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THE REFUGEES

By **A. CONAN DOYLE**, Author of "The Return of Sherlock Holmes" **COPYRIGHT, 1893, BY HARPER & BROTHERS**

It was the soldier's turn to grow excited now. "Well?" he cried, gripping the other's arm. "Well, when we send a scout into the woods, if the matter is worth it, we send a second one at another hour, and so one or other comes back with his hair on. That's the Troquois fashion, and a good fashion too."

"My God, I believe that you have saved me!" "I went back to the major then, and I asked him when he was in Paris to pass by the archbishop's door. I showed him this lump of chalk. 'If we've been there,' said I, 'you'll see a great cross on the left side of the doorpost. If there's no cross, then pull the latch and ask the bishop if he'll come up to the palace as quick as his horses can bring him.' The major started an hour after us. He would be in Paris by half past 10; the bishop would be in his carriage by 11, and he would reach Versailles half an hour ago—that is to say, about half past 12. By the Lord, I think I've driven him off his head!"

De Catinat spun round the cell now, waving his arms and his legs, with his shadow capering up the wall behind him, all distorted in the moonlight. "Oh, if I could but do something for you!" he exclaimed. "You can, then. Lie down on that straw and go to sleep."

By persuasions and a little pushing he got his delighted companion on to his couch again and heaped the straw over him to serve as a blanket. So weary was the young guardsman that it was long past noon and the sun was shining out of a cloudless blue sky before he awoke. For a moment, enveloped as he was in straw, and with the rude arch of the dungeon meeting in four rough hewn groinings above his head, he stared about him in bewilderment. Then in an instant the doings of the day before, his mission, the ambushade, his imprisonment, all flashed back to him, and he sprang to his feet. His comrade, who had been dozing in the corner, jumped up also at the first movement, with his hand on his knife and a sinister glance directed toward the door.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said he. "I thought it was the man. They brought those two loaves and a jug of water just about dawn, when I was settling down for a rest." "And did he say anything?" "No; it was the little black one." "Simon, they called him." "The same. He laid the things down and was gone. I thought that maybe if he came again we might get him to stop. Maybe if we got these stirrup leathers round his ankles he would tell us where we are and what is to be done with us." "Pshaw! What does it matter since our mission is done?" "It may not matter to you—there's no accounting for tastes—but it matters a good deal to me. I'm not used to sitting in a hole, like a bear in a trap, waiting for what other folks choose to do with me."

"There's no help but patience, my friend." "I don't know that. I'd get more help, out of a bar and a few pegs." He opened his coat and took out a short piece of rusted iron and three small, thick pieces of wood, sharpened at one end. "Where did you get those, then?" "These are my night's work. The bar is the top one of the grate. I had a job to loosen it, but there it is. The pegs I whittled out of that log. You see, peg number one goes in here, where I have picked a hole between the stones. Then I've made this other log into a mallet, and with two cracks there it is firm fixed so that you can put your weight on it. Now these two go in the same way into the holes above here. So! Now, you see, you can stand up there and look out of that window without asking too much of your toe joint. Try it."

De Catinat sprang up and looked eagerly out between the bars. "I do not know the place," said he, shaking his head. "It may be any one of thirty castles which lie upon the south side of Paris and within six or seven leagues of it."

He was dropping back to the floor and put his weight upon the bar. To his amazement it came away in his hand. "Look, Amos; look!" he cried. "Ah, you've found it out! Well, I did that during the night. I could make no way with my knife, but when I got the bar out of the grate I managed faster. I'll put this one back now, or some of those folk down below may notice that we have got it loose." "Are they all loose?" "Only the one at present, but we'll get the other two out during the night. You can take that bar out and work with it while I use my own picker at the other. You see, the stone is soft, and by grinding it you soon make a groove along which you can slip the bar. It will be mighty queer if we can't clear a road for ourselves before morning."



He sprang down at him in an instant with his bar.

they should be surprised by the jailer or observed from without. The instant that night fell they were both up upon the pegs, grinding away at the hard stone and tugging at the bars. It was a rainy night, and there was a sharp thunderstorm, but they could see very well, while the shadow of the arched window prevented their being seen. Before midnight they had loosened one bar, and the other was just beginning to give when some slight noise made them turn their heads, and there was their jailer standing, open mouthed, in the middle of the cell, staring up at them.

It was De Catinat who observed him first, and he sprang down at him in an instant with his bar, but at his movement the man rushed for the door and drew it after him just as the American's tool whizzed past his ear and down the passage.

"It is scarce worth while to go on," said De Catinat. "We may as well be doing that as anything else. If my picker had been here I'd have had him down maybe he'll get a stroke or break his neck down those stairs. I've nothing to work with now, but a few rubs with your bar will finish the job. Ah, dear, you are right, and we are fairly tired!"

A great bell had begun to ring in the chateau, and there was a loud buzz of voices and a clatter of feet upon the stones. Hoarse orders were shouted, and there was the sound of turning keys. Five minutes passed, however, and yet another five minutes, without any one appearing.

"Well, I'll have that bar out, after all," said the American at last, rising and stepping over to the window. "Anyhow we'll see what all this caterwauling is about." He climbed up on his pegs as he spoke and peeped out. "Come up!" he cried excitedly to his comrade. "They've got some other game going on here, and they are all a deal too busy to bother their heads about us."

De Catinat clambered up beside him, and the two stood staring down into the courtyard. A brazier had been lit at each corner, and the place was thronged with men, many of whom carried torches. The main gate was open, and a carriage, which had apparently just driven in, was standing at their window. A man wearing a plumed hat and enveloped in a riding coat stepped from the carriage and then, turning round, dragged a second person out after him. There was a scuffle, a cry, a push, and the two figures vanished through the door. As it closed the carriage drove away, the torches and braziers were extinguished, the main gate was closed once more, and all was as quiet as before this sudden interruption.

"Well," gasped De Catinat. "Is this another king's messenger they've got?" "There will be lodgings for two more here in a short time," said Amos Green. "Give me your bar again. This thing is giving. It won't take us long to have it out." He set to work furiously, trying to deepen the groove in the stone, through which he hoped to drag the staple. Suddenly he ceased and strained his ears. "By thunder!" said he. "There's some one working on the other side!" They both stood listening. There were the thud of hammers, the rasping of a saw and the clatter of wood from the other side of the wall. "What can they be doing? Can you see them?" "They are too near the wall." "I think I can make," said De Catinat. "I am slihter than you." He pushed his head and neck and half of one shoulder through the gap between the bars, and there he remained until his friend thought that perhaps he had stuck and pulled his legs to extricate him. He writhed back, however, without any difficulty. "They are building something," he whispered. "Building!"

"Yes. There are four of them, with a lantern." "What can they be building, then?" "It's a shed, I think. I can see four sockets in the ground, and they are fixing four uprights into them." "Well, we can't get away as long as there are four men just under our window."

"Impossible!" "But we may as well finish our work for all that." The gentle scrapings of his iron were drowned amid the noise which swelled ever louder from without. The bar loosened at the end, and he drew it in. The steady hammering and sawing went forward. It was early morning, and the first cold light was beginning to steal over the courtyard before the work was at last finished and the workmen had left. Then at last the prisoners dared to climb up and to see what it was which had been constructed during the night. It gave them a catch of the breath as they looked at it. It was a scaffold. It was buttressed up against their wall, and in the center stood a headman's block.

"I think it is time that we left," said Amos Green. "The window is clear. Let us make a rush for it." "It is useless. I can see a line of armed men along the farther side of the yard. And here come more. See, at the center gate!"

As he spoke the door which faced them opened, and a singular procession filed out. First came two dozen footmen, walking in pairs, all carrying halberds and clad in the same maroon colored liveries. After them a huge bearded man, with his tunic off and the sleeves of his coarse shirt rolled up over his elbows, strode along with a great ax over his left shoulder. Behind him, a priest with an open missal pattered forth prayers, and in his shadow was a woman, clad in black, her neck bared, and a black shawl cast over her head and drooping in front of her bowed face. Within grip of her walked a tall, thin, fierce faced man, with harsh red features and a great jutting nose. He wore a flat velvet cap with a single eagle feather fastened into it by a diamond clasp, which gleamed in the morning light. But bright as was his gem his dark eyes were brighter still and sparkled from under his bushy brows with a mad brilliancy which bore with it something of menace and of terror.

The woman had faltered at the foot of the scaffold, but the man thrust her on, and two of the followers caught her by the either wrist and dragged her forward. "Maurice! Maurice!" she murmured. "I am not fit to die! Oh, Maurice, Maurice, as you hope for forgiveness yourself! Maurice! Maurice!" She strove to get toward him, but he stood with his hand on his breast, gazing at her with a face which was all wreathed and contorted with excitement. She turned away and they back the mantle which had veiled her features.

"Ah, sire!" she cried. "Sire! If you could see me now!" And at the cry and at the sight of that fair pale face De Catinat, looking down from the window, was stricken as though by a dagger, for there, standing beside the headman's block, was she who had been the most powerful, as well as the wittiest and the fairest, of the women of France—none other than Francoise de Montespan, so lately the favorite of the king.

CHAPTER XIII. ON the night upon which such strange chances had befallen his messengers the king sat in his cabinet attended only by Louvois, his minister. There was a tap at the door, and Bontems peeped in. "The archbishop has arrived, sire." "Very well, Bontems. Ask madame to be so good as to stop this way. And order the witnesses to assemble in the anteroom."

As the valet hastened away Louis turned to his minister. "I wish you to be one of the witnesses, Louvois." "To what, sire?" "To my marriage." The minister started. "What, sire! Already?" "Now, Louvois; within five minutes." "Very good, sire."

There had meanwhile been busy goings on in the small room where the red lamp burned in front of the Virgin. Francoise de Maintenon stood in the center, a little flush of excitement on her cheeks and an unwonted light in her placid gray eyes. She was clad in a dress of shining white brocade, trimmed and slashed with silver serge and fringed at the throat and arms with costly point lace. There came a discreet tap at the door. "It is Bontems, madame," said Mlle. Nanon. "He says that the king is ready."

"Then we shall not keep him waiting. Come, mademoiselle, and may God shed his blessing upon what we are about to do!" The little party assembled in the king's anteroom and started from there to the private chapel. In front walked the portly bishop, clad in a green vestment, puffed out with the importance of the function, his missal in his hand and his fingers between the pages at the service de matrimoniis. The king and Mme. de Maintenon walked side by side, she quiet and composed, with gentle bearing and downcast eyes, he with a flush on his dark cheeks and a nervous, furtive look in his eyes, like a man who knows that he is in the midst of one of the great crises of his life. Behind them in solemn silence followed a little group of chosen witnesses, the lean, silent Pere la Chaise, Louvois scowling heavily at the bride, the Maguis de Charmarante, Bontems and Mlle. Nanon. The torches shed a strong yellow light upon this small band as they advanced slowly through the corridors and salons which led to the chapel. A

minute later they were before the altar, and the words were being read which should bind them forever together. As they turned away again, her new ring blazing upon her finger, there was a buzz of congratulation around her. The king only said nothing, but he looked at her, and she had no wish that he should say more. She was still calm and pale, but the blood throbbled in her temples.

But a sudden shadow had fallen across her, and a low voice was in her ear. "Remember your promise to the church," it whispered. She started and turned to see the pale, eager face of the Jesuit beside her. "Your hand has turned cold, Francoise," said Louis. "Let us go, dearest. We have been too long in this dismal church."

Mme. de Montespan had retired to rest, easy in her mind, after receiving the message from her brother. She knew Louis as few others knew him, and she was well aware of that obstinacy in trifles which was one of his characteristics. If he had said that he would be married by the archbishop, then the archbishop it must be. Tonight at least, there should be no marriage.

She dressed herself with care in the morning. No news had come to her of the great event of the previous night, although the court already rang with it, for her haughtiness and her bitter tongue had left her without a friend or intimate. She rose, therefore, in the best of spirits.

She was still in her boudoir putting the last touches to her toilet when her page announced to her that the king was waiting in her salon. Mme. de Montespan could hardly believe in such good fortune. She had racked her brain all morning as to how she should win her way to him, and here he was waiting for her.

He had come with every intention of beginning the interview by telling her bluntly of his marriage, but now, as he looked upon her beauty and her love, he felt that it would have been less brutal to strike her down at his feet. Let some one else tell her, then. She would know soon enough. All this ran swiftly through his mind, and she as swiftly read it off in his brown eyes. "You have something you came to say, and now you have not the heart to say it. God bless the kindly heart which checks the cruel tongue!"

"No, no, madame," said Louis. "I would not be cruel. I cannot forget that my life has been brightened and my court made brilliant during all these years by your wit and your beauty. But times change, madame, and for every reason I think that it is best that we should arrange in the way which we discussed the other day and that you should withdraw yourself from the court."

"Withdraw, sire! For how long?" "It must be a permanent withdrawal, madame. I need not say that I shall make your retirement a happy one as far as in me lies. Your allowance shall be fixed by yourself. A palace shall be erected for you in whatever part of France you may prefer, provided that it is twenty miles from Paris. An estate also!"

"Oh, sire, how can you think that such things as these would compensate me for the loss of your love?" Her heart had turned to lead within her breast. Had he spoken hotly and angrily she might have hoped to turn him, as she had done before, but this gentle and yet firm bearing was new to him, and she felt that all her arts were vain against it.

"Madame," said he, "I have thought well over this matter, and it must be as I say. There is no other way at all. I have ordered your brother to have his carriage at the postern at 9 o'clock, for I thought that perhaps you would wish to retire after midnight."

"To hide my shame from a laughing court! Yet it was thoughtful of you, sire. And yet perhaps this, too, was a duty, since we hear so much of duties nowadays, for who was it but you?" "I know, madame, I know. I confess it. I have wronged you deeply. Believe me that every atonement which is in my power shall be made. Nay, do not look so angrily at me, I beg. Let our last sight of each other be one which may leave a pleasant memory behind it."

"A pleasant memory!" All the gentleness and humility had fallen from her now, and her voice had the hard ring of contempt and of anger. "A pleasant memory! It may well be pleasant to you, who are released from the woman whom you ruined, who can turn now to another without any pale face to be seen within the saloons of your court to remind you of your perfidy. But to me, phing in some lonely country house, spurned by my husband, despised by my family, the scorn and jest of France, far from all which gave a charm to life, far from the man for whose love I have sacrificed everything—this will be a very pleasant memory to me, you may be sure."

The king's eyes had caught the angry gleam which shot from hers, and yet he strove hard to set a curb upon his temper. He felt that it was for him to do so, and yet it did not come kindly to his imperious nature. "There is nothing to be gained, madame," said he, "by using words which are neither seemly for your tongue nor for my ears. You will do me the justice to confess that where I might command I am now entreating." "Oh, you show too much consideration, sire! Our relations of twenty years or so can scarce suffice to explain such forbearance from you." "Your words are bitter, madame. Francoise, be reasonable, I implore you. We have both left our youth behind." "The allusion to my years comes gracefully from your lips." "Ah, you distort my words. Then I shall say no more. You may not see me again, madame. Is there no question which you would wish to ask me before I go?"

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To be continued.