

THE REFUGEES

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

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(Continued from Monday.)

"Well, but even if we could get out into the courtyard where could we turn to them?"

"One thing at a time, friend. Any way, there is more air in the yard than in here, and when the window is clear we shall soon plan out the rest."

The two comrades did not dare to do any work during the day for fear



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 the 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 an inch lower I'd have had him. Well,

maybe he'll get a stroke or break his neck down those stairs. I've nothing to work with now, but a few rags with your bar will finish the job. Ah, dear, you are right, and we are fairly treed!"

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 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 a small door immediately in front of 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 the sudden interruption.

"Well!" gasped De Catinat. "Is this another king's messenger they've got?"

"There will be lodgings for two more here in 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 manage," said De Catinat. "I am slighter 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 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 headsman'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 either wrist and dragged her forward.

"Oh, Maurice! Maurice!" she screamed. "I am not fit to die! Oh, forgive me, Maurice, as you hope for forgiveness yourself! Maurice! Maurice!" She strove to get toward him, to clutch at his wrist, at his sleeve, but he stood with his hand on his sword, gazing at her with a face which was all wreathed and contorted with merriment. She turned away and threw back the mantle which had shrouded 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 headsman'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 step 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 serges and fringed at the throat and arms with

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