

THE REFUGEES

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

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(Continued from Saturday.)

said De Catinat thoughtfully. "What would you propose?"

"That we ride back, and go by some less direct way."

"It is impossible. We should have to ride back to the Meudon crossroads, and then it would add ten miles to our journey. We are sure not to be turned from our path by a mere guess. There is the St. Germain crossroad about a mile below. When we reach it we can strike to the right along the south side of the river and so change our course."

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.

"See!" he cried, pointing. "There is the city, and close here must be the St. Germain road. We shall take it, so as to avoid any danger."

"Very good! But I should not ride too fast, when your girth may break at any moment."

"Nay, come on. We are close to our journey's end. The St. Germain road opens just round this corner, and then we shall see our way, for the lights will guide us."

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 ambulance 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. He had then stationed one of the band as a sentinel some distance up the main highway to flash a light when the two couriers were approaching. A stout cord had been fastened eighteen inches from the ground to the trunk of a wayside sapling, and on receiving the signal the other end was tied to a gatepost upon the farther side. The two cavaliers could not possibly see it, coming as it did at the very curve of the road, and as a consequence their horses fell heavily to the ground and brought them down with them. In an instant the dozen ruffians, who had lurked in the shadow of the trees, sprang out upon them, sword in hand, but there was no movement from either of their victims.

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."

"Here I am, your excellency. It is not for me to boast, but I am as handy a man with a lancet as with a rapier. Which would you have me look to?"

"This one in the road."

The trooper bent over Amos Green.

"He is not long for this world," said



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

he. "Methinks that it were well for me to pass my dagger through his throat."

"Not for your life!" cried the leader.

"If he die without wounds, they cannot lay it to our charge. Turn now to the other."

The man bent over De Catinat and placed his hand upon his heart. As he did so the soldier heaved a long sigh, opened his eyes and gazed about him with the face of one who knows neither where he is nor how he came there. De Vivonne, who had drawn his hat down over his eyes and muffled the lower part of his face in his mantle, took out his flask and poured a little of the contents down the injured man's throat. In an instant a dash of color had come back into the guardsman's bloodless cheeks and the light of memory into his eyes. He struggled up on to his feet and strove furiously to push away those who held him. But his head still swam, and he could scarce hold himself erect.

"I must to Paris," he gasped. "I must to Paris. It is the king's mission. You stop me at your peril."

"He has no hurt save a scratch," said the ex-doctor.

"Then hold him fast. And first carry the dying man to the carriage."

The lantern threw but a small ring of yellow light, so that when it had been carried over to De Catinat Amos Green was left lying in the shadow. Now they brought the light back to where the young man lay. But there was no sign of him. He was gone.

De Vivonne caught the false doctor by the throat and, hurling him down, would have choked him upon the spot had the others not dragged him apart. "You lying dog!" he cried. "Is this your skill? The man has fled, and we are ruined!"

"He has done it in his death struggle!" gasped the other hoarsely. "He cannot be far off."

"That is true. He cannot be far off," cried De Vivonne. "He has neither horse nor arms. You, Despard and Raymond de Carnac, guard the other, that he play us no trick. Do you, Latour, and you, Turberville, ride down the road and wait by the south gate. If he enter Paris at all he must come in that way. If you get him, tie him before you on your horse and bring him to the rendezvous. In any case, it matters little, for he is a stranger, this fellow, and only here by chance."

The two horsemen rode off in pursuit of the fugitive, and De Catinat, still struggling desperately to escape, was dragged down the St. Germain road and thrust into the carriage, which had waited at some distance while these incidents were being enacted. Three of the horsemen rode ahead, the coachman was curtly ordered to follow them, and De Vivonne, having dispatched one of the band with a note to his sister, followed after the coach with the remainder of his desperadoes.

The unfortunate guardsman had now entirely recovered his senses and found himself with a strap round his ankles and another round his wrists, a captive inside a moving prison which lumbered heavily along the country road. He had been stunned by the shock of his fall, and his leg was badly bruised by the weight of his horse. His mind, however, pained him more than his body. He sank his head into his pinioned hands and stamped madly with his feet, rocking himself to and fro in his despair. What a fool, a treble fool, he had been! He, an old soldier, who had seen something of war, to walk with open eyes into such a trap!

But then came a return of that common sense which lies so very closely beneath the impetuosity of the Celt. The matter was done now, and he must see if it could not be mended. Amos Green had escaped. That was one grand point in his favor. And Amos Green had heard the king's message and realized its importance. It was true that he knew nothing of Paris, but surely a man who could pick his way at night through the forests of Maine would not be balked in finding so well known a house as that of the archbishop of Paris.

And then the thought of escape occurred to his mind. Might he not even now be in time perhaps to carry his own message? Who were these men who had seized him? And where were they taking him to? Full of curiosity, he peered out of the windows.

A horseman was riding close up on either side, but there was glass in front of the carriage, and through this he could gain some idea as to his whereabouts. The clouds had cleared now, and the moon was shining brightly, bathing the whole wide landscape in its shimmering light. To the right lay the open country, broad plains with clumps of woodland and the towers of castles peering out from above the groves. On the left, but far away, lay the glimmer of Paris. They were leaving it rapidly behind. Whatever his destination, it was neither the capital nor Versailles. Then he began to count the chances of escape. His sword had been removed, and his pistols were still in the holsters beside his unfortunate horse. He was unarmed, then, even if he could free himself, and his captors were at least a dozen in number. There were three on ahead, riding abreast along the white moonlit road. Then there was one on each side, and he should judge by the clatter of hoofs that there could not be fewer than half

a dozen behind. That would make exactly twelve, including the coachman—too many, surely, for an unarmed man to hope to battle. At the thought of the coachman he had glanced through the glass front at the broad back of the man, and he had suddenly in the glimmer of the carriage lamp observed something which struck him with horror.

The man was evidently desperately wounded. It was strange indeed that he could still sit there and flick his whip with so terrible an injury. In the back of his great red coat, just under the left shoulder blade, was a gash in the cloth where some weapon had passed, and all round was a wide patch of dark scarlet which told its own tale. Nor was this all. As he raised his whip the moonlight shone upon his hand, and De Catinat saw, with a shudder, that it also was splashed and clogged with blood. The guardsman craned his neck to catch a glimpse of the man's face, but his broad brimmed hat was drawn low, and the high collar of his driving coat was raised, so that his features were in the shadow.

And now they had come to a spot where the main road ran onward, but a smaller side track wound away down the steep slope of a hill, and so in the direction of the Seine. The advance guard had kept to the main road and the two horsemen on either side were trotting in the same direction when, to

De Catinat's amazement, the carriage suddenly swerved to one side and in an instant plunged down the steep incline, the two stout horses galloping at their topmost speed, the coachman standing up and lashing furiously at them and the clumsy old vehicle bounding along in a way which threw him backward and forward from one seat to the other. Behind him he could hear a shout of consternation from the escort and then the rush of galloping hoofs. Fast as the coach went, its pursuers went faster still. The rattle of their hoofs was at the very back, and suddenly at one of the windows there came into view the red, distended nostrils of a horse. Slowly it drew forward, the muzzle, the eye, the ear, the mane, coming into sight as the rider still gained, and then above them the fierce face of Despard and the gleam of a brass pistol.

"At the horse, Despard; at the horse!" cried an authoritative voice from behind.

The pistol flashed, and the coach lurched over as one of the horses gave a convulsive spring. But the driver still shrieked and lashed with his whip, while the carriage bounded onward.

But now the road turned a sudden curve, and there, right in front of



"At the horse, Despard; at the horse!"

them, not a hundred paces away, was the Seine, running cold and still in the moonshine. The bank on either side of the highway ran straight down without any break to the water's edge. There was no sign of a bridge, and a black shadow in the center of the stream showed where the ferryboat was returning after conveying some belated travelers across. The driver never hesitated, but, gathering up the reins, he urged the frightened creatures into the river. They hesitated, however, when they first felt the cold water about their hocks, and even as they did so one of them, with a low moan, fell over upon her side. Despard's bullet had found its mark. Like a flash the coachman hurled himself from the box and plunged into the stream, but the pursuing horsemen were all round him before this, and half a dozen hands had seized him ere he could reach deep water and had dragged him to the bank. His broad hat had been struck off in the struggle, and De Catinat saw his face in the moonshine. Great heavens! It was Amos Green.

CHAPTER XII.

THE desperadoes were as much astonished as was De Catinat when they found that they had recaptured in this extraordinary manner the messenger whom they had given up for lost.

"A thousand thunders!" cried one. "And this is the man whom that devil's brat Latour would make out to be dead!"

"And how came he here?"

"And where is Etienne Arnaud?"

"He has stabbed Etienne, and taken his coat and hat."

"What! While we were all within stone's cast?"

"Aye, there is no other way out of it."

"By my soul," cried old Despard, "I had never much love for old Etienne, but I have emptied a cup of wine with him before now, and I shall see that he has justice. Let us cast these reins

(To Be Continued.)

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