

THE REFUGEES

By A. CONAN DOYLE,

Author of "The Return of Sherlock Holmes"

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(Continued from Saturday.)

"It may be so, and yet I am sad and weary when nothing amuses. Who is that knocking?" asked the king.

"It is my companion," said madame. "What is it, mademoiselle?"

"M. Cornelle, to read to the king," said the young lady, opening the door.

"Ah, yes, sire; I know how foolish is a woman's tongue, and so I have brought a wiser one than mine here to charm you. M. Racine was to have come, but I hear that he has had a fall from his horse, and he sends his friend in his place. Shall I admit him?"

"Oh, as you like, madame, as you like," said the king listlessly. At a sign from Mlle. Madon a little peaky man with a shrewd, petulant face and long gray hair falling back over his shoulders entered the room. He bowed profoundly three times and then seated himself nervously on the very edge of the stool, from which the lady had removed her workbasket.

"Shall it be a comedy, or a tragedy, or a burlesque pastoral?" Cornelle asked timidly. "There is my 'Pretended Astrologer.'"

"Yes, that will do."

Cornelle commenced to read his comedy, while Mme. de Maintenon's white and delicate fingers picked among the many colored silks which she was weaving into her tapestry.

From time to time she glanced across, first at the clock and then at the king, who was leaning back, with his lace handkerchief thrown over his face. It was twenty minutes to 4 now, but she knew that she had put it back half an hour and that the true time was ten minutes past.

"Tut, tut!" cried the king suddenly. "There is something amiss there. The second last line has a limp in it surely."

"It was one of his follies to pose as a critic, and the wise poet would fall in with his corrections, however unreasonable they might be."

"Your majesty is perfectly right," said Cornelle unflinchingly. "I shall mark the passage and see that it is corrected."

He picked up his book again and was about to resume his reading when the king said:

"M. Cornelle, I am obliged to you for what you have read, and I regret that I must now interrupt your comedy. Some other day perhaps I may have the pleasure of hearing the rest of it."

He smiled in the gracious fashion which made all who came within his personal influence forget his faults and remember him only as the impersonation of dignity and of courtesy.

The poet, with his book under his arm, slipped out, while his majesty said to madame:

"I see by your clock that it is 4 o'clock. I must go."

"My clock, sire, is half an hour slow."

"Half an hour!" The king looked dismayed for an instant and then began to laugh. "Nay, in that case," said he, "I had best remain where I am, for it is too late to go, and I can say with a clear conscience that it was the clock's fault rather than mine."

"I trust that is nothing of very great importance, sire," said the lady, with a look of demure triumph in her eyes.

"By no means."

"No state affair?"

"No, no; it was only that it was the hour at which I had intended to rebuke the conduct of a presumptuous person. But perhaps it is better as it is. My absence will in itself convey my message and in such a sort that I trust I may never see that person's face more at my court. But, ah, what is this?"

The door had been flung open, and Mme. de Montespan, beautiful and furious, was standing before them.

CHAPTER VII.

MME. DE MAINTENON was a woman who was always full of self-restraint and of cool resource. With a frank smile of greeting she advanced with outstretched hand.

"This is indeed a pleasure," said she. But Mme. de Montespan was very angry, so angry that she was evidently making strong efforts to keep herself within control and to avoid breaking into a furious outburst. She disregarded her rival's outstretched hand and turned toward the king, who had been looking at her with a darkening face.

"I fear that I intrude, sire."

"Your entrance, madame, is certainly somewhat abrupt."

"I must crave pardon if it is so. Since this lady has been the governess of my children I have been in the habit of coming into her room unannounced."

"As far as I am concerned, you are most welcome to do so," said her rival, with perfect composure.

"I confess that I had not even thought it necessary to ask your permission, madame," the other answered coldly.

"Then you shall certainly do so in the future, madame," said the king sternly. "It is my express order to you that every possible respect is to be shown in every way to this lady."

"Oh, to this lady?" with a wave of her hand in her direction. "Your majesty's commands are of course our laws. But I must remember that it is this lady, for sometimes one may get confused as to which name it is

that your majesty has picked out for honor."

She was superb in her pride and her fearlessness as she stood, with her sparkling blue eyes and her heaving bosom, looking down upon her royal lover. Angry as he was, his gaze lost something of its sternness as it rested upon her round full throat and the delicate lines of her shapely shoulders.

"There is nothing to be gained, madame, by being insolent," said he.

"Truth is always mistaken for insolence, sire, at the court of France."

"You forget yourself, madame. I beg that you will leave the room."

"I must first remind your majesty that I was so far honored as to have an appointment this afternoon. At 4 o'clock I had your royal promise that you would come to me. I cannot doubt that your majesty will keep that promise in spite of the fascinations which you may find here."

"I should have come, madame, but the clock, as you may observe, is half an hour slow, and the time had passed before I was aware of it."

"I beg, sire, that you will not let that distress you. I am returning to my chamber, and 5 o'clock will suit me as well as 4."

"I thank you, madame, but I have not found this interview so pleasant that I should seek another."

"Then your majesty will break your word!"

"Silence, madame! This is intolerable!"

"It is indeed intolerable!" cried the angry lady, throwing all discretion to the winds. "Oh, I am not afraid of you, sire. I have loved you, but I have never feared you. I leave you here. I leave you with your conscience and your—your lady confessor. But one word of truth you shall hear before I go. You have been false to your wife, and you have been false to your mistress, but it is only now that I find that you can be false also to your word."

She swept him an indignant courtesy and glided with head erect out of the room.

The king sprang from his chair as if he had been stung. Accustomed as he was to his gentle little wife and the even gentler La Valliere, such language as this had never before intruded itself upon the royal ears. And then his whole soul rose up in anger at her, at the woman who had dared to raise her voice against him. He gave an inarticulate cry of rage and rushed to the door.

"Sire!" Mme. de Maintenon, who had watched keenly the swift play of his emotions over his expressive face, took two quick steps forward and hid her hand upon his arm.

"I will go after her."

"And why, sire?"

"To forbid her the court."

"But, sire—"

"You heard her! It is infamous! I shall go."

"But, sire, could you not write?"

"No, no; I shall see her." He pulled open the door.

"Oh, sire, be firm, then!" It was with an anxious face that she watched him start off, walking rapidly, with angry gestures, down the corridor. Then she turned back and, dropping upon her knees on the prie-dieu, bowed her head in prayer for the king, for herself and for France.

De Catinat, the guardsman, had employed himself in showing his young friend from over the water all the wonders of the great palace.

De Catinat had arranged that the American should remain with his friend Major de Brissac, as the time had come round for his own second turn of guard. He had hardly stationed himself in the corridor when he was astonished to see the king, without escort or attendants, walking swiftly down the passage. His delicate face was disfigured with anger, and his mouth was set grimly, like that of a man who had taken a momentous resolution.

"Officer of the guard," said he shortly.

"Yes, sire."

"I wish your assistance."

"I am at your command, sire."

"Is there a subaltern here?"

"Lieutenant de la Tremouille is at the side guard."

"Very well. You will place him in command. You will yourself go to the apartment of M. de Vivonne. If he is not there you must go and seek him. Wherever he is, you must find him within the hour."

"Yes, sire."

"You will give him an order from me. At 6 o'clock he is to be in his carriage at the east gate of the palace. His sister, Mme. de Montespan, will await him there, and he is charged by me to drive her to the chateau of Petit Bourg. You will tell him that he is answerable to me for her arrival there."

"Yes, sire." De Catinat raised his sword in salute and started upon his mission.

The king passed on down the corridor and opened a door which led him into a magnificent anteroom, all one blaze of mirrors and gold, furnished to a marvel with the most delicate ebony and silver suit, on a deep red carpet of Ateppo, as soft and yielding as the moss of a forest.

Without knocking, he opened the door farther and passed on into the lady's boudoir.

It was a large and rosy room, very different from that from which he had



"All is over forever between us," he cried harshly.

just come. Three long windows from ceiling to floor took up one side, and through the delicate pink tinted blinds the evening sun cast a subdued and dainty light. At the farther side, prone upon an ottoman, her face buried in the cushion, her beautiful white arms thrown over it, the rich coils of her brown hair hanging in disorder across the long curve of her ivory neck, lay, like a drooping flower, the woman whom he had come to discard.

At the sound of the closing door she had glanced up, and then, at sight of the king, she sprang to her feet and ran toward him, her hands out, her blue eyes bedimmed with tears.

"Ah, sire," she cried, with a pretty little sobburst of joy through her tears, "then I have wronged you! I have wronged you cruelly! But you have come after me to tell me that you have forgiven me!" She put her arms forward with the trusting air of a pretty child who claims an embrace as her due, but the king stepped swiftly back from her.

"All is over forever between us," he cried harshly. "Your brother will await you at the east gate at 6 o'clock, and it is my command that you wait there until you receive my further orders."

She staggered back as if he had struck her. "Leave you!" she cried.

"You must leave the court."

"The court! Aye, willingly; this instant! But you! Ah, sire, you ask what is impossible."

"I do not ask, madame; I order. Since you have learned to abuse your position, your presence has become intolerable. The united kings of Europe have never dared to speak to me as you have spoken today. Such things are not done twice, madame. You see your mistake now. At 6 o'clock you leave Versailles forever." His eyes flashed and his small upright figure seemed to swell in the violence of his indignation, while she leaned away from him, one hand across her eyes.

"Oh, I have been wicked!" she cried.

"I know it; I know it! How could I speak to you so! How could I! Oh, that some blight may come upon this unhappy tongue! I, who have had nothing but good from you! I to insult you, who are the author of all my happiness! Oh, sire, forgive me, forgive me; for pity's sake forgive me!"

Louis was by nature a kind hearted man. His feelings were touched, and his pride also was flattered by the abasement of this beautiful and haughty woman. His face softened somewhat in its expression as he glanced at her, but he shook his head, and his voice was as firm as ever as he answered.

"It is useless, madame," said he. "I have thought this matter over for a long time, and your madness today has only hurried what must in any case have taken place. You must leave the palace."

"I will leave the palace. Say only that you forgive me. Oh, sire, I cannot bear your anger. It crushes me down. I am not strong enough. It is not banishment, it is death to which you sentence me. Think of our long years of love, sire, and say that you forgive me. Oh, will you not give your anger up for mine? My God, he weeps! Oh, I am saved; I am saved!"

"No, no, madame," cried the king, dashing his hand across his eyes. "You see the weakness of the man, but you shall also see the firmness of the king. As to your insults today, I forgive them freely, if that will make you more happy in your retirement. But a time has come when it is necessary to review our past life and to prepare for that which is to come."

"Ah, sire, you pain me. You are not yet in the prime of your years, and you speak as if old age were upon you. In a score of years from now it may be time for folks to say that age has made a change in your life."

The king winced. "Who say so?" he cried angrily.

"Oh, sire, it slipped from me unawares. Think no more of it. Nobody says so. Nobody."

"You are hiding something from me. Who is it who says this?"

"Oh, sire, it was but foolish court gossip, all unworthy of your attention. To me, sire, you are as pleasing and as gracious as when you first won the heart of Mlle. Tonny-Charente."

The king smiled as he looked at the beautiful woman before him.

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