

## Chapter 43

### An Interview with the Queen-Mother.

The queen-mother was in the bedroom at the Palais Royal, with Madame de Motteville and Senora Molina. King Louis, who had been impatiently expected the whole day, had not made his appearance; and the queen, who was growing impatient, had often sent to inquire about him. The moral atmosphere of the court seemed to indicate an approaching storm; the courtiers and the ladies of the court avoided meeting in the ante-chambers and the corridors in order not to converse on compromising subjects. Monsieur had joined the king early in the morning for a hunting-party; Madame remained in her own apartment, cool and distant to every one; and the queen-mother, after she had said her prayers in Latin, talked of domestic matters with her two friends in pure Castilian. Madame de Motteville, who understood the language perfectly, answered her in French. When the three ladies had exhausted every form of dissimulation and of politeness, as a circuitous mode of expressing that the king's conduct was making the queen and the queen-mother pine away through sheer grief and vexation, and when, in the most guarded and polished phrases, they had fulminated every variety of imprecation against Mademoiselle de la Valliere, the queen-mother terminated her attack by an exclamation indicative of her own reflections and character. "\_Estos hijos!\_" said she to Molina - which means, "These children!" words full of meaning on a mother's lips - words full of terrible significance in the mouth of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, hid many curious secrets in her soul.

"Yes," said Molina, "children, children! for whom every mother becomes a sacrifice."

"Yes," replied the queen; "a mother sacrifices everything, certainly."

She did not finish her phrase; for she fancied, when she raised her eyes towards the full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that light once more flashed from her husband's dull eyes, and his nostrils grew livid with wrath. The portrait seemed animated by a living expression - speak it did not, but it seemed to threaten. A profound silence succeeded the queen's last remark. La Molina began to turn over ribbons and laces on a large work-table. Madame de Motteville, surprised at the look of mutual intelligence which had been exchanged between the confidant and her mistress, cast down her eyes like a discreet woman, and pretending to be observant of nothing that was passing, listened with the utmost attention to every word. She heard nothing, however, but a very insignificant "hum" on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was the incarnation of caution - and a profound sigh on that of the queen. She looked up immediately.

"You are suffering?" she said.

"No, Motteville, no; why do you say that?"

"Your majesty almost groaned just now."

"You are right; I did sigh, in truth."

"Monsieur Valot is not far off; I believe he is in Madame's apartment."

"Why is he with Madame?"

"Madame is troubled with nervous attacks."

"A very fine disorder, indeed! There is little good in M. Valot being there, when a very different physician would quickly cure Madame."

Madame de Motteville looked up with an air of great surprise, as she replied, "Another doctor instead of M. Valot? - whom do you mean?"

"Occupation, Motteville, occupation. If any one is really ill, it is my poor daughter."

"And your majesty, too."

"Less so this evening, though."

"Do not believe that too confidently, madame," said De Motteville. And, as if to justify her caution, a sharp, acute pain seized the queen, who turned deadly pale, and threw herself back in the chair, with every symptom of a sudden fainting fit. Molina ran to a richly gilded tortoise-shell cabinet, from which she took a large rock-crystal bottle of scented

salts, and held it to the queen's nostrils, who inhaled it wildly for a few minutes, and murmured:

"It is hastening my death - but Heaven's will be done!"

"Your majesty's death is not so near at hand," added Molina, replacing the smelling-bottle in the cabinet.

"Does your majesty feel better now?" inquired Madame de Motteville.

"Much better," returned the queen, placing her finger on her lips, to impose silence on her favorite.

"It is very strange," remarked Madame de Motteville, after a pause.

"What is strange?" said the queen.

"Does your majesty remember the day when this pain attacked you for the first time?"

"I remember only that it was a grievously sad day for me, Motteville."

"But your majesty did not always regard that day as a sad one."

"Why?"

"Because three and twenty years ago, on that very day, his present majesty, your own glorious son, was born at the very same hour."

The queen uttered a loud cry, buried her face in her hands, and seemed utterly prostrated for some minutes; but whether from recollections which arose in her mind, or from reflection, or even with sheer pain, was doubtful. La Molina darted a look at Madame de Motteville, so full of bitter reproach, that the poor woman, perfectly ignorant of its meaning, was in her own exculpation on the point of asking an explanation, when, suddenly, Anne of Austria arose and said, "Yes, the 5th of September; my sorrow began on the 5th of September. The greatest joy, one day; the deepest sorrow the next; - the sorrow," she added, "the bitter expiation of a too excessive joy."

And, from that moment, Anne of Austria, whose memory and reason seemed to be suspended for the time, remained impenetrable, with vacant look, mind almost wandering, and hands hanging heavily down, as if life had almost departed.

"We must put her to bed," said La Molina.

"Presently, Molina."

"Let us leave the queen alone," added the Spanish attendant.

Madame de Motteville rose; large tears were rolling down the queen's pallid face; and Molina, having observed this sign of weakness, fixed her black vigilant eyes upon her.

"Yes, yes," replied the queen. "Leave us, Motteville; go."

The word "us" produced a disagreeable effect upon the ears of the French favorite; for it signified that an interchange of secrets, or of revelations of the past, was about to be made, and that one person was de trop in the conversation which seemed likely to take place.

"Will Molina, alone, be sufficient for your majesty to-night?" inquired the French woman.

"Yes," replied the queen. Madame de Motteville bowed in submission, and was about to withdraw, when suddenly an old female attendant, dressed as if she had belonged to the Spanish court of the year 1620, opened the door, and surprised the queen in her tears. "The remedy!" she cried, delightedly, to the queen, as she unceremoniously approached the group.

"What remedy?" said Anne of Austria.

"For your majesty's sufferings," the former replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Madame de Motteville, eagerly; "Monsieur Valot?"

"No; a lady from Flanders."

"From Flanders? Is she Spanish?" inquired the queen.

"I don't know."

"Who sent her?"

"M. Colbert."

"Her name?"

"She did not mention it."

"Her position in life?"

"She will answer that herself."

"Who is she?"

"She is masked."

"Go, Molina; go and see!" cried the queen.

"It is needless," suddenly replied a voice, at once firm and gentle in its tone, which proceeded from the other side of the tapestry hangings; a

voice which made the attendants start, and the queen tremble excessively. At the same moment, a masked female appeared through the hangings, and, before the queen could speak a syllable she added, "I am connected with the order of the Beguines of Bruges, and do, indeed, bring with me the remedy which is certain to effect a cure of your majesty's complaint." No one uttered a sound, and the Beguine did not move a step.

"Speak," said the queen.

"I will, when we are alone," was the answer.

Anne of Austria looked at her attendants, who immediately withdrew. The Beguine, thereupon, advanced a few steps towards the queen, and bowed reverently before her. The queen gazed with increasing mistrust at this woman, who, in her turn, fixed a pair of brilliant eyes upon her, through her mask.

"The queen of France must, indeed, be very ill," said Anne of Austria, "if it is known at the Beguinage of Bruges that she stands in need of being cured."

"Your majesty is not irremediably ill."

"But tell me how you happen to know I am suffering?"

"Your majesty has friends in Flanders."



"Since these friends, then, sent you, mention their names."

"Impossible, madame, since your majesty's memory has not been awakened by  
your heart."

Anne of Austria looked up, endeavoring to discover through the mysterious mask, and this ambiguous language, the name of her companion, who expressed herself with such familiarity and freedom; then, suddenly, wearied by a curiosity which wounded every feeling of pride in her nature, she said, "You are ignorant, perhaps, that royal personages are never spoken to with the face masked."

"Deign to excuse me, madame," replied the Beguine, humbly.

"I cannot excuse you. I may, possibly, forgive you, if you throw your mask aside."

"I have made a vow, madame, to attend and aid all afflicted and suffering persons, without ever permitting them to behold my face. I might have been able to administer some relief to your body and to your mind, too; but since your majesty forbids me, I will take my leave. Adieu, madame, adieu!"

These words were uttered with a harmony of tone and respect of manner

that disarmed the queen of all anger and suspicion, but did not remove her feeling of curiosity. "You are right," she said; "it ill-becomes those who are suffering to reject the means of relief Heaven sends them. Speak, then; and may you, indeed, be able, as you assert, to administer relief to my body - "

"Let us first speak a little of the mind, if you please," said the Beguine - "of the mind, which, I am sure, must also suffer."

"My mind?"

"There are cancers so insidious in their nature that their very pulsations cannot be felt. Such cancers, madame, leave the ivory whiteness of the skin unblemished, and putrefy not the firm, fair flesh, with their blue tints; the physician who bends over the patient's chest hears not, though he listens, the insatiable teeth of the disease grinding onward through the muscles, and the blood flows freely on; the knife has never been able to destroy, and rarely, even temporarily, to disarm the rage of these mortal scourges, - their home is in the mind, which they corrupt, - they gnaw the whole heart until it breaks. Such, madame, are the cancers fatal to queens; are you, too, free from their scourge?"

Anne slowly raised her arm, dazzling in its perfect whiteness, and pure in its rounded outlines as it was in the time of her earlier days.

"The evils to which you allude," she said, "are the condition of the lives of the high in rank upon earth, to whom Heaven has imparted mind. When those evils become too heavy to be borne, Heaven lightens their burdens by penitence and confession. Thus, only, we lay down our burden and the secrets that oppress us. But, forget not that the same gracious Heaven, in its mercy, apportions to their trials the strength of the feeble creatures of its hand; and my strength has enabled me to bear my burden. For the secrets of others, the silence of Heaven is more than sufficient; for my own secrets, that of my confessor is enough."

"You are as courageous, madame, I see, as ever, against your enemies. You do not acknowledge your confidence in your friends?"

"Queens have no friends; if you have nothing further to say to me, - if you feel yourself inspired by Heaven as a prophetess - leave me, I pray, for I dread the future."

"I should have supposed," said the Beguine, resolutely, "that you would rather have dreaded the past."

Hardly had these words escaped her lips, than the queen rose up proudly. "Speak," she cried, in a short, imperious tone of voice; "explain yourself briefly, quickly, entirely; or, if not - "

"Nay, do not threaten me, your majesty," said the Beguine, gently; "I came here to you full of compassion and respect. I came here on the part

of a friend."

"Prove that to me! Comfort, instead of irritating me."

"Easily enough, and your majesty will see who is friendly to you. What misfortune has happened to your majesty during these three and twenty years past - "

"Serious misfortunes, indeed; have I not lost the king?"

"I speak not of misfortunes of that kind. I wish to ask you, if, since the birth of the king, any indiscretion on a friend's part has caused your majesty the slightest serious anxiety, or distress?"

"I do not understand you," replied the queen, clenching her teeth in order to conceal her emotion.

"I will make myself understood, then. Your majesty remembers that the king was born on the 5th of September, 1638, at a quarter past eleven o'clock."

"Yes," stammered out the queen.

"At half-past twelve," continued the Beguine, "the dauphin, who had been baptized by Monseigneur de Meaux in the king's and your own presence, was

acknowledged as the heir of the crown of France. The king then went to the chapel of the old Chateau de Saint-Germain, to hear the \_Te Deum\_ chanted."

"Quite true, quite true," murmured the queen.

"Your majesty's conferment took place in the presence of Monsieur, his majesty's late uncle, of the princes, and of the ladies attached to the court. The king's physician, Bouvard, and Honore, the surgeon, were stationed in the ante-chamber; your majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, I believe."

"Yes, yes; but you tell me no more than every one else knows as well as you and myself."

"I am now, madame, approaching that which very few persons are acquainted

with. Very few persons, did I say, alas! I might say two only, for formerly there were but five in all, and, for many years past, the secret has been well preserved by the deaths of the principal participators in it. The late king sleeps now with his ancestors; Peronne, the midwife, soon followed him; Laporte is already forgotten."

The queen opened her lips as though to reply; she felt, beneath her icy hand, with which she kept her face half concealed, the beads of perspiration on her brow.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Beguine; "the king was seated at supper, full of joy and happiness; around him on all sides arose wild cries of delight and drinking of healths; the people cheered beneath the balconies; the Swiss guards, the musketeers, and the royal guards wandered through the city, borne about in triumph by the drunken students. Those boisterous sounds of general joy disturbed the dauphin, the future king of France, who was quietly lying in the arms of Madame de Hausac, his nurse, and whose eyes, as he opened them, and stared about, might have observed two crowns at the foot of his cradle. Suddenly your majesty uttered a piercing cry, and Dame Peronne immediately flew to your beside. The doctors were dining in a room at some distance from your chamber; the palace, deserted from the frequency of the irruptions made into it, was without either sentinels or guards. The midwife, having questioned and examined your majesty, gave a sudden exclamation as if in wild astonishment, and taking you in her arms, bewildered almost out of her senses from sheer distress of mind, dispatched Laporte to inform the king that her majesty the queen-mother wished to see him in her room.

Laporte, you are aware, madame, was a man of the most admirable calmness

and presence of mind. He did not approach the king as if he were the bearer of alarming intelligence and wished to inspire the terror he himself experienced; besides, it was not a very terrifying intelligence which awaited the king. Therefore, Laporte appeared with a smile upon his lips, and approached the king's chair, saying to him - 'Sire, the queen is very happy, and would be still more so to see your majesty.' On

that day, Louis XIII. would have given his crown away to the veriest beggar for a 'God bless you.' Animated, light-hearted, and full of gayety, the king rose from the table, and said to those around him, in a tone that Henry IV. might have adopted, - 'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.' He came to your beside, madame, at the very moment Dame Peronne presented to him a second prince, as beautiful and healthy as the former, and said - 'Sire, Heaven will not allow the kingdom of France to fall into the female line.' The king, yielding to a first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, and cried, 'Oh, Heaven, I thank Thee!'"

At this part of her recital, the Beguine paused, observing how intensely the queen was suffering; she had thrown herself back in her chair, and with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed, listened without seeming to hear, and her lips moving convulsively, either breathing a prayer to Heaven or imprecations on the woman standing before her.

"Ah! I do not believe that, if, because there could be but one dauphin in France, "exclaimed the Beguine, "the queen allowed that child to vegetate, banished from his royal parents' presence, she was on that account an unfeeling mother. Oh, no, no; there are those alive who have known and witnessed the passionate kisses she imprinted on that innocent creature in exchange for a life of misery and gloom to which state policy condemned the twin brother of Louis XIV."

"Oh! Heaven!" murmured the queen feebly.

"It is admitted," continued the Beguine, quickly, "that when the king perceived the effect which would result from the existence of two sons, equal in age and pretensions, he trembled for the welfare of France, for the tranquillity of the state; and it is equally well known that Cardinal de Richelieu, by the direction of Louis XIII., thought over the subject with deep attention, and after an hour's meditation in his majesty's cabinet, he pronounced the following sentence: - 'One prince means peace and safety for the state; two competitors, civil war and anarchy.'"

The queen rose suddenly from her seat, pale as death, and her hands clenched together:

"You know too much," she said, in a hoarse, thick voice, "since you refer to secrets of state. As for the friends from whom you have acquired this secret, they are false and treacherous. You are their accomplice in the crime which is being now committed. Now, throw aside your mask, or I will have you arrested by my captain of the guards. Do not think that this secret terrifies me! You have obtained it, you shall restore it to me. Never shall it leave your bosom, for neither your secret nor your own life belong to you from this moment."

Anne of Austria, joining gesture to the threat, advanced a couple of steps towards the Beguine.

"Learn," said the latter, "to know and value the fidelity, the honor, and secrecy of the friends you have abandoned." And, then, suddenly she



threw aside her mask.

"Madame de Chevreuse!" exclaimed the queen.

"With your majesty, the sole living \_confidante\_ of the secret."

"Ah!" murmured Anne of Austria; "come and embrace me, duchesse. Alas! you kill your friend in thus trifling with her terrible distress."

And the queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchesse, burst into a flood of bitter tears. "How young you are - still!" said the latter, in a hollow voice; "you can weep!"