

Chapter XV. Colbert.

History will tell us, or rather history has told us, of the various events of the following day, of the splendid fetes given by the surintendant to his sovereign. Nothing but amusement and delight was allowed to prevail throughout the whole of the following day; there was a promenade, a banquet, a comedy to be acted, and a comedy, too, in which, to his great amazement, Porthos recognized "M. Coquelin de Voliere" as one of the actors, in the piece called "Les Facheux." Full of preoccupation, however, from the scene of the previous evening, and hardly recovered from the effects of the poison which Colbert had then administered to him, the king, during the whole of the day, so brilliant in its effects, so full of unexpected and startling novelties, in which all the wonders of the "Arabian Night's Entertainments" seemed to be reproduced for his especial amusement--the king, we say, showed himself cold, reserved, and taciturn. Nothing could smooth the frowns upon his face; every one who observed him noticed that a deep feeling of resentment, of remote origin, increased by slow degrees, as the source becomes a river, thanks to the thousand threads of water that increase its body, was keenly alive in the depths of the king's heart. Towards the middle of the day only did he begin to resume a little serenity of manner, and by that time he had, in all probability, made up his mind. Aramis, who followed him step by step in his thoughts, as in his walk, concluded that the event he was expecting would not be long before it was announced. This time Colbert seemed to walk in concert with the bishop of Vannes, and had he received for every annoyance which he inflicted on the king a word of direction from Aramis, he could not have done better. During the whole of the day the king, who, in all probability, wished to free himself from some of the thoughts which disturbed his mind, seemed to seek La Valliere's society as actively as he seemed to show his anxiety to flee that of M. Colbert or M. Fouquet. The evening came. The king had expressed a wish not to walk in the park until after cards in the evening. In the interval between supper and the promenade, cards and dice were introduced. The king won a thousand pistoles, and, having won them, put them in his pocket, and then rose, saying, "And now, gentlemen, to the park." He found the ladies of the court were already there. The king, we have before observed, had won a thousand pistoles, and had put them in his pocket; but M. Fouquet had somehow contrived to lose ten thousand, so that among the courtiers there was still left a hundred and ninety thousand francs' profit to divide, a circumstance which made the countenances of the courtiers and the officers of the king's household the most joyous countenances in the world. It was not the same, however, with the king's face; for, notwithstanding his success at play, to which he was by no means insensible, there still remained a slight shade of dissatisfaction. Colbert was waiting for or upon him at the corner of one of the avenues; he was most probably waiting there in consequence of a rendezvous which had been given him by the king, as Louis XIV., who had avoided him, or who had seemed to avoid him, suddenly made him a sign, and they then

struck into the depths of the park together. But La Valliere, too, had observed the king's gloomy aspect and kindling glances; she had remarked this--and as nothing which lay hidden or smoldering in his heart was hidden from the gaze of her affection, she understood that this repressed wrath menaced some one; she prepared to withstand the current of his vengeance, and intercede like an angel of mercy. Overcome by sadness, nervously agitated, deeply distressed at having been so long separated from her lover, disturbed at the sight of the emotion she had divined, she accordingly presented herself to the king with an embarrassed aspect, which in his then disposition of mind the king interpreted unfavorably. Then, as they were alone--nearly alone, inasmuch as Colbert, as soon as he perceived the young girl approaching, had stopped and drawn back a dozen paces--the king advanced towards La Valliere and took her by the hand. "Mademoiselle," he said to her, "should I be guilty of an indiscretion if I were to inquire if you were indisposed? for you seem to breathe as if you were oppressed by some secret cause of uneasiness, and your eyes are filled with tears."

"Oh! sire, if I be indeed so, and if my eyes are indeed full of tears, I am sorrowful only at the sadness which seems to oppress your majesty."

"My sadness? You are mistaken, mademoiselle; no, it is not sadness I experience."

"What is it, then, sire?"

"Humiliation."

"Humiliation? oh! sire, what a word for you to use!"

"I mean, mademoiselle, that wherever I may happen to be, no one else ought to be the master. Well, then, look round you on every side, and judge whether I am not eclipsed--I, the king of France--before the monarch of these wide domains. Oh!" he continued, clenching his hands and teeth, "when I think that this king--"

"Well, sire?" said Louise, terrified.

"--That this king is a faithless, unworthy servant, who grows proud and self-sufficient upon the strength of property that belongs to me, and which he has stolen. And therefore I am about to change this impudent minister's fete into sorrow and mourning, of which the nymph of Vaux, as the poets say, shall not soon lose the remembrance."

"Oh! your majesty--"

"Well, mademoiselle, are you about to take M. Fouquet's part?" said Louis, impatiently.

"No, sire; I will only ask whether you are well informed. Your majesty has more than once learned the value of accusations made at court."

Louis XIV. made a sign for Colbert to approach. "Speak, Monsieur Colbert," said the young prince, "for I almost believe that Mademoiselle de la Valliere has need of your assistance before she can put any faith in the king's word. Tell mademoiselle what M. Fouquet has done; and you, mademoiselle, will perhaps have the kindness to listen. It will not be long."

Why did Louis XIV. insist upon it in such a manner? A very simple reason--his heart was not at rest, his mind was not thoroughly convinced; he imagined there lay some dark, hidden, tortuous intrigue behind these thirteen millions of francs; and he wished that the pure heart of La Valliere, which had revolted at the idea of theft or robbery, should approve--even were it only by a single word--the resolution he had taken, and which, nevertheless, he hesitated before carrying into execution.

"Speak, monsieur," said La Valliere to Colbert, who had advanced; "speak, since the king wishes me to listen to you. Tell me, what is the crime with which M. Fouquet is charged?"

"Oh! not very heinous, mademoiselle," he returned, "a mere abuse of confidence."

"Speak, speak, Colbert; and when you have related it, leave us, and go and inform M. d'Artagnan that I have certain orders to give him."

"M. d'Artagnan, sire!" exclaimed La Valliere; "but why send for M. d'Artagnan? I entreat you to tell me."

"Pardieu! in order to arrest this haughty, arrogant Titan who, true to his menace, threatens to scale my heaven."

"Arrest M. Fouquet, do you say?"

"Ah! does that surprise you?"

"In his own house!"

"Why not? If he be guilty, he is as guilty in his own house as anywhere else."

"M. Fouquet, who at this moment is ruining himself for his sovereign."

"In plain truth, mademoiselle, it seems as if you were defending this traitor."

Colbert began to chuckle silently. The king turned round at the sound of this suppressed mirth.

"Sire," said La Valliere, "it is not M. Fouquet I am defending; it is yourself."

"Me! you are defending me?"

"Sire, you would dishonor yourself if you were to give such an order."

"Dishonor myself!" murmured the king, turning pale with anger. "In plain truth, mademoiselle, you show a strange persistence in what you say."

"If I do, sire, my only motive is that of serving your majesty," replied the noble-hearted girl: "for that I would risk, I would sacrifice my very life, without the least reserve."

Colbert seemed inclined to grumble and complain. La Valliere, that timid, gentle lamb, turned round upon him, and with a glance like lightning imposed silence upon him. "Monsieur," she said, "when the king acts well, whether, in doing so, he does either myself or those who belong to me an injury, I have nothing to say; but were the king to confer a benefit either upon me or mine, and if he acted badly, I should tell him so."

"But it appears to me, mademoiselle," Colbert ventured to say, "that I too love the king."

"Yes, monseigneur, we both love him, but each in a different manner," replied La Valliere, with such an accent that the heart of the young king was powerfully affected by it. "I love him so deeply, that the whole world is aware of it; so purely, that the king himself does not doubt my affection. He is my king and my master; I am the least of all his servants. But whoso touches his honor assails my life. Therefore, I repeat, that they dishonor the king who advise him to arrest M. Fouquet under his own roof."

Colbert hung down his head, for he felt that the king had abandoned him. However, as he bent his head, he murmured, "Mademoiselle, I have only one word to say."

"Do not say it, then, monsieur; for I would not listen to it. Besides, what could you have to tell me? That M. Fouquet has been guilty of certain crimes? I believe he has, because the king has said so; and, from the moment the king said, 'I think so,' I have no occasion for other lips to say, 'I affirm it.' But, were M. Fouquet the vilest of men, I should say aloud, 'M. Fouquet's person is sacred to the king because he is the guest of M. Fouquet. Were his house a den of thieves, were Vaux a cave of coiners or robbers, his home is sacred, his palace

is inviolable, since his wife is living in it; and that is an asylum which even executioners would not dare to violate."

La Valliere paused, and was silent. In spite of himself the king could not but admire her; he was overpowered by the passionate energy of her voice; by the nobleness of the cause she advocated. Colbert yielded, overcome by the inequality of the struggle. At last the king breathed again more freely, shook his head, and held out his hand to La Valliere. "Mademoiselle," he said, gently, "why do you decide against me? Do you know what this wretched fellow will do, if I give him time to breathe again?"

"Is he not a prey which will always be within your grasp?"

"Should he escape, and take to flight?" exclaimed Colbert.

"Well, monsieur, it will always remain on record, to the king's eternal honor, that he allowed M. Fouquet to flee; and the more guilty he may have been, the greater will the king's honor and glory appear, compared with such unnecessary misery and shame."

Louis kissed La Valliere's hand, as he knelt before her.

"I am lost," thought Colbert; then suddenly his face brightened up again. "Oh! no, no, aha, old fox!--not yet," he said to himself.

And while the king, protected from observation by the thick covert of an enormous lime, pressed La Valliere to his breast, with all the ardor of ineffable affection, Colbert tranquilly fumbled among the papers in his pocket-book and drew out of it a paper folded in the form of a letter, somewhat yellow, perhaps, but one that must have been most precious, since the intendant smiled as he looked at it; he then bent a look, full of hatred, upon the charming group which the young girl and the king formed together--a group revealed but for a moment, as the light of the approaching torches shone upon it. Louis noticed the light reflected upon La Valliere's white dress. "Leave me, Louise," he said, "for some one is coming."

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle, some one is coming," cried Colbert, to expedite the young girl's departure.

Louise disappeared rapidly among the trees; and then, as the king, who had been on his knees before the young girl, was rising from his humble posture, Colbert exclaimed, "Ah! Mademoiselle de la Valliere has let something fall."

"What is it?" inquired the king.

"A paper--a letter--something white; look there, sire."

The king stooped down immediately and picked up the letter, crumpling it in his hand, as he did so; and at the same moment the torches arrived, inundating the blackness of the scene with a flood of light as bright as day.