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# STHE S.

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

row night."

the road."

"No?"

"Your plan?" she repeated.

"But how prevent it?"

"No: the messengers."

"We must prevent the archbishop

about the court which are to be bought

for less than I carry in one pocket.

"And waylay the archbishop?"

will gather them together and wait on

"Oh, excellent! You are a prince of

brothers! If no message reach Paris

we are saved. Go; go; do not lose a

"It is very well, Francoise, but what

are we to do with them when we get

them? We may lose our heads over

the matter, it seems to me. After all,

they are the king's messengers, and

we can scarce pass our swords through

"There would be no forgiveness for

is looked into I shall have regained my

how long is your influence to last? A

pleasant life for us if at every change

of favor we have to fly the country!

No, no, Francoise; the most that we

"Where can you detain them?" -

the castle of the Marquis de Montes-

enemy! Oh, Charles, you are not seri-

so. The marquis was away in Paris

"I have thought of that. There is

"Of my husband-of my most bitter

"On the contrary, I was never more

"This will be our key."

yesterday and has not yet returned.

She hunted among her jewels and

"This will be our key. When good

Marceau, the steward, sees it, every

dungeon in the castle will be at our

disposal. It is that or nothing. There

is no other place where we can hold

"But when my husband returns?"

"Ah, he may be a little puzzled as

to his captives. And the complaisant

Marceau may have an evil quarter of

an hour. But that may not be for a

week, and by that time, my little sis-

ter. I have confidence enough in you

ished the campaign." He took her

paced up and down with noiseless

steps upon the deep, soft carpet, her

hands still clinched, her eyes flaming,

her whole soul wrapped and consumed

with jealousy and hatred of her rival.

Ten struck, and 11, and midnight, but

still she waited, fierce and eager, strain-

ing her ears for every footfall which

might be the herald of news. At last it

came. She heard the quick step in the

passage, the tap at the anteroom door

and the whispering of her page. Quiv-

ering with impatience, she rushed in

and took the note herself from the

dusty cavalier who had brought it. It

was but six words scrawled roughly

upon a wisp of dirty paper. It was her

brother's writing, and it ran, "The arch-

CHAPTER X1.

and antagonisms with which the court

his instructions. He waited, therefore,

gave the young American a rapid

sketch of the situation at the court and

bishop will not come tonight."

burried from the room.

picked out a gold ring with a broad

Where is the ring with his arms?"

engraved face.

them safe."

can do is to detain the messengers."

"All very fine, my little sister, but

influence with the king."

pan at Portillac."

CHAPTER X.

ME. DE MONTESPAN still kept her rooms, uneasy in mind at the king's disappearance, but unwilling to show her anxiety to the court by appearing among them or by making any inquiry as to what had occurred. While she thus remained in ignorance of the sudden and complete collapse of her fortunes, she had one active and energetic agent who had lost no incident of what had occurred and who watched her interests with as much zeal as if they were his own. And indeed they were his own, for her brother, M. de Vivonne, had gained everything for which he yearned-money, lands and preferment-through his sister's notoriety. By nature bold, unscrupulous and resourceful, he was not a man to lose the game without playing it out to the very end. Keenly alert to all that passed, he had from the time that he first heard the rumor of the king's intention haunted the antechamber and drawn his own conclusions from what he had seen. Nothing had escaped him—the disconsolate faces of monsieur and of the dauphin, the visit of Pere la Chaise and Bossuet to the lady's room, her return, the triumph which shone in her eyes as she came away from the interview. He had seen Bontems hurry off and summon the guardsman and his friend. He had heard them order their horses to be brought out in a couple of hours' time, and finally from a spy whom he employed among the servants he learned that an unwonted bustle was going forward in Mme. de Main-

that he understood how urgent was the danger. Mme, de Montespan had spent the evening stretched upon a sofa in the worst possible humor with every one around her. There was the sound of an opening door and of a quick step in her anteroom. Was it the king, or at least his messenger with a note

tenon's room, that Mile. Nanon was

half wild with excitement and that two

court milliners had been hastily sum-

moned to madame's apartment. It

was only, however, when he heard

from the same servant that a chamber

was to be prepared for the reception

that night of the archbishop of Paris

from him? But, no; it was her brother, with the haggard eyes and drawn face of a man who is weighed down with his own evil tidings. He turned as he entered, fastened the door and then, striding across the room, locked the other one which led to her boudoir.

"We are safe from interruption." he panted. "I have hastened here, for every second may be invaluable. Have you heard anything from the king?" "Nothing." She had sprung to her

"The hour has come for action, Fran-

"What is it?"

"The king is about to marry Mme. de Maintenon." "The gouvernantel The widow Scar-

ron! It is impossible!" "It is certain that he will marry her."

The woman flung out her hands in a gesture of contempt and laughed loud and bitterly. "You are easily frightened, brother,"

said she. "Ah, you do not know your little sister. Perchance if you were not my brother you might rate my powers more highly. One day is all I ask to bring him back."

"Lut you cannot have it. The marriage is tonight."

"You are mad, Charles." "I am certain of it." In a few bro-

ken sentences he shot out all that he had seen and heard. She listened with a grim face and hands which closed ever tighter and tighter as he proceeded.

"I shall go and see him," she cried, to think that you really may have finsweeping toward the door.

"No, no, Francoise. Believe me, you will ruin everything if you do. Strict orders have been given to the guard to admit no one to the king."

"Had I only a day, Charles, I am sure that I could bring him back to me. There has been some other influence here—that meddlesome Jesuit or the pompous Bossuet, perhaps. Only one day to counteract their wiles. Charles, it must be stopped; I say it must be stopped! I will give anything. everything, to prevent it!"

"What will you give, my sister?" She looked at him aghast. "What! You do not wish me to buy you?" she

"No, but I wish to buy others." "Ha! You see a chance, then!"

presses. I want money."

"One, and one only. But time "How much?"

"I cannot have too much-all that you can spare." With hands which trembled with ea-

gerness she unlocked a secret cupboard in the wall in which she concealed her valuables. A blaze of jewelry met her brother's eyes as he peered over her shoulder. At one side were three drawers, the one over the other. She drew out the lowest one. It was full to the brim with glittering louis d'ors.

"Take what you will!" she said. "And now your plan! Quick!"

He stuffed the money in handfuls into the side pockets of his coat. Coins slipped between his fingers and tinkled and wheeled over the floor, but neither cast a glance at them.

of the chance that this nocturnal ride might be an event which would affect the future history of France. "Are you armed?" he asked. "You

have no sword or pistols?" "No: if I may not carry my gun I had rather not be troubled by tools that I have never learned to use. have my knife. But why do you ask?"

"Because there may be danger. Many have an interest in stopping this marriage. All the first men of the kingdem are bitterly against it. If they could stop us, they would stop it, for tonight at least."

"But I thought it was secret." "There is no such thing at a court. There is the dauphin or the king's brother. Either of them or any of their

from arriving here. Then the marriage would be postponed until tomortriends would be right glad that we should be in the Seine before we reached the archbishop's house this night. "There are a dozen good rapiers But who is this?"

A burly figure had loomed up through the gloom on the path upon which they were going. As it approached, a colored lamp dangling from one of the trees shone upon the blue and silver of an officer of the guards. It was Major de Brissac of De Catinat's own regi- it we can strike to the right along the

"Hello! Whither away?" he asked.

"To Paris, major." Will you not wait, that we may go thing in the gloom which brought a together?"

"I am sorry, but I ride on a matter them, between two dark tree clumps, of urgency."

"Very good. Good night, and a pleasant ride."

"Is he a trusty man, our friend the major?" asked Amos Green, glancing "But consider that before the matter

"True as steel." "Then I would have a word with him." The American hurried back along the way they had come, while De Catinat stood chafing at this unnecessary delay. It was a full five minutes before his companion joined

soldier was hot with impatience. "I think that perhaps you had best ride into Paris at your leisure, my friend," said he. "If I go upon the king's service I cannot be delayed whenever the whim takes you."

him, and the fiery blood of the French

"I am sorry," answered the other quietly. "I had something to say to your major, and I thought that maybe I might not see him again."

"Well, here are the horses," said the guardsman as he pushed open the postern gate. "Have you fed and watered them, Jaques?"

"Yes, my captain," answered the

"Boot and saddle, then, friend Green, and we shall not draw rein again until we see the lights of Paris."

For a mile or more the comrades galloped along. The road was very dark, and it was hard but for the loom upon either side to tell where it lay. De Catinat at least found it so, and he peered anxiously over his horse's ears and stooped his face to the mane in his efforts to see his way.

"What do you make of the road?" he asked at last.

"It looks as if a good many carriage wheels had passed over it today." "What! Mon Dieu! Do you mean to say that you can see carriage wheels

there?" "Certainly. Why not?"

Amos Green laughed heartily. "When you have traveled in the woods by use one's eyes."

"Then you had best ride on, and I are both gone." shall keep just behind you. So! Hola! What is the matter now?"

the saddle.

has fallen." "Can you find it?"

it. Let us push on."

They had galloped for about five minutes in this fashion, De Catinat's

horse's head within a few feet of the other's tail, when there was a second snap, and the guardsman rolled out of the saddle on to the ground. He kept his grip of the reins, however, and was up in an instant at his horse's fondly in his arms, kissed her and then "A thousand thunders of heaven!" For hours after his departure she

he cried. "What was it that happened

"Your leather has gone too." "Two stirrup leathers in five minutes?"

"It is not possible that it should be chance." said the American gravely, swinging himself off his horse. "Why, what is this? My other leather is cut." "And so is mine. I can feel it when I pass my hand along. Have you a tinder box? Let us strike a light." "No, no; the man who is in the dark

is in safety. I let my enemy strike lights."

"My rein is cut also." "And so is mine."

"And the girth of my saddle." "It is a wonder that we came so far with whole bones. Now, who has

played us this little trick?" "Who could it be but that rogue E CATINAT in the meanwhile Jaques? He has had the horses in his was perfectly aware of the charge. By my faith, he shall know importance of the mission what the strappado means when I see which had been assigned to Versailles again!"

him. He knew enough of the intrigues "But why should he do it?" "Ah, he has been set on to it. He has been a tool in the hands of those

was full to understand that every precaution was necessary in carrying out who wished to binder our journey." "Very like. But they must have had until night had fallen before ordering some reason behind. They knew well his soldier-servant to bring round the that to cut our straps would not pretwo horses to one of the less public vent us from reaching Paris, since we gates of the grounds. As he and his could ride bareback or, for that mat-

friend walked together to the spot he ter, could run it if need be." "They hoped to break our necks."

"One neck they might break, but scarce those of two. They could not have thought to stop us. What did they mean, then? They could only have meant to delay us. And why

should they wish to delay us?" "For heaven's sake"- broke in De

Catinat impetuously. "Why should they wish to delay us, then? There's only one reason that I can see-in order to give other folk time to get in front of us and stop us. That is it, captain. I'd lay you a beaver skin to a rabbit pelt that I'm on the track. There's been a party of a dozen horsemen along this ground since the dew began to fall. If we were delayed they would have time to form their plans before we came."

"By my faith, you may be right." said De Catinat thoughtfully. "What

would you propose?" "That we ride back, and go by some less direct way."

"It is impossible. We should have to ride back to the Meudon crossroads, and then it would add ten miles to our journey. We are surely not to be turned from our path by a mere guess. There is the St. Germain crossroad about a mile below. When we reach south side of the river and so change our course."

They mounted and rode on. Sud-"I go there myself within an hour. denly De Catinat's eye caught somesmile to his face. Away in front of lay a vast number of shimmering, glittering yellow points, as thick as flowers in a garden. They were the lights

"See!" he cried, pointing. "There is the city, and close here must be the St. Germain road. We shall take it, so as to avoid any danger."

"Very good! But I should not ride too fast, when your girth may break at any moment."

"Nay, come on. We are close to our journey's end. The St. Germain road opens just round this corner, and then we shall see our way, for the lights will guide us."

He cut his horse with his whip, and the two galloped together round the curve. Next instant they were both down in one wild heap of tossing heads and struggling hoofs, De Catinat partly covered by his horse, and his comrade hurled twenty paces, where he lay silent and motionless in the center of the road.

M. de Vivonne had laid his ambus-

cade with discretion. With a closed carriage and a band of chosen ruffians he had left the palace a good half hour before the king's messengers. On reaching the branch road he had ortle distance along it and had tethered all the horses to a fence under his charge. He had then stationed one of the band as a sentinel some distance up the main highway to flash a light when the two couriers were approaching. A stout cord had been fastened eighteen inches from the ground to the trunk of a wayside sapling, and on receiving the signal the other end was tied to a gatepost upon the farther side. The two cavaliers could not possibly see it, coming as it did at the very curve of the road, and as a consequence their horses fell heavily to the ground and brought them down with them. In an instant the dozen ruffians, who had lurked in the shadow of the "Why, man, I cannot see the road at trees, sprang out upon them, sword in hand, but there was no movement from either of their victims.

M. de Vivonne lit a lantern and night as often as I have," said he, flashed it upon the faces of the two "when to show a light may mean to unconscious men. "This is bad busilose your hair, one comes to learn to ness, Major Despard," said he to the man next him. "I believe that they

"Tut, tut! By my soul, men did not die like that when I was young!" an-There had been the sudden sharp swered the other, leaning forward his snap of something breaking, and the fierce, grizzled face into the light of American had reeled for an instant in the lantern. "Pass your rapier under the third rib of the horses, De la "It's one of my stirrup leathers. It Touche. They will never be fit to set hoof to ground again."

"Yes, but I can ride as well without their straining necks falling back to earth told that the two steeds had

"Very good. I can just see you come to the end of their troubles. "Where is Achille Latour?" asked De Rudd's Harness, Robes, Furs, Blan-Vivonne. "He has studied medicine at Montpellier."

"Here I am, your excellency. It is not for me to boast, but I am as handy a man with a lancet as with a rapier. Which would you have me look to?" -"This one in the road."

The trooper bent over Amos Green. "He is not long for this world," said



The dozen ruffians, who had lurked in the shadow of the trees, sprang out.

To be continued.

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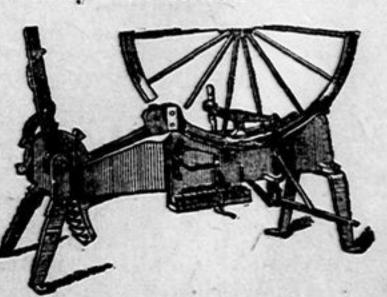
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