Chapter 56

Rivals in Politics.

On his return from the promenade, which had been so prolific in poetical effusions, and in which every one had paid his or her tribute to the Muses, as the poets of the period used to say, the king found M. Fouquet waiting for an audience. M. Colbert had lain in wait for his majesty in the corridor, and followed him like a jealous and watchful shadow; M. Colbert, with his square head, his vulgar and untidy, though rich costume, somewhat resembled a Flemish gentleman after he had been over-indulging in his national drink - beer. Fouquet, at sight of his enemy, remained perfectly unmoved, and during the whole of the scene which followed scrupulously resolved to observe a line of conduct particularly difficult to the man of superior mind, who does not even wish to show his contempt, for fear of doing his adversary too much honor. Colbert made no attempt to conceal his insolent expression of the vulgar joy he felt. In his opinion, M. Fouquet's was a game very badly played and hopelessly lost, although not yet finished. Colbert belonged to that school of politicians who think cleverness alone worthy of their admiration, and success the only thing worth caring for. Colbert, moreover, who was not simply an envious and jealous man, but who had the king's interest really at heart, because he was thoroughly imbued with the highest sense of probity in all matters of figures and accounts, could well afford to assign as a pretext for his conduct, that in hating and doing his utmost to ruin M. Fouquet, he had nothing in view but the welfare of the state and the dignity of the crown. None of these details escaped Fouquet's

observation; through his enemy's thick, bushy brows, and despite the restless movement of his eyelids, he could, by merely looking at his eyes, penetrate to the very bottom of Colbert's heart, and he read to what an unbounded extent hate towards himself and triumph at his approaching fall existed there. But as, in observing everything, he wished to remain himself impenetrable, he composed his features, smiled with the charmingly sympathetic smile that was peculiarly his own, and saluted the king with the most dignified and graceful ease and elasticity of manner. "Sire," he said, "I perceive by your majesty's joyous air that you have been gratified with the promenade."

"Most gratified, indeed, monsieur le surintendant, most gratified. You were very wrong not to come with us, as I invited you to do."

"I was working, sire," replied the superintendent, who did not even seem to take the trouble to turn aside his head in merest respect of Colbert's presence.

"Ah! M. Fouquet," cried the king, "there is nothing like the country. I should be delighted to live in the country always, in the open air and under the trees."

"I should hope that your majesty is not yet weary of the throne," said Fouquet.

"No; but thrones of soft turf are very pleasant."

"Your majesty gratifies my utmost wishes in speaking in that manner, for I have a request to submit to you."

"On whose behalf, monsieur?"

"Oh behalf of the nymphs of Vaux, sire."

"Ah! ah!" said Louis XIV.

"Your majesty, too, once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember it."

"The _fete_ at Vaux, the celebrated _fete_, I think, it was, sire," said Colbert, endeavoring to show his importance by taking part in the conversation.

Fouquet, with the profoundest contempt, did not take the slightest notice of the remark, as if, as far as he was concerned, Colbert had not even thought or said a word.

"Your majesty is aware," he said, "that I destine my estate at Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the most powerful of monarchs."

"I have given you my promise, monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling; "and a

king never departs from his word."

"And I have come now, sire, to inform your majesty that I am ready to obey your orders in every respect."

"Do you promise me many wonders, monsieur le surintendant?" said Louis, looking at Colbert.

"Wonders? Oh! no, sire. I do not undertake that. I hope to be able to procure your majesty a little pleasure, perhaps even a little forgetfulness of the cares of state."

"Nay, nay, M. Fouquet," returned the king; "I insist upon the word 'wonders.' You are a magician, I believe; we all know the power you wield; we also know that you can find gold even when there is none to be found elsewhere; so much so, indeed, that people say you coin it."

Fouquet felt that the shot was discharged from a double quiver, and that the king had launched an arrow from his own bow as well as one from Colbert's. "Oh!" said he, laughingly, "the people know perfectly well out of what mine I procure the gold; and they know it only too well, perhaps; besides," he added, "I can assure your majesty that the gold destined to pay the expenses of the _fete_ at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; hard labor it may, perhaps, but that can be paid for."

Louis paused quite confused. He wished to look at Colbert; Colbert, too,

wished to reply to him; a glance as swift as an eagle's, a king-like glance, indeed, which Fouquet darted at the latter, arrested the words upon his lips. The king, who had by this time recovered his self-possession, turned towards Fouquet, saying, "I presume, therefore, I am now to consider myself formally invited?"

"Yes, sire, if your majesty will condescend so far as to accept my invitation."

"What day have you fixed?"

"Any day your majesty may find most convenient."

"You speak like an enchanter who has but to conjure up in actuality the wildest fancies, Monsieur Fouquet. I could not say so much, indeed, myself."

"Your majesty will do, whenever you please, everything that a monarch can and ought to do. The king of France has servants at his bidding who are able to do anything on his behalf, to accomplish everything to gratify his pleasures."

Colbert tried to look at the superintendent, in order to see whether this remark was an approach to less hostile sentiments on his part; but Fouquet had not even looked at his enemy, and Colbert hardly seemed to exist as far as he was concerned. "Very good, then," said the king.

"Will a week hence suit you?"

"Perfectly well, sire."

"This is Tuesday; if I give you until next Sunday week, will that be sufficient?"

"The delay which your majesty deigns to accord me will greatly aid the various works which my architects have in hand for the purpose of adding to the amusement of your majesty and your friends."

"By the by, speaking of my friends," resumed the king; "how do you intend to treat them?"

"The king is master everywhere, sire; your majesty will draw up your own list and give your own orders. All those you may deign to invite will be my guests, my honored guests, indeed."

"I thank you!" returned the king, touched by the noble thought expressed in so noble a tone.

Fouquet, therefore, took leave of Louis XIV., after a few words had been added with regard to the details of certain matters of business. He felt that Colbert would remain behind with the king, that they would both converse about him, and that neither of them would spare him in the least degree. The satisfaction of being able to give a last and terrible blow

to his enemy seemed to him almost like a compensation for everything they were about to subject him to. He turned back again immediately, as soon, indeed, as he had reached the door, and addressing the king, said, "I was forgetting that I had to crave your majesty's forgiveness."

"In what respect?" said the king, graciously.

"For having committed a serious fault without perceiving it."

"A fault! You! Ah! Monsieur Fouquet, I shall be unable to do otherwise than forgive you. In what way or against whom have you been found wanting?"

"Against every sense of propriety, sire. I forgot to inform your majesty of a circumstance that has lately occurred of some little importance."

"What is it?"

Colbert trembled; he fancied that he was about to frame a denunciation against him. His conduct had been unmasked. A single syllable from Fouquet, a single proof formally advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of feeling which guided Louis XIV., Colbert's favor would disappear at once; the latter trembled, therefore, lest so daring a blow might overthrow his whole scaffold; in point of fact, the opportunity was so admirably suited to be taken advantage of, that a skillful, practiced player like Aramis would not have let it slip. "Sire," said Fouquet,

with an easy, unconcerned air, "since you have had the kindness to forgive me, I am perfectly indifferent about my confession; this morning I sold one of the official appointments I hold."

"One of your appointments," said the king, "which?"

Colbert turned perfectly livid. "That which conferred upon me, sire, a grand gown, and a stern air of gravity; the appointment of procureur-general."

The king involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation and looked at Colbert, who, with his face bedewed with perspiration, felt almost on the point of fainting. "To whom have you sold this department, Monsieur Fouquet?" inquired the king.

Colbert was obliged to lean against a column of the fireplace. "To a councilor belonging to the parliament, sire, whose name is Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"Yes, sire, a particular friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet; letting every word fall from his lips with the most inimitable nonchalance, and with an admirably assumed expression of forgetfulness and ignorance. And having finished, and having overwhelmed Colbert beneath the weight of this superiority, the superintendent again saluted the king and quitted the room, partially revenged by the stupefaction of

the king and the humiliation of the favorite.

"Is it really possible," said the king, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared, "that he has sold that office?"

"Yes, sire," said Colbert, meaningly.

"He must be mad," the king added.

Colbert this time did not reply; he had penetrated the king's thought, a thought which amply revenged him for the humiliation he had just been made to suffer; his hatred was augmented by a feeling of bitter jealousy of Fouquet; and a threat of disgrace was now added to the plan he had arranged for his ruin. Colbert felt perfectly assured that for the future, between Louis XIV. and himself, their hostile feelings and ideas would meet with no obstacles, and that at the first fault committed by Fouquet, which could be laid hold of as a pretext, the chastisement so long impending would be precipitated. Fouquet had thrown aside his weapons of defense, and hate and jealousy had picked them up. Colbert was invited by the king to the _fete_ at Vaux; he bowed like a man confident in himself, and accepted the invitation with the air of one who almost confers a favor. The king was about writing down Saint-Aignan's name on his list of royal commands, when the usher announced the Comte de Saint-Aignan. As soon as the royal "Mercury" entered, Colbert discreetly withdrew.