
principle might be a mere mask, but
he was accustomed to hypocrisy all
around him. It was surely unlikely that
a woman who was still beautiful, with
as bright an eye and as graceful a fig-
ure as any in his court, could after a
life spent in the gayest circles pre-
serve the spirit of a nun. But on this
point he was soon undeceived, for
when his own language had become
warmer than that of friendship he had
been met by an iciness of manner and
a brevity of speech which had shown
him that there was one woman at least
in his dominions who had a higher re-
spect for herself than for him. And
perhaps it was better so. The placid
pleasures of friendship were very
soothing after the storms of passion.

To sit in her room every afternoon, to
listen to talk which was not tainted
with flattery and to hear opinions
which were not framed to please his
ear were the occupations now of his
happiest hours. And then her influ-
ence over him was all so good!

And now he knew that the time had
come when he must choose between
her and De Montespan. Their influ-
ences were antagonistic. They could
not continue together. He stood be-
tween virtue and vice, and he must
choose.

Such were the thoughts which ran
through the king's head as he bent
over the rich crimson cushion which
topped his prie-dieu of carved oak. It
knelt in his own inclosure to the right
of the altar, with his guards and his
immediate household around him, while
the court, ladies and cavaliers, filled
the chapel. Piety was a fashion now,
like dark overcoats and lace cravats
and no courtier was so worthy a moun-
der as not to have had a touch of grace-
fulness the king had taken to religion.

It was the habit of Louis as he walk-
ed back from the chapel to receive pe-
titions or to listen to any tales of
wrong which his subjects might bring
to him. On this particular morning
there were but two or three—a Parisian
who conceived himself injured by
the provost of his guild, a peasant
whose cow had been torn by a hunts-
man's dog and a farmer who had had
hard usage from his feudal lord. A
few questions and then a hurried order
to his secretary disposed of each case.

He was about to resume his way again
when an elderly man, clad in the garb
of a respectable citizen and with a
strong, deep lined face which marked
him as a man of character, darted for-
ward and threw himself down upon
one knee in front of the monarch.

"What is this?" asked Louis. "Who
are you, and what is it that you
want?"

"I am a citizen of Paris, and I have
been cruelly wronged."

"You seem a very worthy person. If
you have indeed been wronged you
shall have redress. What have you to
complain of?"

"Twenty of the Blue dragoons of
Languedoc are quartered in my house,
with Captain Dalbert at their head.
They have devoured my food, stolen
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yet the magistrates will give me no re-
dress."

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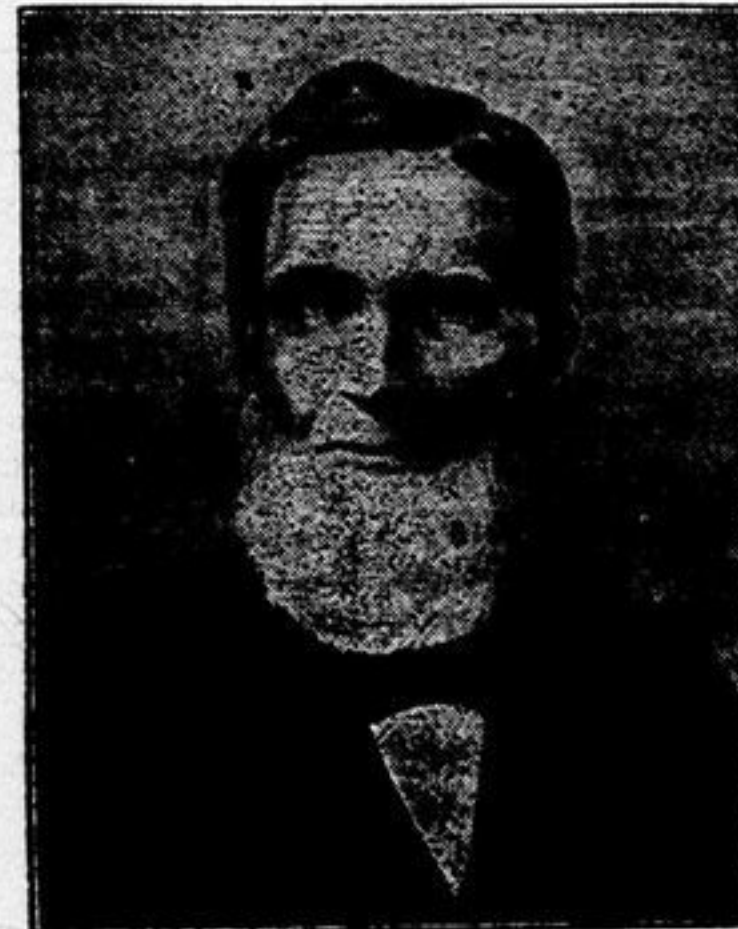
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