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THE REFUGEES

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

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CHAPTER X. MME. 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.

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.

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.

"I shall go and see him," she cried, sweeping toward the door. "No, no, Francois. Believe me, you will ruin everything if you do. Strict orders have been given to the guard to admit no one to the king."

With hands which trembled with eagerness 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.

"Your plan?" she repeated. "We must prevent the archbishop from arriving here. Then the marriage would be postponed until tomorrow night."

"But how prevent it?" "There are a dozen good rapiers about the court which are to be bought for less than I carry in one pocket. I will gather them together and wait on the road."

"But consider that before the matter is looked into I shall have regained my influence with the king." "All very fine, my little sister, but how long is your influence to last? A pleasant life for us if at every change of favor we have to fly the country!

"On the contrary, I was never more so. The marquis was away in Paris yesterday and has not yet returned. Where is the ring with his arms?"



"This will be our key," she said, holding up a gold ring with a broad engraved face. "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 their safe."

For hours after his departure she paced up and down with noiseless steps upon the deep, soft carpet, her hands still clenched, her eyes flaming, her whole soul wrapped and consumed with jealousy and hatred of her rival.

CHAPTER XI. DE CATINAT in the meanwhile was perfectly aware of the importance of the mission which had been assigned to him. He knew enough of the intrigues and antagonisms with which the court was full to understand that every precaution was necessary in carrying out his instructions.

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?"

"Hello! Whither away?" he asked. "To Paris, major." "I go there myself within an hour. Will you not wait, that we may go together?"

"I am sorry, but I ride on a matter of urgency." "Very good. Good night, and a pleasant ride." "Is he a trusty man, our friend the major?" asked Amos Green, glancing back.

"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 moon upon either side to tell where it lay.

"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?" "Why, man, I cannot see the road at all." Amos Green laughed heartily. "When you have traveled in the woods by night as often as I have," said he, "when to show a light may mean to lose your hair, one comes to learn to use one's eyes."

"Then you had best ride on, and I shall keep just behind you. So! Hola! What is the matter now?" "There had been the sudden sharp snap of something breaking, and the American had reeled for an instant in the saddle."

"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 first." "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?"

"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?"

"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 road since the dew began to fall. If we were delayed they would have time to form their plans before we came."

"They mounted and rode on. Suddenly De Catinat's eye caught something in the gloom which brought a smile to his face. Away in front of them, between two dark tree clumps, lay a vast number of shimmering, glittering yellow points, as thick as flowers in a garden. They were the lights of Paris."

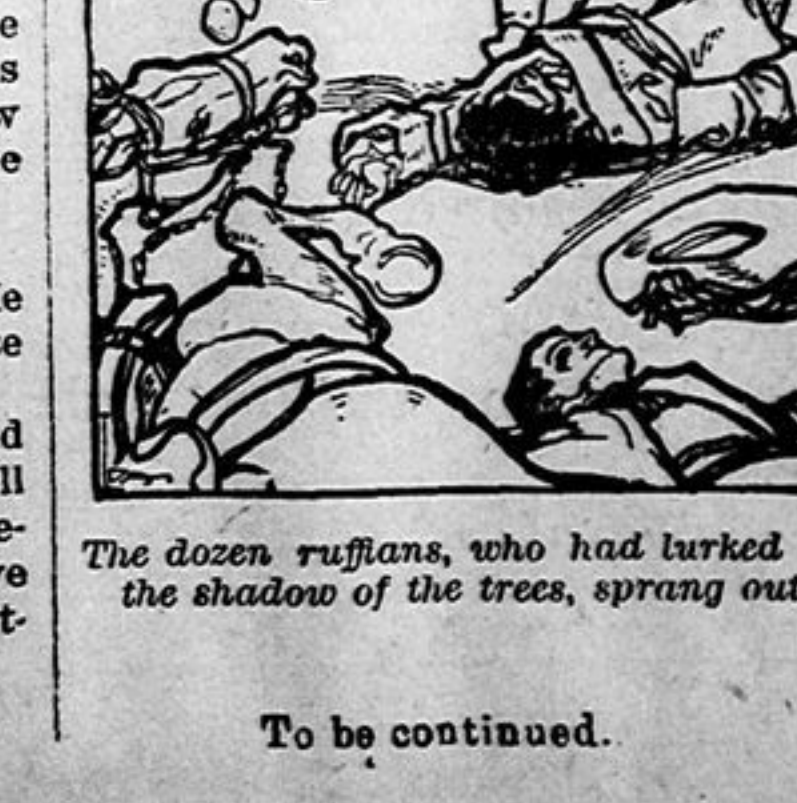
He cut his horse with his whip, and the two galloped together round the curve. Next instant they were both down in one wild heap of tossing heads and struggling hoofs, De Catinat partly covered by his horse, and his comrade hurled twenty paces, where he lay silent and motionless in the center of the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

M. de Vivonne had laid his ambush 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 ordered the coachman to drive some little distance along it and had tethered all the horses to a fence under his charge.

M. de Vivonne lit a lantern and flashed it upon the faces of the two unconscious men. "This is bad business, Major Despard," said he to the man next him. "I believe that they are both gone."

"Tut, tut! By my soul, men did not die like that when I was young!" answered the other, leaning forward his fierce, grizzled face into the light of the lantern. "Pass your rapier under the third rib of the horses, De la Touche. They will never be fit to set hoof to ground again."

Two sobbing gasps and the thud of their straining necks falling back to earth told that the two steeds had come to the end of their troubles. "Where is Achille Latour?" asked De Vivonne. "He has studied medicine at Montpellier."



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

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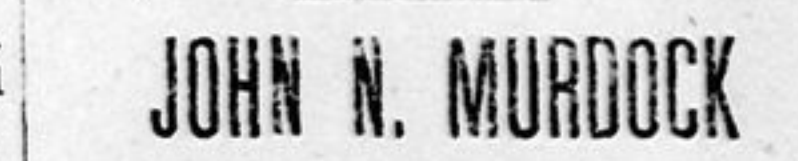
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