

Chapter 27

Showing How Louis, on His Part, Had Passed the Time from Ten to Half-Past Twelve at Night.

When the king left the apartments of the maids of honor, he found Colbert awaiting him to take directions for the next day's ceremony, as the king was then to receive the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors. Louis XIV. had serious causes of dissatisfaction with the Dutch; the States had already been guilty of many mean shifts and evasions with France, and without perceiving or without caring about the chances of a rupture, they again abandoned the alliance with his Most Christian Majesty, for the purpose of entering into all kinds of plots with Spain. Louis XIV. at his accession, that is to say, at the death of Cardinal Mazarin, had found this political question roughly sketched out; the solution was difficult for a young man, but as, at that time, the king represented the whole nation, anything that the head resolved upon, the body would be found ready to carry out. Any sudden impulse of anger, the reaction of young hot blood upon the brain, would be quite sufficient to change an old form of policy and create another system altogether. The part that diplomatists had to play in those days was that of arranging among themselves the different *_coups-d'etat_* which their sovereign masters might wish to effect. Louis was not in that calm frame of mind which was necessary to enable him to determine on a wise course of policy. Still much agitated from the quarrel he had just had with La Valliere, he walked hastily into his cabinet, dimly desirous of finding an opportunity of producing an explosion after he had controlled himself for so long a

time. Colbert, as he saw the king enter, knew the position of affairs at a glance, understood the king's intentions, and resolved therefore to maneuver a little. When Louis requested to be informed what it would be necessary to say on the morrow, Colbert began by expressing his surprise that his majesty had not been properly informed by M. Fouquet. "M. Fouquet," he said, "is perfectly acquainted with the whole of this Dutch affair - he received the dispatches himself direct."

The king, who was accustomed to hear M. Colbert speak in not over-scrupulous terms of M. Fouquet, allowed this remark to pass unanswered, and merely listened. Colbert noticed the effect it had produced, and hastened to back out, saying that M. Fouquet was not on all occasions as blamable as at the first glance might seem to be the case, inasmuch as at that moment he was greatly occupied. The king looked up. "What do you allude to?" he said.

"Sire, men are but men, and M. Fouquet has his defects as well as his great qualities."

"Ah! defects, who is without them, M. Colbert?"

"Your majesty, hardly," said Colbert, boldly; for he knew how to convey a good deal of flattery in a light amount of blame, like the arrow which cleaves the air notwithstanding its weight, thanks to the light feathers which bear it up.

The king smiled. "What defect has M. Fouquet, then?" he said.

"Still the same, sire; it is said he is in love."

"In love! with whom?"

"I am not quite sure, sire; I have very little to do with matters of gallantry."

"At all events you know, since you speak of it."

"I have heard a name mentioned."

"Whose?"

"I cannot now remember whose, but I think it is one of Madame's maids of honor."

The king started. "You know more than you like to say, M. Colbert," he murmured.

"I assure you, no, sire."

"At all events, Madame's maids of honor are all known, and in mentioning their names to you, you will perhaps recollect the one you allude to."

"No, sire."

"At least, try."

"It would be useless, sire. Whenever the name of any lady who runs the risk of being compromised is concerned, my memory is like a coffer of bronze, the key of which I have lost."

A dark cloud seemed to pass over the mind as well as across the face of the king; then, wishing to appear as if he were perfect master of himself and his feelings, he said, "And now for the affair concerning Holland."

"In the first place, sire, at what hour will your majesty receive the ambassadors?"

"Early in the morning."

"Eleven o'clock?"

"That is too late - say nine o'clock."

"That will be too early, sire."

"For friends, that would be a matter of no importance; one does what one likes with one's friends; but for one's enemies, in that case nothing could be better than if they were to feel hurt. I should not be sorry,

I confess, to have to finish altogether with these marsh-birds, who annoy me with their cries."

"It shall be precisely as your majesty desires. At nine o'clock, therefore - I will give the necessary orders. Is it to be a formal audience?"

"No. I wish to have an explanation with them, and not to embitter matters, as is always the case when many persons are present, but, at the same time, I wish to clear up everything with them, in order not to have to begin over again."

"Your majesty will inform me of the persons whom you wish to be present at the reception."

"I will draw out a list. Let us speak of the ambassadors; what do they want?"

"Allies with Spain, they gain nothing; allies with France, they lose much."

"How is that?"

"Allied with Spain, they see themselves bounded and protected by the possessions of their allies; they cannot touch them, however anxious they may be to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step, and that by

the way of the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to make a bite at the Spanish cake, you, sire, the son-in-law of the king of Spain, could with your cavalry sweep the earth from your dominions to Brussels in a couple of days. Their design is, therefore, only to quarrel so far with you, and only to make you suspect Spain so far, as will be sufficient to induce you not to interfere with their own affairs."

"It would be far more simple, I should imagine," replied the king, "to form a solid alliance with me, by means of which I should gain something, while they would gain everything."

"Not so; for if, by chance, they were to have you, or France rather, as a boundary, your majesty is not an agreeable neighbor. Young, ardent, warlike, the king of France might inflict some serious mischief on Holland, especially if he were to get near her."

"I perfectly understand, M. Colbert, and you have explained it very clearly; but be good enough to tell me the conclusion you have arrived at."

"Your majesty's own decisions are never deficient in wisdom."

"What will these ambassadors say to me?"

"They will tell your majesty that they are ardently desirous of forming an alliance with you, which will be a falsehood: they will tell Spain

that the three powers ought to unite so as to check the prosperity of England, and that will equally be a falsehood; for at present, the natural ally of your majesty is England, who has ships while we have none; England, who can counteract Dutch influence in India; England, in fact, a monarchical country, to which your majesty is attached by ties of relationship."

"Good; but how would you answer?"

"I should answer, sire, with the greatest possible moderation of tone, that the disposition of Holland does not seem friendly towards the Court of France; that the symptoms of public feeling among the Dutch are alarming as regards your majesty; that certain medals have been struck with insulting devices."

"Towards me?" exclaimed the young king, excitedly.

"Oh, no! sire, no; insulting is not the word; I was mistaken, I ought to have said immeasurably flattering to the Dutch."

"Oh! if that be so, the pride of the Dutch is a matter of indifference to me," said the king, sighing.

"Your majesty is right, a thousand times right. However, it is never a mistake in politics, your majesty knows better than myself, to exaggerate a little in order to obtain a concession in your own favor. If your

majesty were to complain as if your susceptibility were offended, you would stand in a far higher position with them."

"What are these medals you speak of?" inquired Louis; "for if I allude to them, I ought to know what to say."

"Upon my word, sire, I cannot very well tell you - some overweeningly conceited device - that is the sense of it; the words have little to do with the thing itself."

"Very good! I will mention the word 'medal,' and they can understand it if they like."

"Oh! they will understand without any difficulty. Your majesty can also slip in a few words about certain pamphlets which are being circulated."

"Never! Pamphlets befoul those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. M. Colbert, I thank you. You can leave now. Do not forget the hour I have fixed, and be there yourself."

"Sire, I await your majesty's list."

"True," returned the king; and he began to meditate; he had not thought of the list in the least. The clock struck half-past eleven. The king's face revealed a violent conflict between pride and love. The political conversation had dispelled a good deal of the irritation which Louis had

felt, and La Valliere's pale, worn features, in his imagination, spoke a very different language from that of the Dutch medals, or the Batavian pamphlets. He sat for ten minutes debating within himself whether he should or should not return to La Valliere; but Colbert having with some urgency respectfully requested that the list might be furnished him, the king was ashamed to be thinking of mere matters of affection where important state affairs required his attention. He therefore dictated: the queen-mother, the queen, Madame, Madame de Motteville, Madame de Chatillon, Madame de Navailles; and, for the men, M. le Prince, M. de Gramont, M. de Manicamp, M. de Saint-Aignan, and the officers on duty.

"The ministers?" asked Colbert.

"As a matter of course, and the secretaries also."

"Sire, I will leave at once in order to get everything prepared; the orders will be at the different residences to-morrow."

"Say rather to-day," replied Louis mournfully, as the clock struck twelve. It was the very hour when poor La Valliere was almost dying from anguish and bitter suffering. The king's attendants entered, it being the hour of his retirement to his chamber; the queen, indeed, had been waiting for more than an hour. Louis accordingly retreated to his bedroom with a sigh; but, as he sighed, he congratulated himself on his courage, and applauded himself for having been as firm in love as in affairs of state.