

THE REFUGEES

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

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(Continued from Wednesday.)

"Out of my room, sir! Am I to be tormented to death by your importunities? What! You dare to linger when I order you to go!" The king advanced angrily upon the minister, but Louvois suddenly flashed out his rapier. Louis sprang back, with alarm and amazement upon his face, but it was the hit and not the point which was presented to him.

"Pass it through my heart, sire!" the minister cried, falling upon his knees, his whole great frame in a quiver with emotion. "I will not live to see your glory fade!"

"Great heaven!" shrieked Louis, throwing the sword down upon the ground. "I believe that this is a conspiracy to drive me mad. Was ever a man so tormented in his life? This will be a private marriage, man, and it will not affect the state in the least degree."

Louvois gathered himself up and shot his rapier back into its sheath.

"Your majesty is determined?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

"Then I say no more. I have done my duty." He bowed his head as one in deep dejection when he departed, but in truth his heart was lightened within him, for he had the king's assurance that the woman whom he hated would, even though his wife, not sit on the throne of the queens of France.

These repeated attacks, if they had not shaken the king's resolution, had at least irritated and exasperated him to the utmost. He wore accordingly no very cordial face when the usher in attendance admitted the venerable figure of Father la Chaise, his confessor.

"I wish you all happiness, sire," said the Jesuit, "and I congratulate you from my heart that you have taken the great step which must lead to content both in this world and the next."

"I have had neither happiness nor contentment yet, father," answered the king peevishly. "I have never been so pestered in my life. The whole court has been on its knees to me to change my intention."

The Jesuit looked at him anxiously out of his keen gray eyes.

"Fortunately your majesty is a man of strong will," said he, "and not to be so easily swayed as they think."

"No, no, I did not give an inch. But still it must be confessed that it is very unpleasant to have so many against one."

"Then there is the more credit to your majesty for having resisted them. You have done nobly, sire. You have earned the praise and blessing of holy church."

"I trust that what I have done is right, father," said the king gravely. "I should be glad to see you again later in the evening, but at present I desire a little leisure for solitary thought."

Father la Chaise left the cabinet with a deep distrust of the king's intentions. It was obvious that the powerful appeals which had been made to him had shaken if they had failed to alter his resolution. What would be the result if more were made? And more would be made. That was as certain as that darkness follows light. Some master card must be played now which would bring the matter to a crisis at once.

The bishop of Meaux was waiting in the anteroom, and Father la Chaise in a few brief words let him see the danger of the situation and the means by which they should meet it. Together they sought Mme. de Maintenon in her room. As the two plotters looked upon her perfect complexion, her regular features, so calm and yet so full of refinement, and the exquisite grace of her figure and bearing they could not but feel that if they failed in their ends it was not for want of having a perfect tool.

She had risen at their entrance, and her expression showed that she had read upon their faces something of the anxiety which filled their minds.

"You have evil news!" she cried. "No, no, my daughter." It was the bishop who spoke. "But we must be on our guard against our enemies, who would turn the king away from you if they could."

Her face shone at the mention of her lover. "Ah, you do not know!" she cried. "He has made a vow. I would trust him as I would trust myself."

But the Jesuit's intellect was arrayed against the intuition of the woman. "Our opponents are many and strong," said he, shaking his head. "We must bring the matter to an end."

"And how, father?"

"The marriage must be at once, this very night if possible."

"Oh, father, you ask too much. The king would never consent to such a proposal."

"It is he that will propose it."

"And why?"

"Because we shall force him to. It is only thus that all opposition can be stopped. When it is done the court will accept it. Until it is done they will resist it."

"What would you have me do, then, father?"

"Resign the king."

"Resign him!" She turned as pale as a lily.

"It is the best course, madame."

"An, father, I might have done it last month, last week, even yesterday morning."

"Fear not, madame. We advise you for the best. Go to the king now, at once. Say to him that you have heard that he has been subjected to much annoyance upon your account, that you cannot bear to think that you should be a cause of dissension in his own family and that therefore you will release him from his promise and will withdraw yourself from the court forever."

She cast a light mantle about her shoulders.

"I follow your advice," she said. "I believe that you are wiser than I. But, oh, if he should take me at my word!"

"He will not take you at your word."

The king had remained alone in his cabinet, wrapped in somewhat gloomy thoughts. Suddenly there came a gentle tap at the door, and there was the woman who was in his thoughts standing in the twilight before him. He sprang to his feet and held out his hands with a smile.

"Francoise! You here? Then I have at last a welcome visitor, and it is the first one today."

"Sire, I fear that you have been troubled."

"I have indeed, Francoise."

"But I have a remedy for it."

"And what is that?"

"I shall leave the court, sire, and you shall think no more of what has passed between us. I have brought discord where I meant to bring peace. Let me retire to St. Cyr or to the Abbey of Fontevrault, and you will no longer be called upon to make such sacrifices for my sake."

The king turned deathly pale and clutched at her shawl with a trembling hand, as though he feared that she was about to put her resolution into effect that very instant.

"No, no, Francoise; you must not leave me! You must stay with me and be my wife." He could hardly speak for agitation, and he still grasped at her dress to detain her.

"Some time must elapse before our wedding, sire. Yet during all that interval you will be exposed to these annoyances. How can I be happy when I feel that I have brought upon you so long a period of discomfort? A day would be too long, sire, for you to be unhappy through my fault. It is a misery to me to think of it. Believe me, it would be better that I should leave you."

"Never! You shall not! Why should we even wait a day, Francoise? I am ready. You are ready. Why should we not be married now?"

"At once? Oh, sire!"

"We shall. It is my wish. It is my order. That is my answer to those who would drive me. Let it be done secretly, Francoise. I will send in a trusty messenger this very night for the archbishop of Paris, and I swear that if all France stand in the way he shall make us man and wife before he departs."

"Is it your will, sire?"

"It is, and, ah, I can see by your eyes that it is yours also! We shall not lose a moment, Francoise. What a blessed thought of mine, which will silence their tongues forever! When it is ready they may know, but not before."

The king was all on fire with the excitement of this new resolution. He had lost his air of doubt and discontent, and he paced swiftly about the room with a smiling face and shining eyes; then he touched a small gold bell, which summoned Bontems, his private body servant.

"What o'clock is it, Bontems?"

"It is nearly 6, sire."

"Hum!" The king considered for some moments.

"Do you know where Captain de Catinat is, Bontems?"

"He was in the grounds, sire, but I heard that he would ride back to Paris tonight."

"Does he ride alone?"

"He has one friend with him."

"Who is this friend—an officer of the guards?"

"No, sire; it is a stranger from over the seas—from America, as I understand—who has stayed with him of late."

"A stranger! So much the better. Go, Bontems, and bring them both to me."

"I trust that they have not started, sire. I will see." He hurried off and was back in ten minutes in the cabinet once more.

"Well?"

"I have been fortunate, sire. Their horses had been led out and their feet were in the stirrups when I reached them."

"Where are they, then?"

"They await your majesty's orders in the anteroom."

"Show them in, Bontems, and give admission to none, not even to the minister, until they have left me."

To De Catinat an audience with the monarch was a common incident of his duties, but it was with profound astonishment that he learned from Bontems that his friend and companion was included in the order.

(To Be Continued.)

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