

The Refugees

Edith Wharton

Table of Contents

<u>The Refugees</u>	1
<u>Edith Wharton</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	7
<u>III</u>	10
<u>IV</u>	13
<u>V</u>	18

The Refugees

The Refugees

Edith Wharton

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V

The Refugees

I

ON SEPTEMBER 8, 1914, Charley Durand stood helplessly blinking through his spectacles at the throng of fugitives which the Folkestone train had just poured out on the platform of Charing Cross.

He was aware of a faint haze on the spectacles, which he usually kept clear of the slightest smirch. It had been too prolonged, too abominable, too soul-searching, the slow torture of his hours of travel with the stricken multitude in which he had found himself entangled on the pier at Boulogne.

Charley Durand, professor of Romance languages in a Western university, had been spending the first weeks of a hard-earned sabbatical holiday in wandering through Flanders and Belgium, and on the fatal second of August had found himself at Louvain, whose university a year or two previously had honored him with a degree.

He had left Belgium at once, and deeply disturbed by the dislocation of his plans had carried his shaken nerves to a lost corner of Normandy, where he had spent the ensuing weeks in trying to think the war would soon be over.

It was not that he was naturally hard or aloof about it, or wanted to be; but the whole business was so contrary to his conception of the universe and his fagged mind at the moment was so incapable of prompt readjustment that he needed time to steady himself. Besides, his conscience told him that his first duty was to get back unimpaired to the task which just enabled him to keep a mother and two sisters above want. His few remaining francs had gone to the various relief funds whose appeals penetrated even to his lost corner; and he therefore decided that the prudent course, now that everybody said the horror was certainly going to last till November, would be to slip over to cheap lodgings in London and bury his nose in the British Museum.

This decision, as it chanced, had coincided with the annihilation of Louvain and Malines. News of the rapid German advance had not reached him; but at Boulogne he had found himself caught in the central eddy of fugitives, tossed about among them like one of themselves, pitched on the boat with them, dealt with compassionately but firmly by the fagged officials at Folkestone, jammed into a cranny of the endless train, had chocolate and buns thrust on him by ministering angels with high heels and powdered noses, and shyly passed these refreshments on to the fifteen dazed fellow travelers packed into his compartment.

His first impulse had been to turn back and fly the sight at any cost. But his luggage had already passed out of his keeping, and he had not the courage to forsake it. Moreover, a slight congenital lameness made flight in such circumstances almost impossible. So after a fugitive had come down heavily on his lame foot he resigned himself to keeping in the main current and letting it sweep him onto the boat.

Once on board he had hastened to isolate himself behind a funnel, in an airless corner reeking of oil and steam, while the refugees, abandoned to unanimous seasickness, became for the time an indistinguishable animal welter. But the run to London had brought him into closer contact with them. It was impossible to sit for three mortal hours with an unclaimed little boy on one's lap, opposite a stony-faced woman holding a baby that never stopped crying, and not give them something more than what remained of one's chocolate and buns. The woman with the child was bad enough; though perhaps less perversely moving than the little blond thing with long soiled gloves who kept staring straight ahead and moaning "My furs! Oh, my furs!" But worst of all was the old man at the other end of the compartment, the motionless old man in a frayed suit of professorial black, with a face like a sallow bust on a bracket in a university library.

It was the face of Durand's own class and of his own profession, and it struck him as something not to be contemplated without dire results to his nervous system. He was glad the old man did not speak to him, but only waved away with a silent bow the sandwich he awkwardly offered; and glad that he himself was protected by a slight stammer, which agitation always increased, from any attempt at sustained conversation with the others. But in spite of these safeguards the run to London was dreadful.

On the platform at Charing Cross he stood motionless, trying to protect his lame leg and yet to take up as little room as possible, while he waited for the tide to flow by and canalize itself. There was no way in which he could help the doomed wretches; he kept repeating that without its affording him the least relief. He had given away his last available penny, keeping barely enough to pay for a few frugal weeks in certain grimy lodgings he knew of off Bedford Square; and he could do nothing for the moment but take up as little space as possible till a break in

I

The Refugees

the crowd should let him hobble through to freedom. But that might not be for another hour; and meanwhile helplessly he gazed at the scene through misty spectacles.

The refugees were spread out about him in a stagnant mass, through which, over which almost, there squeezed, darted, skimmed and criss-crossed the light battalions of the benevolent. People with badges were everywhere, philanthropists of both sexes and all ages, sorting, directing, exhorting, contradicting, saying "Wee, wee," and "Oh, no," and "This way, please. Oh, dear, what is 'this way' in French?" and "I beg your pardon, but that bed warmer belongs to my old woman"; and industriously adding, by all the means known to philanthropy, to the distress and bewilderment of their victims.

Durand saw the old professor slip by alone, as if protected by his silent dignity. He saw other stricken faces that held benevolence at bay. One or two erect old women with smooth hair and neat black bonnets gave him a sharper pang than the disheveled; and he watched with positive anguish a mother pausing to straighten her little boy's collar.

Suddenly he was aware of a frightened touch on his arm.

"Oh, monsieur, je roux en prie, venez! Do come!"

The voice was a reedy pipe, the face that of a little elderly lady so frail and dry and diaphanous that she reminded him in her limp, dust-colored garments of a last year's moth shaken out of the curtains of an empty room.

"Je roux en prie!" she repeated, with a plaintive stress on the last word. Her intonation was not exactly French, but he supposed it was some variety of provincial Belgian, and wondered why it sounded so unlike anything he had been hearing. Her face was as wild as anything so small and domesticated could be. Tears were running down her thin cheeks, and the hand on his sleeve twitched in its cotton glove. "Mais oui, mais oui," he found himself reassuring her. Her look of anxiety disappeared, and as he drew the cotton glove through his arm the tears seemed to be absorbed into her pale wrinkles.

"So many of them obviously want to be left alone; here's one who wants to be looked after," he thought to himself, with a whimsical satisfaction in the discovery, as he yielded to the gentle pull on his arm.

He was of a retiring nature, and compassion, far from making him expansive, usually contracted his faculties to the point of cowardice; but the scenes he had traversed were so far beyond any former vision of human wretchedness that all the defenses of his gentle egotism had broken down and he found himself suddenly happy and almost proud at having been singled out as a rescuer. He understood the passionate wish of all the rescuers to secure a refugee and carry him or her away in triumph against all competitors; and while his agile mind made a rapid sum in division his grasp tightened on the little old lady's arm and he muttered to himself: "They shan't take her from me if I have to live on dry bread!"

With a victim on his arm — and one who looked the part so touchingly — it was easier to insinuate his way through the crowd, and he fended off all the attempts of fair highwaymen to snatch his prize from him with an energy in which the prize ably seconded him.

"No, no, no!" she repeated in soft, piping English, tightening her clutch as he tightened his; and presently he discovered that she had noticed his lameness, and with her free hand was making soft fierce dabs at the backs and ribs that blocked their advance.

"You're lame too. Did they do it?" she whispered, falling into French again; and he said chivalrously: "Oh, yes — but it wasn't their fault."

"The savages! I shall never feel in that way about them — though it's noble of you," she murmured; and the inconsequence of this ferocity toward her fellow sufferers struck him as rather refreshingly feminine. Like most shy men he was dazzled by unreasonable women.

"Are you in very great pain?" she continued as they reached the street.

"Oh, no — not at all. I beg you won't — The trouble is — " he broke off, confronted by an unforeseen difficulty.

"What is your trouble?" she sighed, leaning her little head toward him.

"Why — I — the fact is I don't know London; or England; jamais etc," he confessed, merging the two languages in a vain effort at fluency.

"But of course — why should you? Only trust me."

"Ah, you do know it, then?"

The Refugees

What luck to have found a refugee who could take care of him! He vowed her half his worldly goods on the spot.

"She was busy signaling a hansom, and did not answer. "Is this all your luggage?"

A porter had followed with it. He felt that he ought to have been asking her for hers, but dared not, fearing a tragic answer. He supposed she had been able to bring away nothing but her shabby cloak and the little knobby bag that had been prodding his ribs ever since they had linked arms.

"How lucky to have been able to save so much!" she sighed as his bags and boxes were laboriously hoisted to the hansom.

"Yes — in such a struggle," he agreed; and wondered if she was a little flighty as she added: "I suppose you didn't bring your mattress? Not that it matters in the very least. Quick, get in!" she shrieked out abruptly, pushing him past her into the hansom, and adding as she scrambled in and snapped the doors shut: "My sister-in-law — she's so grasping — I don't want her to see us."

She pushed up the lid and cried out a name unfamiliar to her companion, but to which horse and driver instantly responded.

Durand sank back without speaking. He was bewildered and disconcerted, and her last words had shocked him. "My sister-in-law — she's so grasping." The refugees, then, poor souls, were torn by the same family jealousies as more prosperous mortals. Affliction was supposed to soften, but apparently in such monstrous doses it had the opposite effect. He had noticed on the journey symptoms of this reciprocal distrust among the herded creatures. It was no doubt natural: but he wished his little refugee had not betrayed the weakness.

The thought of the sister-in-law they were deserting — perhaps as helpless and destitute as his own waif — brought a protest to his stammering tongue.

"Ought — oughtn't we to take her with us? Hadn't we better turn back?"

"For Caroline? Oh, no, non, no!" She screamed it in every tongue. "Cher monsieur, please! She's sure to have her own. Such heaps of them!"

Ah — it was jealousy then; jealousy of the more favored sister-in-law, who was no doubt younger and handsomer, and had been fought over by rival rescuers, while she, poor pet, had had to single one out for herself. Well, Durand felt he would not have exchanged her for a beauty — so frail, fluttered, plaintive did she seem, so small a vessel to contain so great a woe.

Suddenly it struck him that it was she who had given the order to the driver. He was more and more bewildered, and ashamed of his visible incompetence.

"Where are we going?" he faltered.

"For tea — there's plenty of time, I do assure you; and I'm fainting for a little food."

"So am I," he admitted; adding to himself: "I'll feed the poor thing, and then we'll see what's to be done."

How he wished he hadn't given away all but his last handful of shillings! His poverty had never been so humiliating to him. What right had he to be pretending to help a refugee? It was as much as he could do to pay the hansom and give her her tea. And then? A dampness of fear broke over him, and he cursed his cowardice in not having told her at once to make another choice.

"But supposing nobody else had taken her?" he thought, stealing a look at her small pointed profile and the pale wisps of hair under her draggled veil. Her insignificance was complete, and he decided that he had probably been her last expedient.

It would be odd if it proved that she was also his. He remembered hearing that some of the rich refugees had been able to bring their money with them, and his mind strayed away to the whimsical possibility of being offered a post with emoluments by the frightened creature who was so determined not to let him go.

"If only I knew London," he thought regretfully, "I might be worth a good salary to her. The queer thing is that she seems to know it herself."

Both sat silent, absorbed in their emotions.

It was certainly an odd way to be seeing London for the first time; but he was glad to be traveling at horse pace instead of whirling through his thronged sensations in a motor cab.

"Trafalgar Square — yes. How clever of you! Les Lions de Milord Nelson!" she explained.

They drove on, past palaces and parks.

"Maison du Grand Duc. Arc de triomphe de marbre," she successively enlightened him, sounding like a gnat

The Refugees

in a megaphone. He leaned and gazed, forgetting her and himself in an ecstasy of assimilation. In the golden autumn haze London loomed mightier and richer than his best dreams of it.

The Refugees

II

THE hansom stopped and they entered a modest tea room not too densely crowded.

"I wanted to get away from that awful mob," she explained, pushing back her veil as they seated themselves at a table with red-and-white napkins and a britannia sugar bowl.

"Crumpets — lots of crumpets and jam," she instructed a disdainful girl in a butterfly cap, who languished away with the order to the back of the shop.

"Durand sat speechless, overwhelmed by his predicament. Tea and crumpets were all very well — but afterward, what?"

He felt that his silence was becoming boorish, and leaned forward over the metal teapot. At the same instant his protegee leaned, too, and simultaneously they brought out the question:

"Where were you when it broke out?"

"At Louvain," he answered; and she shuddered.

"Louvain — how terrible!"

"And you, madame?"

"I? At Brussels."

"How terrible!" he echoed.

"Yes." Her eyes filled with tears. "I had such kind friends there."

"Ah, of course. Naturally."

She poured the tea and pushed his cup to him. The haughty girl reappeared with sodden crumpets, which looked to him like manna steeped in nectar. He tossed off his tea as if it had been champagne, and courage began to flow through his veins. Never would he desert the simple creature who had trusted him! Let no one tell him that an able-bodied man with brains and education could not earn enough in a city of this size to support himself and this poor sparrow.

The sparrow had emptied her cup, too, and a soft pink suffused her cheeks, effacing the wrinkles, which had perhaps been only lines of worry. He began to wonder if after all she was much more than forty. Rather absurd for a man of his age to have been calling a woman of forty an old lady!

Suddenly he saw that the sense of security, combined with the hot tea and the crumpets, was beginning to act on her famished system like a dangerous intoxicant, and that she was going to tell him everything — or nearly everything. She bent forward, her elbows on the table, the cotton gloves drawn off her thin hands, which were nervously clenched under her chin. He noticed a large sapphire on one of them.

"I can't tell you — I can't tell you how happy I am!" she faltered with swimming eyes.

He remained silent, through sheer embarrassment, and she went on: "You see, I'd so completely lost hope — so completely. I thought no one would ever want me. They all told me at home that no one would — my nieces did, and everybody. They taunted me with it." She broke off and glanced at him appealingly. "You do understand English, don't you?"

He assented, still more bewildered, and she went on: "Oh, then it's so much easier — then we can really talk! No — our train doesn't leave for nearly two hours. You don't mind my talking, do you? You'll let me make a clean breast of it? I must!"

She touched with a clawlike finger the narrow interval between her shoulders and added: "For weeks I've been simply suffocating with longing."

An uncomfortable redness rose in Charley Durand's forehead. With these foreign women you could never tell; his brief Continental experiences had taught him that. After all, he was not a monster, and several ladies had already attempted to prove it to him. There had been one adventure — on the way home to his hotel at Louvain, after dining with the curator of prehistoric antiquities — one adventure of which he could not think even now without feeling as if he were in a Turkish bath, with no marble slab to cool off on.

But this poor lady! Of course he was mistaken. He blushed anew at his mistake.

"They all laughed at me — jeered at me; Caroline and my nieces and all of them. They said it was no use trying — they'd failed, and how was I going to succeed? Even Caroline has failed hitherto — and she's so dreadfully determined. And of course for a married woman it's always easier, isn't it?"

The Refugees

She appealed to him with anxious eyes, and his own sank behind his protecting spectacles. Easier for a married woman! After all, perhaps he hadn't been mistaken. He had heard of course that in the highest society the laxity was even worse.

"It's true enough" — she seemed to be answering him — "that the young, good-looking women get everything away from us. There's nothing new in that; they always have. I don't know how they manage it; but I'm told they were on hand when the very first boatload of refugees arrived. I understand the young Duchess of Bolchester and Lady Ivy Trantham were down at Folkestone with all the Trantham motors — and from that day to this, though we've all had our names down on the government list, not one of us — not one human being at Lingerfield — has had so much as an application from the committee.

"And when I couldn't stand it any longer, and said I was going up to town myself, to wait at the station and seize one of the poor things before any of those unscrupulous women had got him they said it was just like me to make a show of myself for nothing. But, after all, you see Caroline sneaked off after me without saying anything, and was making a show of herself too. And when I saw her she evidently hadn't succeeded, for she was running about all alone, looking as wild as she does on sales days at Harrod's. Caroline is very extravagant, and doesn't mind what she spends; but she never can make up her mind between bargains, and rushes about like a madwoman till it's too late. But oh, how humiliating for her to go back to the hall without a single refugee!"

The speaker broke off with a faint laugh of triumph, and wiped away her tears.

Charley Durand sat speechless. The crumpet had fallen from his fork and his tea was turning gray; but he was unconscious of such minor misfortunes.

"I don't — I don't understand," he began; but as he spoke he perceived that he did.

It was as clear as daylight; he and his companion had taken each other for refugees, and she was passionately pressing upon him the assistance he had been wondering how on earth he should manage to offer her!

"Of course you don't, I explain so badly. They've always told me that," she answered eagerly. "Fancy asking you if you'd brought your mattress, for instance — what you must have thought! But the fact is I'd made up my mind you were going to be one of those poor old women in caps who take snuff and spill things, and who have always come away with nothing but their beds and a saucepan. They all said at Lingerfield: 'If you get even a deaf old woman you're lucky.' And so I arranged to give you — I mean her — one of the rooms in the postmistress' cottage, where I've put an old bedstead that the vicar's coachman's mother died in, but the mattress had to be burnt. Whereas of course you're coming to me — to the cottage, I mean. And I haven't even told you where it is or who I am! Oh, dear, it's so stupid of me; but you see Kathleen and Agatha and my sister-in-law all said 'Of course poor Audrey'll never get anybody'; and I've had the room standing ready for three weeks all but the mattress — and even the vicar's wife had begun to joke about it with my brother. Oh, my brother's Lord Beausedge — didn't I tell you?"

She paused, breathless, and then added with embarrassment: "I don't think I ever made such a long speech in my life."

He was sure she hadn't, for as she poured out her confession it had been borne in on him that he was listening not to a habitual battler but to the uncontrollable outburst of a shy woman grown inarticulate through want of listeners. It was harrowing, the arrears of self-confession that one guessed behind her torrent of broken phrases.

"I can't tell you," she began again, as if she had perceived his sympathy, "the difference it's going to make for me at home — my bringing the first refugee; and its being — well, someone like you."

Her blushes deepened, and she lost herself again in the abasing sense of her inability to explain.

"Well, my name at any rate," she burst out, "is Audrey Rushworth; and I'm not married."

"Neither am I," said her guest, smiling.

American fashion, he was groping to produce a card. It would really not be decent in him to keep up the pretense a moment longer, and here was an easy way to let her know of her mistake. He pushed the card toward her, and as he did so his eye fell on it and he saw, too late, that it was one of those he had rather fatuously had engraved in French for his Continental travels:

CHARLES DURAND
PROFESSEUR DES LANGUES ROMANES
A L'UNIVERSITE DE LA SALLE
DOCTEUR DE LETTRES DE L'UNIVERSITE DE LOUVAIN

The Refugees

She scanned the inscription and raised a reverent glance to him. "Monsieur le Professeur? I'd no idea! Though I suppose I ought to have known at once. Oh, I do hope," she cried, "you won't find Lingerfield too unbearably dull!" She added as if it were wrung from her: "Some people think my nieces rather clever."

The professor of Romance languages sat fascinated by the consequences of his last blunder. That card seemed to have been dealt out by the finger of Fate. Supposing he went to Lingerfield with her — just to see what it was like?

He had always pined to see what an English countryseat was like; and Lingerfield was apparently important. He shook off the mad notion with an effort. "I'll drive with her to the station," he thought, "and just lose myself in the crowd. That will be the easiest way of all."

"There are three of them — Agatha, Kathleen and Clio. But you'll find us all hopelessly dull," he heard her repeating.

"I shall — I certainly shan't — I mean, of course, how could I?" he stammered.

It was so much like her own syntax that it appeared to satisfy her.

"No — I pay!" she cried, darting between him and the advancing waitress. "Shall we walk? It's only two steps." And seeing him looking about for the vanished hansom: "Oh, I sent the luggage on at once by the cab driver. You see, there's a good deal of it, and there's such a hideous rush at the booking office at this hour. He'll have given it to a porter — so please don't worry!"

Firm and elastic as a girl, she sprang through the doorway, while, limping silently at her side, he stared at the decisive fact that his luggage was once more out of his keeping.

The Refugees

III

CHARLEY DURAND, his shaving glass told him, was forty-five, decidedly bald, with an awkward limp, scant-lashed blue eyes blinking behind gold spectacles, a brow that he believed to be thoughtful and a chin that he knew to be weak. His height was medium, his figure sedentary, with the hollows and prominences all in the wrong places; and he wore ready-made clothes in protective colors, and square-toed boots with side elastics, and stammered whenever it was all-important to speak fluently.

But his Sister Mabel, who knew him better than the others, had once taken one of his cards and run a pen through the word "Languages," leaving simply "Professor of Romance"; and in his secret soul Charley Durand knew that she was right.

He had in truth a dramatic imagination without the power of expression. Instead of writing novels he read them; instead of living adventures he dreamed them. Being naturally modest he had long since discovered his limitations, and decided that all his imagination would ever do for him was to give him a greater freedom of judgment than his neighbors had. Even that was something to be thankful for; but now he began to ask himself if it was enough.

Professor Durand had read L'Abbesse de Jouarre and knew that in moments of extreme social peril superior persons often felt themselves justified in casting conventional morality to the winds. He had no thought of proceeding to such extremes; but he did wonder if, at the hour when civilization was shaken to its base, he, Charley Durand, might not at last permit himself forty-eight hours of romance.

His audacity was fortified by the fact that his luggage was out of his control, for he could hardly picture any situation more subversive than that of being separated from his toothbrush and his reading glasses. But the difficulty of explaining himself if he went any farther in the adventure loomed larger as they approached the station; and as they crossed its crowded threshold, and Miss Rushworth said "Now we'll see about your things," he saw a fresh possibility of escape and cried out: "No, no! Please find places. I'll look for my luggage."

He felt on his arm the same inexorable grasp that had steered him through the labyrinth of Charing Cross.

"You're quite right. We'll get our seats first; in such a crowd it's safer!" she answered gayly, and guided him toward a second-class compartment. He had always heard the aristocracy traveled second class in England. "Besides," she continued as she pounced on two window seats, "the baggage is sure to be in the van already. Or if it isn't you'd never find it. All the refugees in England seem to be traveling by this train!"

They did indeed — and how tell her that there was one less in the number than she imagined? A new difficulty had only just occurred to him. It was easy enough to explain to her that she had been mistaken; but if he did, how justify the hours he had already spent in her company? Could he tell the sister of Lord Beausedge that he had taken her for a refugee? The statement would seem too preposterous.

Desperation nerved him to unconsidered action. The train was not leaving yet — there was still time for the confession.

He scrambled to the seat opposite his captor's and rashly spoke: "I ought to tell you — I must apologize — apologize abjectly — for not explaining sooner —"

Miss Rushworth turned pale, and leaning forward caught his wrist in her thin claws.

"Ah, don't go on!" she gasped.

He lost his last hold on self-possession.

"Not go on?"

"Don't you suppose I know? Didn't you guess that I knew all along?"

He paled, too, and then crimsoned, all his old suspicions rushing back on him.

"How could I not," she pursued, "when I saw all those heaps of luggage? Of course I knew at once you were rich, and didn't need," — but her wistful eyes were wet — "need anything I could do for you. But you looked so lonely, and your lameness, and the moral anguish. I don't see, after all, why we should open our houses only to pauper refugees; and anyhow it's not my fault, is it, if the committee simply wouldn't send me any?"

"But — but —" he desperately began; and then all at once his stammer caught him, and an endless succession of b's issued from his helpless throat.

The Refugees

With exquisite tact Miss Rushworth smiled away his confusion.

"I won't listen to another word; not one! Oh, duck your head, quick!" she shrieked in another voice, flattening herself back into her corner.

Durand recognized the same note of terror with which she had hailed her sister-in-law's approach at Charing Cross. It was needless for her to add faintly: "Caroline."

As she did so a plumed and determined head surged up into the window frame and an astonished voice exclaimed: "Audrey!"

A moment later four ladies, a maid laden with parcels and two bushy Chow dogs had possessed themselves of all that remained of the compartment; and Durand as he squeezed himself into his corner was feeling the sudden relief that comes with the cessation of virtuous effort. He had seen at a glance that there was nothing more to be done.

The young ladies with Lady Beausedge were visibly her daughters. They were of graduated heights, beginning with a very tall one; and were all thin, conspicuous and queerly dressed, suggesting to the bewildered professor bad copies of originals he had never seen. None of them took any notice of him, and the dogs after smelling his ankles contemptuously followed their example.

It would indeed have been difficult during the first moments for any personality less masterful than Lady Beausedge's to assert itself in her presence. So prevalent was she that Durand found himself viewing her daughters, dogs and attendant as her mere fringes and attributes, and thinking with terror "She's going to choose the seat next to me," when in reality it was only the youngest and thinnest of the girls who was settling herself at his side with a play of parcels as sharp as elbows.

Lady Beausedge was already assailing her sister-in-law:

"I'd no idea you meant to run up to town to-day, Audrey. You said nothing of it when you dined with us last night."

Miss Rushworth's eyes fluttered apprehensively from Lady Beausedge's awful countenance to the timorous face of the professor of Romance languages, who had bought a newspaper and was deep in its inner pages.

"Neither did you, Caroline — " Miss Rushworth began with unexpected energy; and the thin girl next to Durand laughed.

"Neither did I what? What are you laughing at, Clio?"

"Neither did you say you were coming up to town, mother."

Lady Beausedge glared, and the other girls giggled. Even the maid stooped over the dogs to conceal an appreciative smile. It was evident that baiting Lady Beausedge was a popular if dangerous amusement.

"As it happens," said the lady of Lingerfield, "the committee telephoned only this morning."

Miss Rushworth's eyes brightened. She grew almost arch. "Ah — then you came up about refugees?"

"Naturally." Lady Beausedge shook out her boa and opened the Pall Mall Gazette.

"Such a fight!" groaned the tallest girl, who was also the largest, vividest and most expensively dressed.

"Yes; it was hardly worth while. Anything so grotesquely mismanaged!"

The young lady called Clio remarked in a quiet undertone: "Five people and two dogs to fetch down one old woman with a pipe."

"Ah, you have got one?" murmured Miss Rushworth, with what seemed to the absorbed Durand a fiendish simulation of envy.

"Yes," her sister-in-law grudgingly admitted. "But, as Clio says, it's almost an insult to have dragged us all up to town. They'd promised us a large family, with a prima donna from the Brussels Opera — so useful for Agatha's music; and two orphans besides. I suppose Ivy Trantham got them all, as usual." She paused, and added more condescendingly: "After all, Audrey, you were right not to try to do anything through the committee."

"Yes; I think one does better without," Miss Rushworth replied with extreme gentleness.

"One does better without refugees, you mean? I dare say we shall find it so. I've no doubt the Bidchester set has taken all but the utterly impossible ones."

"Not all," said Miss Rushworth.

Something in her tone caused her nieces to exchange an astonished glance and Lady Beausedge to rear her head from the Pall Mall Gazette.

"Not all," repeated Miss Rushworth.

The Refugees

The eldest girls broke into an excited laugh. "Aunt Audrey — you don't mean you've got an old woman with a pipe too?"

"No. Not an old woman." She paused and waved her hand in Durand's direction. "Monsieur le Professeur Durand, de l'Universite de Louvain — my sister-in-law, my nieces. He speaks English," she added in a whisper.

The Refugees

IV

CHARLEY DURAND'S window was very low and wide, and quaintly trellised. There was no mistaking it, it was a "lattice" — a real one, with old bluish panes set in sturdy black moldings, not the stage variety made of plate glass and papier-mache that he had seen in the sham cottage of aesthetic suburbs at home.

When he pushed it open a great branch of yellow roses brushed his face, and a dewy clematis gazed in at him with purple eyes. Below lay a garden, incredibly velvety, flower-filled, and inclosed in yew hedges so high that it seemed, under the low twilight sky, as intimate and shut in as Miss Rushworth's low-ceilinged drawing-room, which, in its turn, was as open to the air and as full of flowers as the garden.

But all England, that afternoon, as his train traversed it, had seemed like some great rich garden roofed in from storm and dust and disorder. What a wonderful place, and what a miracle to have been thus carried into the very heart of it! All his scruples vanished in the enchantment of this first encounter with the English country.

When he had bathed and dressed and descended the black-oak stairs he found his hostess waiting in the garden. She was hatless, with a pale scarf over her head, and a pink spot of excitement on each withered cheek.

"I should have preferred a quiet evening here; but since Caroline made such a point of our dining at the hall —" she began.

"Of course, of course! It's all so lovely," said her guest recklessly. He would have dined at Windsor Castle with composure. After the compact and quintessential magic of the cottage nothing could surprise or overwhelm him.

They left the garden by a dark-green door in a wall of old peach-colored brick, and walked in the deepening twilight across a field and over a stile. A stile! He remembered pictures and ballads about helping girls over stiles, and lowered his eyes respectfully as Miss Rushworth's hand rested on his in the descent.

The next moment they were in the spacious shade of a sort of Forest of Arden, with great groups of bossy trees standing apart, and deer flashing by at the end of ferny glades.

"Is it — are we —"

"Oh, yes. This is Lingerfield. The cottage is on the edge of the park. It's not a long walk if we go by the chapel and through the cloisters."

The very words oppressed him with their too-crowding suggestions. There was a chapel in the park — there were cloisters! Lingerfield had an ecclesiastical past — had been an abbey, no doubt. But even such associations paled in the light of the reality. As they came out of the shadow of the trees they recovered a last glow of daylight. In it lay a gray chapel delicately laced and pinnacled; and beyond the chapel the arcade of the cloister, a lawn with one domed cedar, and a gabled Tudor house, its bricks still rosy in the dusk, and a gleam of sunset caught in its many-windowed front.

"How — how long the daylight lasts in England!" said Professor Durand, choking with emotion.

The drawing-room into which he had followed Miss Rushworth seemed full of people and full of silence. Professor Durand had never had on a social occasion such an impression of effortless quiet. The ladies about the big stone chimney and between the lamplit tables, if they had not been so discordantly modern in dress and attitude, might have been a part of the shadowy past.

Only Lady Beausedge, strongly corseted, many-necklaced, her boa standing out from her bare shoulders like an Elizabethan ruff, seemed to Durand majestic enough for her background. She suggested a composite image of Bloody Mary and the late Queen.

He was just recovering from the exchange of silences that had greeted his entrance when he discovered another figure worthy of the scene. It was Lord Beausedge, standing in the window and glancing disgustedly over the evening paper.

Lord Beausedge was as much in character as his wife; only he belonged to a later period. He suggested stocks and nankeen trousers, a Lawrence portrait, port wine, fox-hunting, the Peninsular War, the Indian Mutiny, every Englishman doing his duty, and resistance to the Reform Bill. It was portentous that one person, wearing modern clothes and reading a newspaper, should so epitomize a vanished age.

He made a step or two toward his guest, took him for granted, and returned to the newspaper.

"Why — why do we all fidget so at home?" Professor Durand wondered vaguely.

The Refugees

"Gwen and Ivy are always late," said Lady Beausedge, as though answering a silence. Miss Rushworth looked agitated.

"Are they coming from Trantham?" she asked.

"Not him. Only Gwen and Ivy. Agatha telephoned, and Gwen asked if they might."

After that everyone sat silent again for a long time without any air of impatience or surprise. Durand had the feeling that they all — except perhaps Lord Beausedge — had a great deal to say to him, but that it would be very slow in coming to the surface. Well — so much the better; time was no consideration, and he was glad not to crowd his sensations.

"Do you know the duchess?" asked Lady Beausedge suddenly.

"The duchess?"

"Gwen Rochester. She's coming. She wants to see you.

"To see me?"

"When Agatha telephoned that you were here she chucked a dinner somewhere else, and she's rushing over from Trantham with her sister-in-law.

Durand looked helplessly at Miss Rushworth and saw that her cheeks were pink with triumph. The Duchess of Bolchester was coming to see her refugee!

"Do people here just chuck dinners like that?" he asked with a faint facetiousness.

"When they want to," said Lady Beausedge simply. The conversation again came to a natural end.

It revived with feverish vivacity on the entrance of two tall and emaciated young women, who drifted in after Lord Beausedge had decided to ring for dinner, and who wasted none of their volubility in excusing their late arrival.

These apparitions, who had a kind of limp loveliness totally unknown to the professor of Romance languages, he guessed to be the Duchess of Bolchester and Lady Ivy Trantham, the most successful refugee raiders of the district. They were dressed in pale frail garments and hung with barbaric beads and bangles, and as soon as he saw them he understood why he had thought the daughters of the house looked like bad copies — all except the youngest, whom he was beginning to single out from her sisters.

He was not sure whether, during the rapid murmur of talk that followed, someone breathed his name to the newcomers; but certainly no one told him which of the two ladies was which; or indeed made any effort to draw him into the conversation. It was only when the slightly less tall addressed the taller one as Gwen that he remembered this name was that of the duchess.

She had swept him with a smiling glance of her large, sweet, vacant eyes, and he had the impression that she, too, had things to say to him, but that the least strain on her attention was too great an effort, and that each time she was about to remember who he was something else distracted her.

The thought that a duchess had chucked a dinner to see him had made him slightly giddy; and the humiliation of finding that once they were confronted she had forgotten what she had come for was painful even to his disciplined humility.

But Professor Durand was not without his modest perspicacity, and little by little he began to guess that this absence of concentration and insistence was part of a sort of leisurely holiday spirit unlike anything he had ever known. Under the low-voiced volubility and restless animation of these young women — whom the daughters of the house intensely imitated — he felt a great central inattention. Their strenuousness was not fatiguing because it did not insist but blew about like thistledown from topic to topic. He saw that his safety lay in this fact, and reassurance began to steal over him as he understood that the last danger he was exposed to was that of being too closely interrogated.

"If I'm an impostor," he thought, "at least no one here will find it out."

And then just as he had drawn this sage conclusion, he felt the sudden pounce of the duchess' eye. Dinner was over and the party had regrouped itself in a great book-paneled room, before the carved chimney piece of which she stood lighting her cigarette like a duchess on the cover of a novel.

"You know I'm going to carry you off presently," she said gayly.

Miss Audrey Rushworth was sitting in a sofa corner beside her youngest niece, whom she evidently found less intimidating than the others. Durand instinctively glancing toward them saw the elder lady turn pale, while Miss Clio Rushworth's swinging foot seemed to twinkle with malice.

The Refugees

He bowed as he supposed one ought to bow when addressed by a duchess.

"Off for a talk?" he hazarded playfully.

"Off to Trantham. Didn't they tell you? I'm giving a big garden party for the Refugee Relief Fund, and I'm looking for somebody to give us a lecture on Atrocities. That's what I came for," she added ingenuously.

There was a profound silence, which Lord Beausedge, lifting his head from the Times, suddenly broke.

"Damn bad taste, all that sort of thing," he remarked, and continued his reading.

"But Gwen, dear," Miss Rushworth faltered, "your garden party isn't till the nineteenth."

The duchess looked surprised. She evidently had no head for dates.

"Isn't it, Aunt Audrey? Well, it doesn't matter, does it? I want him all the same. We want him awfully, Ivy, don't we?" She shone on Durand. "You'll see such lots of your own people at Trantham. The Belgian Minister and the French Ambassador are coming down for the lecture. You'll feel less lonely there."

Lady Beausedge intervened with authority: "I think I have a prior claim, my dear Gwen. Of course Audrey was not expecting anyone — anyone like Professor Durand; and at the cottage he might — he might — but here, with your uncle, and the girls all speaking French — " She turned to Durand with a hospitable smile.

"Your room's quite ready; and of course my husband will be delighted if you like to use the library to prepare your lecture in. We'll send the governess cart for your traps to-morrow." She fixed her firm eyes on the duchess. "You see, dear, it was all quite settled."

Lady Ivy Trantham spoke up: "It is not a bit of use, Aunt Carrie. Gwen can't give him up." Being apparently unable to master the professor's name the sisters-in-law continued to designate him by the personal pronoun. "The committee has given us a prima donna from the Brussels Opera to sing the Marseillaise and the what-ye-may-call-it Belgian anthem, but there are lots of people coming just for the Atrocities."

"Oh, we must have the Atrocities!" the duchess echoed. She looked musingly at Durand's pink, troubled face. "He'll do them awfully well," she concluded, talking about him as if he were deaf.

"We must have somebody who's accustomed to lecturing. People won't put up with amateurs," Lady Ivy reinforced her.

Lady Beausedge's countenance was dark with rage.

"A prima donna from the Brussels Opera! But the committee telephoned me this morning to come up and meet a prima donna! It's all a mistake her being at Trantham, Gwen!"

"Well," said the duchess serenely. "I dare say it's all a mistake his being here." She looked more and more tenderly on the professor.

"But he's not here: he's with me at the cottage!" cried Miss Rushworth, springing up with sudden resolution. "It's too absurd and undignified, this — this squabbling."

"Yes; don't let's squabble. Come along," said the duchess, slipping her long arm through Durand's as Miss Rushworth's had been slipped through it at Charing Cross.

The subject of this flattering but agitating discussion had been struggling ever since it began, with a nervous contraction of the throat. When at length his lips opened only a torrent of consonants rushed from them, finally followed by the cryptic monosyllables: "I'm not!"

"Not a professional? Oh, but you're a professor — that'll do!" cried Lady Ivy Trantham briskly, while the duchess, hugging his arm closer, added in a voice of persuasion: "You see, we've got one at Trantham already, and we're so awfully afraid of him that we want you to come and talk to him. You must."

"I mean, n-n-not a r-r-ref — " gasped out the desperate Durand.

Suddenly he felt his other arm caught by Miss Clio Rushworth, who gave it a deep and eloquent pinch. At the same time their eyes met, and he read in hers entreaty, command and the passionate injunction to follow her lead.

"Poor Professor Durand — you'll take us for red Indians on the war trail! Come to the dining room with me and I'll give you a glass of champagne. I saw the curry was too strong for you," this young lady insinuatingly declared.

Durand with one of his rare flashes of self-possession had converted his stammer into a strangling cough, and released by the duchess made haste to follow his rescuer out of the room. He kept up his racking cough while they crossed the hall, and by the time they reached the dining room tears of congestion were running down behind his spectacles, and he sank into a chair and rested his elbows despairingly on a corner of the great mahogany table.

Miss Clio Rushworth disappeared behind a tall screen and returned with a glass of champagne. "Anything in

The Refugees

it?" she inquired pleasantly, and smiled at his doleful gesture of negation.

He emptied his glass and cleared his throat; but before he could speak she held up a silencing hand.

"Don't — don't!" she said.

He was startled by this odd echo of her aunt's entreaty, and a little tired of being hurled from one cryptic injunction to another.

"Don't what?" he questioned sharply.

"Make a clean breast of it. Not yet. Pretend you are, just a little longer, please."

"Pretend I am — "

"A refugee." She sat down opposite him, her sharp chin supported on crossed hands. "I'll tell you why."

But Professor Durand was not listening. A momentary rapture of relief at being found out had been succeeded by a sick dread of the consequences. He tried to read the girl's thin ironic face, but her eyes and smile were inscrutable.

"Miss Rushworth, at least let me tell you — "

She shook her head kindly but firmly. "That you're not a German spy in disguise? Bless you, don't you suppose I can guess what's happened? I saw it the moment we got into the railway carriage. I suppose you came over from Boulogne in the refugee train, and when poor dear Aunt Audrey pounced on you you began to stammer and couldn't explain."

Oh, the blessed balm of her understanding! He drew a deep breath of gratitude, and faltered, smiling back at her smile: "It was worse than that. Much worse. I took her for a refugee too. We rescued each other!"

A peal of youthful mirth shook the mighty rafters of the Lingerfield dining room. Miss Clio Rushworth buried her face and sobbed.

"Oh, I see — I see — I see it all!"

"No you don't — not quite — not yet!" he gurgled back at her.

"Tell me then; tell me everything!"

And he told her; told her quietly, succinctly and without a stammer, because under her cool kindly gaze he felt himself at last in an atmosphere of boundless comprehension.

"You see, the adventure fascinated me; I won't deny that," he ended, laying bare the last fold of his duplicity.

This, for the first time, seemed to stagger her.

"The adventure — an adventure with Aunt Audrey?"

They smiled at each other a little. "I meant, the adventure of England — I've never been in England before — and of a baronial hall. It is baronial? In short, of just exactly what's been happening to me. The novelty, you see — but how should you see? — was irresistible. The novelty, and all the old historic associations. England's in our blood, after all." He looked about him at the big, dusky, tapestried room. "Fancy having seen this kind of thing only on the stage! Yes, I was drawn on by everything — by everything I saw and heard from the moment I set foot in London. Of course if I hadn't been I should have found an opportunity of explaining; or I could have bolted away from her at the station."

"I'm so glad you didn't. That's what I'm coming to," said the girl. "You see, it's been — how shall I explain? — more than an adventure for Aunt Audrey. It's literally the first thing that's ever happened to her."

Professor Durand blushed to the roots of his hair.

"I don't understand," he said feebly.

"No. Of course not. Any more, I suppose, than I really understand what Lingerfield represents to an American. And you would have had to live at Lingerfield for generations and generations to understand Aunt Audrey. You see, nothing much ever happened to the unmarried women of her time. Most of them were just put away in cottages covered with clematis and forgotten. Aunt Audrey has always been forgotten — even the refugee committee forgot her. And my father and mother, and her other brothers and sisters, and my sisters and I — I'm afraid we've always forgotten her too."

"Not you," said Professor Durand with sudden temerity.

Miss Clio Rushworth smiled. "I'm very fond of her: and then I've been a little bit forgotten myself." She paused a moment and continued: "All this would take too long to explain. But what I want to beg of you is this — let her have her adventure, give her her innings, keep up the pretense a little longer. None of the others have guessed, and I promise to get you away safely before they do. Just let Aunt Audrey have her refugee for a bit, and

The Refugees

triumph over Lingerfield and Trantham. . . . The duchess? Oh, I'll arrange that too. Slip back to the cottage now — this way, across the lawn, by the chapel — and I'll say your cough was so troublesome that you rushed back to put on a mustard plaster. I'll tell Gwen you'll be delighted to give the lecture — "

Durand raised his hands in protest but she went on gayly: "Why, don't you see that the more you hold out the more she'll want you? Whereas if you accept at once and even let her think you're going over to stop at Trantham as soon as your cough is better she'll forget she's ever asked you. . . . Insincere, you say? Yes, of course; a little. But have you considered what would have happened if you hadn't choked just now and had succeeded in shouting out that you were an impostor?"

A cold chill ran down Charley Durand's spine as his masterful adviser set forth this forgotten aspect of the case.

"Yes — I do see. I see it's for the best."

"Well — rather!" She pushed him toward a window opening on the lawn. "Be off now — and do play up, won't you? I'll promise to stick by you and see you out of it if only you'll do as I ask."

Their hands met in a merry grasp of complicity, and as he fled away through the moonlight he carried with him the vision of her ugly vivid face and wondered how such a girl could ever think she could be forgotten.

The Refugees

V

A GOOD many things had happened before he stood again on the pier at Boulogne.

It was in April, 1918, and he was buttoned into a too-tight uniform, on which he secretly hoped the Y. M. C. A. initials were not always the first things to strike the eye of the admiring spectator.

It was not that he was ungrateful to the great organization which had found a task for him in its ranks; but that he could never quite console himself for the accident of having been born a few years too soon to be wearing the real uniform of his country. That would indeed have been romance beyond his dreams; but he had long ago discovered that he was never to get beyond the second-best in such matters. None of his adventures would ever be written with a capital.

Still, he was very content; and never more so than now that he was actually in France again, in touch and in sound of the mighty struggle that had once been more than his nerves could bear, but that they could bear now with perfect serenity because he and his country, for all they were individually worth, had a stake in the affair and were no longer mere sentimental spectators.

The scene, novel as it was because of the throngs of English and American troops that animated it, was still in some of its details pathetically familiar. For the German advance in the north had set in movement the native populations of that region, and among the fugitives some forlorn groups had reached Boulogne and were gathered on the pier, much as he had seen them four years earlier. Only in this case they were in dozens instead of hundreds, and the sight of them was harrowing more because of what they symbolized than from their actual numbers.

Professor Durand was no more in quest of refugees than he had been formerly. He had been dispatched to Boulogne to look after the library of a Y. M. C. A. canteen, and was standing on the pier looking vaguely about him for a guide with the familiar initials on his collar.

In the general confusion, he could discover no one who took the least interest in his problem, and he was waiting resignedly in the sheltered angle formed by two stacks of packing cases when he suddenly remembered that he had always known the face he was looking at was not one to forget.

It was that of a dark thin girl in khaki, with a slouch hat and leggings, and her own unintelligible initials on her shoulder, who was giving firm directions to a large orderly in a British Army motor.

As Durand looked at her she looked at him. Their eyes met, and she burst out laughing.

"Well, you do have the queerest-looking tunics in your army!" she exclaimed as their hands clasped.

"I know we do — and I'm too fat. But you knew me?" the professor cried triumphantly.

"Why, of course! I should know your spectacles anywhere," said Miss Clio Rushworth gayly. She finished what she was saying to the orderly, and then came back to the professor.

"What a lark! What are you? Oh, Y. M. C. A., of course. With the British, I suppose?" They perched on the boxes and exchanged confidences, while Durand inwardly hoped that the man who ought to be looking for him was otherwise engaged.

Apparently he was, for their talk continued to ramble on through a happy labyrinth of reminiscences spangled with laughter.

"And when they found out — weren't they too awfully horrified?" he asked at last, blushing at the mere remembrance.

She shook her head with a smile. "They never did — nobody found out but father, and he laughed for a week. I wouldn't have had anyone else know for the world. It would have spoiled all Aunt Audrey's fun if Lingerfield had known you weren't a refugee. To this day you're her great adventure."

"But how did you manage it? I don't see yet."

"Come round to our canteen to-night and I'll tell you."

She stood up and shoved her cigarette case into the pocket of the tunic that fitted so much better than his.

"I tell you what — as your man hasn't turned up come over to the canteen now and see Aunt Audrey."

Professor Durand paled in an unmartial manner.

"Oh, is Miss Rushworth here?"

"Rather! She's my chief. Come along."

The Refugees

"Your chief? He wavered again, his heart failing him.

"Really — won't it be better for me not to? Suppose — suppose she should remember me?"

Miss Rushworth's niece laughed. "I don't believe she will, she's so blind. Besides, what if she did? She's seen a good many refugees since your day. You see, they've become rather a drug on the market, poor dears. And Aunt Audrey's got her head full of other things now."

She had started off at her long swift stride, and he was hurrying obediently after her.

The big brown canteen was crowded with soldiers who were being variously refreshed by young ladies in trig khaki. At the other end of the main room Miss Clio Rushworth turned a corner and entered an office. Durand followed her.

At the office desk sat a lady with eye-glasses on a sharp nose. She wore a colonel's uniform, with several decorations, and was bending over the desk busily writing.

A young girl in a nurse's dress stood beside her, as if waiting for an order, and flattened against the wall of the room sat a row of limp, disheveled, desolate beings — too evidently refugees.

The colonel lifted her head quickly and glanced at her niece with a resolute and almost forbidding eye.

"Not another refugee, Clio — not one! I absolutely refuse. We've not a hole left to put them in, and the last family you sent me went off with my mackintosh and my electric lamp."

She bent again sternly to her writing. As she looked up her glance strayed carelessly over Professor Durand's congested countenance, and then dropped to the desk without a sign of recognition.

"Oh, Aunt Audrey — not one, not just one?" the colonel's niece pleaded.

"It's no use, my dear. Now don't interrupt, please. . . . Here are the bulletins, nurse."

Colonel Audrey Rushworth shut her lips with a snap and her pen drove on steadily over the sheets of official letter paper.

When Professor Durand and Clio Rushworth stood outside of the canteen again in the spring sunshine they looked long at each other without speaking.

Charley Durand, under his momentary sense of relief, was aware of a distinct humiliation.

"I see I needn't have been afraid!" he said, forcing an artificial laugh.

"I told you so. The fact is, Aunt Audrey has a lot of other things to think about nowadays. There's no danger of her being forgotten — it's she who does the forgetting now." She laid a commiserating hand on his arm. "I'm sorry — but you must excuse her. She's just been promoted again and she's going to marry the Bishop of the Kamerun next month."