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THE REFUGEES

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

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"But surely—surely this could never be," she said at last. "What king of France has married a subject? See how every princess of Europe stretches out her hand to him. The queen of France must be of queenly blood, even as the last was."

"All this may be overcome."
"And then there are the reasons of state. If the king marry, it should be to form a powerful alliance, to cement a friendship with a neighboring nation or to gain some province which may be the bride's dowry. What is my dowry? A widow's pension and a workbox."

"Your dowry, my daughter, would be those gifts of body and of mind with which heaven has endowed you. The king has money enough and the king has provinces enough. As to the state, how can the state be better served than by the assurance that the king will be saved in future from such sights as are to be seen in this palace today?"

"Oh, if it could be so! But think, father; think of those about him—the dauphin, monsieur his brother, his ministers. You know how little this would please them and how easy it is for them to sway his mind."
The faces of the two ecclesiastics who had dismissed her other objections with a smile and a wave clouded over at this.

"My daughter," said the Jesuit gravely, "that is a matter which you may leave to the church. It may be that we, too, have some power over the king's mind and that we may lead him in the right path, even though those of his own blood would fain have it otherwise. The future only can show with whom the power lies. But you? Love and duty both draw you one way now, and the church may count upon you and you upon the church. It will serve you if you in turn will but serve it."

"What higher wish could I have?"
"You will be our daughter, our queen, our champion, and you will heal the wounds of the suffering church. The Huguenots must go. They must be driven forth. The goats must be driven from the sheep. The king is alighted in two minds. Louvois is our friend now. If you are with us, then all will be well."

"But, father, think how many there are! And think, too, of their sufferings should they be driven forth!"
"Their cure lies in their own hands."
"That is true. And yet my heart softens for them."

Pere la Chaise and the bishop shook their heads.
"You would befriend God's enemies, then?"

"No, no; not if they are indeed so."
"Can you doubt it? Is it possible that your heart still turns toward the heresy of your youth?"

"No, father; but it is not in nature to forget that my father and my grandfather—"
"Say; they have answered for their own sins. Is it possible that the church has been mistaken in you? Do you, then, refuse the first favor which she asks of you? You would accept her aid, and yet you would give none in return."

Mme. de Maintenon rose with the air of one who has made her resolution. "You are wiser than I," said she, "and to you have been committed the interests of the church. I will do what you advise."

"You promise it?"
"I do."
Her two visitors threw up their hands together. "It is a blessed day," they cried, "and generations yet unborn will learn to deem it so."

She sat half stunned by the prospect which was opening out in front of her. Ambitious she had, as the Jesuit had surmised, always been—ambitious for the power which would enable her to leave the world better than she found it. But close at the heels of her joy there came a sudden revulsion to doubt and despondency. Was not all this fine prospect a mere day dream? And how could these men be so sure that they held the king in the hollow of their hand? The Jesuit read the fears which dulled the sparkle of her eyes, and answered her thoughts.

"The church redeems its pledges swiftly," said he. "And you, my daughter, you must be as prompt when your own turn comes."

"I have promised, father."
"Then it is for us to perform. You will remain in your room all evening!"
"Yes, father."

"The king already hesitates. I spoke with him this morning, and his mind was full of blackness and despair. His better self turns in disgust from his sins. I have to see and speak with him once more, and I go from your room to his. And when I have spoken he will come from his room to yours, or I have studied his heart for twenty years in vain." They bowed low to her, both together, and left her to her thoughts.

An hour passed, and then a second one, as she sat in her fauteuil, her tapestry before her, but her hands listless upon her lap, waiting for her fate. Her life's future was now being settled for her, and she was powerless to



"Marry the king!"

turn in one way or the other. Daylight turned to the pearly light of evening, and that again to dusk, but she still sat waiting in the shadow. At last, however, there came a quick, sharp tread, crisp and authoritative, which brought her to her feet with flushed cheeks and her heart beating wildly. The door opened, and she saw outlined against the gray light of the outer passage the erect and graceful figure of the king.

"Sire, one instant and mademoiselle will light the lamp."
"Do not call her." He entered and closed the door behind him. "Francoise, the dusk is welcome to me because it screens me from the reproaches which must lie in your glance even if your tongue be too kindly to utter them."

"Reproaches, sire! God forbid that I should utter them!"
"When I last left you, Francoise, it was with a good resolution in my mind I tried to carry it out, and I failed—I failed. I remember that you warned me. Fool that I was not to follow your advice!"

"We are all weak and mortal, sire. Who has not fallen? Nay, sire, it goes to my heart to see you thus."

He was standing by the fireplace, his face buried in his hands, and she could tell by the catch of his breath that he was weeping.

"I cannot do without you, Francoise!" he cried. "I am the loneliest man in all this world, like one who lives on a great mountain peak, with none to bear him company. Who have I for a friend? Whom can I rely upon? Some are for the church; some are for their families; most are for themselves. But who of them all is single minded? You are my better self, Francoise. You are my guardian angel. What the good father says is true, and the nearer I am to you the farther am I from all that is evil. Tell me, Francoise, do you love me?"

"I have loved you for years, sire." Her voice was low, but clear—the voice of a woman to whom coquetry was abhorrent.

"I had hoped it, Francoise, and yet it thrills me to hear you say it. Will you be my wife, Francoise?"

And so the moment had in very truth come. She paused for an instant, only an instant, before taking this last great step, but even that was too long for the patience of the king.

"Will you not, Francoise?" he cried.
"May God make me worthy of such an honor, sire!" said she. "And here I swear that if heaven double my life every hour shall be spent in the one endeavor to make you a happier man!"

She had knelt down, and the king, still holding her hand, knelt down beside her.

"And I swear, too," he cried, "that if my days also are doubled you will and forever be the one and only woman for me."

And so their double oath was taken, an oath which was to be tested in the future, for each did live almost double their years, and yet neither broke the promise made hand in hand on that evening in the shadowy girl chamber.

CHAPTER IX.

IT may have been that Mlle. Nanon, the faithful confidante of Mme. de Maintenon, had learned something of this interview, or it may be that Pere la Chaise, with the shrewdness for which his order is famous, had come to the conclusion that publicity was the best means of holding the king to his present intention, but whatever the source, it was known all over the court next day that the old favorite was again in disgrace and that there was talk of a marriage between the king and the governess of his children. By midday there was none in the court who had not heard the tidings save only Mme. de Montespan, who, alarmed at her lover's absence, had remained in haughty seclusion in

her room and knew nothing of what had passed.

Louis in his innate selfishness had been so accustomed to regard every event entirely from the side of how it would affect himself that it had never struck him that his long suffering family, who had always yielded to him the absolute obedience which he claimed as his right, would venture to offer any opposition to his new resolution. He was surprised, therefore, when his brother demanded a private interview that afternoon and entered his presence without the complaisant smile and humble air with which he was wont to appear before him.

"Why, monsieur, you seem less gay than usual today," said the king, with a smile. "Your dress indeed is bright, but your brow is clouded. I trust that all is well with madame and with the Duc de Chartres."

"Yes, sire, they are well, but they are sad, like myself, and from the same cause."

"Indeed! And why?"

"Have I ever failed in my duty as your younger brother, sire?"
"Never, Philippe, never!" said the king, laying his hand affectionately upon the other's shoulder. "You have set an excellent example to my subjects."

"Then why set a slight upon me?"

"Philippe!"

"Yes, sire, I say it is a slight. We are of royal blood, and our wives are of royal blood also. You married the Princess of Spain; I married the Princess of Bavaria. It was a condescension, but still I did it. My first wife was the Princess of England. How can we admit into a house which has formed such alliances as these a woman who is the widow of a hunchback singer, a mere lamponner, a man whose name is a byword through Europe?"

The king had stared in amazement at his brother, but his anger now overcame his astonishment.

"Upon my word!" he cried, "upon my word! I have said just now that you have been an excellent brother, but I fear that I spoke a little prematurely. And so you take upon yourself to object to the lady whom I select as my wife?"

"I do, sire."

"And by what right?"
"By the right of the family honor, sire, which is as much mine as yours. I look upon it as a slight upon me and a slight upon my wife."

"Your wife! I have every respect for Charlotte Elizabeth of Bavaria, but how is she superior to one whose grandfather was the dear friend and comrade in arms of Henry the Great? Enough! I will not condescend to argue such a matter with you! Be gone, and do not return to my presence until you have learned not to interfere in my affairs."

"For all that, my wife shall not know her!" snarled monsieur.

The king was to have no quiet that day. If Mme. de Maintenon's friends had rallied to her yesterday, her enemies were active today. Monsieur had hardly disappeared before there rushed into the room a youth who bore upon his rich attire every sign of having just arrived from a dusty journey. He was pale faced and auburn haired,

with features which would have been strikingly like the king's if it were not that his nose had been flattened in his youth. The king's face had lightened up at the sight of him, but it darkened again as he hurried forward and threw himself down at his feet.

"Oh, sire," he cried, "spare us this grief—spare us this humiliation! I implore you to pause before you do what will bring dishonor upon yourself and upon us!"

The king started back from him.
"This is intolerable!" he cried. "It was bad from my brother, but worse from my son. You are in a conspiracy with him, Louis. Monsieur has told you to act this part."

The dauphin rose to his feet and looked steadfastly at his angry father.

"I have not seen my uncle," he said. "I was at Meudon when I heard this news—this dreadful news—and I galloped over to implore you to think again before you drag our royal house so low."

"You talk like a fool!" cried his father. "I propose to marry a virtuous and charming lady of one of the oldest noble families of France, and you talk as if I were doing something degrading and unheard of."

"She is the daughter of a man whose vices were well known, her brother is



"Pass it through my heart, sire!"

of the worst repute, she has led the life of an adventuress, she is the widow of a deformed scribbler, and she occupies a menial position in the palace."

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The king had stamped with his foot upon the carpet more than once during this frank address, but his anger blazed into a fury at its conclusion.

"Do you dare," he cried, with flashing eyes, "to call the charge of my children a menial position? I say that there is no higher in the kingdom. Go back to Meudon, sir, this instant and never dare to open your mouth again on the subject."

The young man bowed low and walked with dignity from the chamber. The king's first hot anger had died away by now and had left behind it a cold, bitter spirit which was even more formidable to his antagonists.

But he had little breathing space. His assailants knew that with persistence they had bent his will before, and they trusted that they might do so again. It was Louvois, the minister, now who entered the room, with his majestic port, his lofty bearing, his huge wig and his aristocratic face, which, however, showed some signs of trepidation as it met the baleful eye of the king.

"Well, Louvois, what now?" he asked impatiently. "Has some new state matter arisen?"

"There is but one new state matter which has arisen, sire, but it is of such importance as to banish all others from our mind—your marriage, sire."

"You disapprove of it?"

"Oh, sire, can I help it?"

"Out of my room, sir! Am I to be tormented to death by your impertinities? What! You dare to linger when I order you to go!" The king advanced angrily upon the minister, but Louvois suddenly flashed out his rapier. Louis sprang back, with alarm and amazement upon his face, but it was the hilt and not the point which was presented to him.

"Pass it through my heart, sire!" the minister cried, falling upon his knees, his whole great frame in a quiver with emotion. "I will not live to see your glory fade!"

"Great heaven!" shrieked Louis, throwing the sword down upon the ground. "I believe that this is a conspiracy to drive me mad. Was ever a man so tormented in his life? This will be a private marriage, man, and it will not affect the state in the least degree."

Louvois gathered himself up and shot his rapier back into its sheath.

"Your majesty is determined?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"Then I say no more. I have done my duty." He bowed his head as one in deep dejection when he departed, but in truth his heart was lightened within him, for he had the king's assurance that the woman whom he hated would, even though his wife, not sit on the throne of the queens of France.

These repeated attacks, if they had not shaken the king's resolution, had at least irritated and exasperated him to the utmost. He wore accordingly no very cordial face when the usher in attendance admitted the venerable figure of Father la Chaise, his confessor.

"I wish you all happiness, sire," said the Jesuit, "and I congratulate you from my heart that you have taken the

To be continued.

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