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THE REFUGEES

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

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"Good God," she cried, "is this a man? Has it a heart? Are these the lips which have told me so often that he loved me? Are these the eyes which have looked so fondly into mine? Can you then thrust away a woman whose life has been yours as you put away the St. Germain palace when a more showy one was ready for you? And this is the end of all those vows, those sweet whispers, those persuasions, those promises—this!"

"Nay, madame, this is painful to both of us."

"Pain! Where is the pain in your face? I see anger in it because I have dared to speak truth. I see joy in it because you feel that your vile task is done."

"My patience can bear no more!" cried the king furiously. "I leave you, madame, and forever!"

But her fury had swept all fear and discretion from her mind. She stepped between the door and him, her face flushed, her eyes blazing, her face thrust a little forward, one small white satin slipper tapping upon the carpet.

"You are in haste, sire? She is waiting for you doubtless. But it was a disappointment last night, was it not, my poor sire? Ah, and for the government, what a blow! Great heaven, what a blow! No archbishop, no marriage, all the pretty plan gone wrong! Was it not cruel?"

Louis gazed at the beautiful, furious face in bewilderment, and it flashed across his mind that perhaps her grief had turned her brain. What else could be the meaning of this wild talk of the archbishop and the disappointment? It would be unworthy of him to speak harshly to one who was so afflicted. He must soothe her, and, above all, he must get away from her.

"You have had the keeping of a good many of my family jewels," said he. "I beg that you will still retain them as a small sign of my regard."

He had hoped to please her and to calm her, but in an instant she was over at her treasure cupboard hurling double handfuls of precious stones down at his feet. They clinked and rattled, the little pellets of red and yellow and green, rolling, glinting over the floor and rapping up against the oak panels at the base of the walls.

"They will do for the governess if the archbishop comes at last!" she cried.

He was more convinced than ever that she had lost her wits. A thought struck him by which he might appeal to all that was softer and more gentle in her nature. He stepped swiftly to the door, pushed it half open and gave a whispered order. A youth with long golden hair waving down over his black velvet doublet entered the room. It was her youngest son, the Count of Toulouse.

"I thought that you would wish to bid him farewell," said Louis.

She stood staring as though unable to realize the significance of his words. Then it was borne suddenly upon her that her children as well as her lover were to be taken from her, that this other woman should see them and speak with them and win their love while she was far away. All that was evil and bitter in the woman flushed suddenly up in her until for the instant she was what the king had thought her. If her son was not for her then he should be for none. A jeweled knife lay among her treasures ready to her hand. She caught it up and rushed at the cowering lad.

Louis screamed and ran forward to stop her, but another had been swifter than he. A woman had darted through the open door and had caught the up-raised wrist. There was a moment's struggle, two queenly figures swayed and strained, and the knife dropped between their feet. The frightened Louis caught it up, and, seizing his little son by the wrist, he rushed from the apartment. Françoise de Montespan staggered back against the ottoman to find herself confronted by the steady eyes and set face of that other Françoise, the woman whose presence fell like a shadow at every turn of her life.

"I have saved you, madame, from doing that which you would have been the first to bewail."

"Saved me! It is you who have driven me to this—you, whom I picked up when you were hard pressed for a crust of bread or a cup of sour wine. What had you? You had nothing—nothing except a name which was a laughingstock. And what did I give you? I gave you everything. You know that I gave you everything—money, position, the entrance to the court. You had them all from me. And now you mock me!"

"Madame, I do not mock you. I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

"Pity? Ha, ha! A Mortemart is pitted by the widow Scarron! Your pity may go where your gratitude is, and where your character is. We shall be troubled with it no longer then."

"Your words do not pain me. I have never had an evil thought toward you."

"None toward me? Oh, woman, woman!"

"What have I done, then? The king came to my room to see the children taught. He stayed. He talked. He asked my opinion on this and that. Could I be silent, or could I say other than what I thought?"

"And so, by your own confession,

you stole the king's love from me, most virtuous of widows!"

"I had all gratitude and kindly thought for you. You have, as you have so often reminded me, been my benefactress. It was not necessary for you to say it, for I had never for an instant forgotten it."

"Pah! Your hypocrisy sickens me! If you pretend to be a nun, why are you not where the nuns are? I was honest, and what I did I did before the world. You, behind your priests and your directors and your pri-dieux and your missals—do you think that you deceive me as you deceive others?"

Her antagonist's gray eyes sparkled for the first time, and she took a quick step forward, with one white hand half lifted in rebuke.

"You may speak as you will of me," she said. "To me it is no more than the foolish parakeet that chatters in your anteroom. But do not touch upon things which are sacred. Ah, if you would but raise your own thoughts to such things—if you would but turn them inward and see before it is too late how vile and foul is this life which you have led! What might you not have done? His soul was in your hands like clay for the potter. If you had raised him up, if you had led him on the higher path, if you had brought out all that was noble and good within him, how your name would have been loved and blessed from the chateau to the cottage! But no. You dragged him down, you wasted his youth, you drew him from his wife, you marred his manhood. Take heed, madame, for God's sake take heed ere it be too late! For all your beauty there can be for you, as for me, a few short years of life. Then, when that brown hair is white, when that white cheek is sunken, when that bright eye is dimmed—ah, then God pity the sin stained soul of Françoise de Montespan!"

Her rival had sunk her head for the moment before the solemn words and the beautiful eyes. For an instant she stood silent, cowed for the first time in all her life, but then the mocking, defiant spirit came back to her, and she glanced up with a curling lip.

"I am already provided with a spiritual director, thank you," said she.



A woman had darted through the open door.

"Oh, madame, you must not think to throw dust in my eyes! I know you and know you well!"

"On the contrary, you seem to know less than I had expected. If you know me so well, pray what am I?"

All her rival's bitterness and hatred rang in the tones of her answer. "You are," said she, "the governess of my children and the secret mistress of the king."

"You are mistaken," answered Mme. de Maintenon serenely. "I am the governess of your children and I am the king's wife."

CHAPTER XIV.

OFTEN had De Montespan feigned a faint in the days when she wished to disarm the anger of the king. But now she knew what it was to have the senses struck out of her by a word. She could not doubt the truth of what she heard. There was that in her rival's face, in her steady eye, in her quiet voice, which carried absolute conviction with it. She stood stunned for an instant, panting, her outstretched hands feeling at the air, her defiant eyes dulling and glazing. Then with a short sharp cry, the wall of one who has fought hard and yet knows that she can fight no more, her proud head drooped and she fell forward senseless.

Mme. de Maintenon stooped and raised her up in her strong white arms. There were true grief and pity in her eyes as she looked down at the snow-pale face which lay against her bosom, all the bitterness and pride gone out of it and nothing left save the tear which sparkled under the dark lashes and the petulant droop of the lip, like that of a child which has wept itself to sleep. She laid her on the

ottoman and placed a silken cushion under her head. Then she gathered together and put back into the open cupboard all the jewels which were scattered about the carpet. Having locked it and placed the key on a table where its owner's eye would readily fall upon it, she struck a gong which summoned the page.

"Your mistress is indisposed," said she. "Go and bring her maids to her." And so, having done all that lay with her to do, she turned away from the great silent room where, amid the velvet and the gilding, her beautiful rival lay like a crushed flower, helpless and hopeless.

Helpless enough, for what could she do? And hopeless, too, for how could fortune aid her? The instant that her senses had come back to her she had sent away her waiting women and lay with clasped hands and a drawn face planning out her own weary future. She must go, that was certain. Her spirit was broken at last. She must accept defeat, and she must go.

She rose from the couch feeling that she had aged ten years in an hour. There was much to be done and little time in which to do it. She had cast down her jewels when the king had spoken as though they would atone for the loss of his love. But now that the love was gone there was no reason why the jewels should be lost too. If she had ceased to be the most powerful woman in France, there was her pension, of course. That would be a munificent one, for Louis was always generous. And then there was all the spoil which she had collected during these long years, the jewels, the pearls, the gold, the vases, the pictures, the crucifixes, the watches, the trinkets—altogether they represented many millions of livres. With her own hands she packed away the most precious and portable of them, while she arranged with her brother for the safe keeping of the others. By evening all was ready, and she had arranged that her property should be sent after her to Petit Bourg, to which castle she intended to retire.

It wanted half an hour of the time fixed for her departure when a young cavalier whose face was strange to her was ushered into her room.

He came with a message from her brother.

"M. de Vivonne regrets, madame, that the rumor of your departure has got abroad among the court."

"What do I care for that, monsieur?" she retorted.

"He says, madame, that the courtiers may assemble at the west gate to see you go; that Mme. de Neully will be there, and the Duchesse de Chambord and—"

The lady shrank with horror at the thought of such an ordeal. To drive away from the palace where she had been more than queen under the scornful eyes and bitter gibes of personal enemies!

"Tell my brother, monsieur, that I should be obliged if he would make fresh arrangements."

"He bade me say that he had done so, madame."

"Ah! At what hour, then?"

"Now. As soon as possible."

"I am ready. At the west gate, then?"

"No. At the east. The carriage waits."

"And where is my brother?"

"We are to pick him up at the park gate. He is watched, and were he seen beside the carriage all would be known."

"Very good. Then, monsieur, if you will take my cloak and this casket we may start at once."

They made their way by a circuitous route through the less used corridors, she hurrying on like a guilty creature, a hood drawn over her face and her heart in a flutter at every stray footfall. But fortune stood her friend. She met no one and soon found herself at the eastern postern gate. A couple of phlegmatic Swiss guardsmen leaned upon their muskets upon either side, and the lamp above shone upon the carriage which awaited her. The door was open, and a tall cavalier swathed in a black cloak handed her into it. He then took the seat opposite to her, slammed the door, and the caleche rattled away down the main drive.

It had not surprised her that this man should join her inside the coach, for it was usual to have a guard there, and he was doubtless taking the place which her brother would afterward occupy. That was all natural enough. But when ten minutes passed by and he had neither moved nor spoken she peered at him through the gloom with some curiosity. At last the silence impressed her with a vague uneasiness. It was time to bring it to an end.

A thrill ran through her nerves. Who or what could he be, this silent man? Then suddenly it struck her that he might be dumb.

"Perhaps monsieur is afflicted," she said. "Perhaps monsieur cannot speak. If that be the cause of your silence, will you raise your hand, and I shall understand." He sat rigid and silent.

Then a sudden mad fear came upon her, shut up in the dark with this dreadful, voiceless thing. She screamed in her terror and strove to pull down the window and open the door. But a grip of steel closed suddenly round her wrist and forced her back into her seat. They were already out on the country roads far beyond Versailles. It was darker than before, heavy clouds had banked over the heavens, and the rumbling of thunder was heard low down on the horizon.

The lady lay back panting upon the leather cushions of the carriage. She was a brave woman, and yet this sudden, strange horror coming upon her at the moment when she was weakest had shaken her to the soul. She crouched in the corner, staring across with eyes which were dilated with terror at the figure on the other side. If he would, but say something. Any revelation, any menace, was better than this si-



"Maurice!" she screamed. "Maurice! It is you?"

shot an ice cold shudder through Françoise de Montespan. It was that of all men upon earth, this was he whom she most dreaded and whom she had least thought to see.

"Maurice!" she screamed. "Maurice! It is you?"

"Yes, little wife, it is I. We are restored to each other's arms, you see, after this interval."

"Oh, Maurice, how you have frightened me! How could you be so cruel? Why would you not speak to me?"

"Because it was so sweet to sit in silence and to think that I really had you to myself after all these years, with none to come between. Ah, little wife, I have often longed for this hour."

"I have wronged you, Maurice; I have wronged you! Forgive me?"

"We do not forgive in our family, my darling Françoise."

"You may kill me if you will," she moaned.

"I will," said he simply.

Still the carriage flew along, jolting and staggering in the deeply rutted country roads. The storm had passed, out the growl of the thunder and the faroff glint of a lightning flash were to be heard and seen on the other side of the heavens.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked at last.

"To Portillac, my little wife."

"And why there? What would you do to me?"

"I would silence that little lying tongue forever. It shall deceive no more men."

"You would murder me? You have a stone for a heart?"

"It is true. My other was given to a woman."

"Oh, my sins are indeed punished. Can I do nothing to atone?"

"I will see that you atone."

"You have a sword by your side, Maurice. Why do you not kill me, then, if you are so bitter against me? Why do you not pass it through my heart?"

"Rest assured that I would have done so had I not an excellent reason."

"Why, then?"

"I will tell you. At Portillac I have the right of the high justice, the middle and the low. I am seigneur there, and can try, condemn and execute. It is my lawful privilege. This pitiful king will not even know how to avenge you, for the right is mine and he cannot gainsay it without making an enemy of every seigneur in France."

He opened his mouth again and laughed at his own device, while she, shivering in every limb, turned away from his cruel face and glowing eyes.

To be continued.

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