

## Chapter 39

### The Ballet of the Seasons.

At the conclusion of the banquet, which was served at five o'clock, the king entered his cabinet, where his tailors were awaiting him for the purpose of trying on the celebrated costume representing Spring, which was the result of so much imagination, and had cost so many efforts of thought to the designers and ornament-workers of the court. As for the ballet itself, every person knew the part he had to take in it, and how to perform it. The king had resolved to make it surprise. Hardly, therefore, had he finished his conference, and entered his own apartment, than he desired his two masters of the ceremonies, Villeroy and Saint-Aignan, to be sent for. Both replied that they only awaited his orders, and that everything was ready to begin, but that it was necessary to be sure of fine weather and a favorable night before these orders could be carried out. The king opened his window; the pale-gold hues of the evening were visible on the horizon through the vistas of the wood, and the moon, white as snow, was already mounting the heavens. Not a ripple could be noticed on the surface of the green waters; the swans themselves, even, reposing with folded wings like ships at anchor, seemed inspirations of the warmth of the air, the freshness of the water, and the silence of the beautiful evening. The king, having observed all these things, and contemplated the magnificent picture before him, gave the order which De Villeroy and De Saint-Aignan awaited; but with a view of insuring the execution of this order in a royal manner, one last question was necessary, and Louis XIV. put it to the two gentlemen in the

following manner: - "Have you any money?"

"Sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "we have arranged everything with M. Colbert."

"Ah! very well!"

"Yes, sire, and M. Colbert said he would wait upon your majesty, as soon as your majesty should manifest an intention of carrying out the *\_fetes\_*, of which he has furnished the programme."

"Let him come in, then," said the king; and as if Colbert had been listening at the door for the purpose of keeping himself *\_au courant\_* with the conversation, he entered as soon as the king had pronounced his name to the two courtiers.

"Ah! M. Colbert," said the king. "Gentlemen, to your posts," whereupon Saint-Aignan and Villeroy took their leave. The king seated himself in an easy-chair near the window, saying: "The ballet will take place this evening, M. Colbert."

"In that case, sire, I will pay all accounts to-morrow."

"Why so?"

"I promised the tradespeople to pay their bills the day following that on

which the ballet should take place."

"Very well, M. Colbert, pay them, since you have promised to do so."

"Certainly, sire; but I must have money to do that."

"What! have not the four millions, which M. Fouquet promised, been sent?  
I forgot to ask you about it."

"Sire, they were sent at the hour promised."

"Well?"

"Well, sire, the colored lamps, the fireworks, the musicians, and the  
cooks, have swallowed up four millions in eight days."

"Entirely?"

"To the last penny. Every time your majesty directed the banks of the  
grand canal to be illuminated, as much oil was consumed as there was  
water in the basins."

"Well, well, M. Colbert; the fact is, then, you have no more money?"

"I have no more, sire, but M. Fouquet has," Colbert replied, his face  
darkening with a sinister expression of pleasure.

"What do you mean?" inquired Louis.

"We have already made M. Fouquet advance six millions. He has given them with too much grace not to have others still to give, if they are required, which is the case at the present moment. It is necessary, therefore, that he should comply."

The king frowned. "M. Colbert," said he, accentuating the financier's name, "that is not the way I understood the matter; I do not wish to make use, against any of my servants, of a means of pressure which may oppress him and fetter his services. In eight days M. Fouquet has furnished six millions; that is a good round sum."

Colbert turned pale. "And yet," he said, "your majesty did not use this language some time ago, when the news about Belle-Isle arrived, for instance."

"You are right, M. Colbert."

"Nothing, however, has changed since then; on the contrary, indeed."

"In my thoughts, monsieur, everything has changed."

"Does your majesty then no longer believe the disloyal attempt?"

"My affairs concern myself alone, monsieur; and I have already told you I transact them without interference."

"Then, I perceive," said Colbert, trembling with anger and fear, "that I have had the misfortune to fall into disgrace with your majesty."

"Not at all; you are, on the contrary, most agreeable to me."

"Yet, sire," said the minister, with a certain affected bluntness, so successful when it was a question of flattering Louis's self-esteem, "what use is there in being agreeable to your majesty, if one can no longer be of any use?"

"I reserve your services for a better occasion; and believe me, they will only be the better appreciated."

"Your majesty's plan, then, in this affair, is - "

"You want money, M. Colbert?"

"Seven hundred thousand francs, sire."

"You will take them from my private treasure." Colbert bowed. "And," added Louis, "as it seems a difficult matter for you, notwithstanding your economy, to defray, with so limited a sum, the expenses which I intend to incur, I will at once sign an order for three millions."

The king took a pen and signed an order immediately, then handed it to Colbert. "Be satisfied, M. Colbert, the plan I have adopted is one worthy of a king," said Louis XIV., who pronounced these words with all the majesty he knew how to assume in such circumstances; and dismissed Colbert for the purpose of giving an audience to his tailors.

The order issued by the king was known throughout the whole of Fontainebleau; it was already known, too, that the king was trying on his costume, and that the ballet would be danced in the evening. The news circulated with the rapidity of lightning; during its progress it kindled every variety of coquetry, desire, and wild ambition. At the same moment, as if by enchantment, every one who knew how to hold a needle, every one who could distinguish a coat from a pair of trousers, was summoned to the assistance of those who had received invitations. The king had completed his toilette by nine o'clock; he appeared in an open carriage decorated with branches of trees and flowers. The queens had taken their seats upon a magnificent dias or platform, erected upon the borders of the lake, in a theater of wonderful elegance of construction. In the space of five hours the carpenters had put together all the different parts connected with the building; the upholsterers had laid down the carpets, erected the seats; and, as if at the wave of an enchanter's wand, a thousand arms, aiding, instead of interfering with each other, had constructed the building, amidst the sound of music; whilst, at the same time, other workmen illuminated the theater and the shores of the lake with an incalculable number of lamps. As the heavens,

set with stars, were perfectly unclouded, as not even a breath of air could be heard in the woods, and as if Nature itself had yielded complacently to the king's fancies, the back of the theater had been left open; so that, behind the foreground of the scenes, could be seen as a background the beautiful sky, glittering with stars; the sheet of water, illuminated by the lights which were reflected in it; and the bluish outline of the grand masses of woods, with their rounded tops. When the king made his appearance, the theater was full, and presented to the view one vast group, dazzling with gold and precious stones; in which, however, at the first glance, no single face could be distinguished. By degrees, as the sight became accustomed to so much brilliancy, the rarest beauties appeared to the view, as in the evening sky the stars appear one by one to him who closes his eyes and then opens them again.

The theater represented a grove of trees; a few fauns lifting up their cloven feet were jumping about; a dryad made her appearance on the scene, and was immediately pursued by them; others gathered round her for her defense, and they quarrelled as they danced. Suddenly, for the purpose of restoring peace and order, Spring, accompanied by his whole court, made his appearance. The Elements, subaltern powers of mythology, together with their attributes, hastened to follow their gracious sovereign. The Seasons, allies of Spring, followed him closely, to form a quadrille, which, after many words of more or less flattering import, was the commencement of the dance. The music, hautboys, flutes, and viols, was delightfully descriptive of rural delights. The king had already made his appearance, amid thunders of applause. He was dressed

in a tunic of flowers, which set off his graceful and well-formed figure to advantage. His legs, the best-shaped at court, were displayed to great advantage in flesh-colored silken hose, of silk so fine and so transparent that it seemed almost like flesh itself. The most beautiful pale-lilac satin shoes, with bows of flowers and leaves, imprisoned his small feet. The bust of the figure was in harmonious keeping with the base; Louis's waving hair floated on his shoulders, the freshness of his complexion was enhanced by the brilliancy of his beautiful blue eyes, which softly kindled all hearts; a mouth with tempting lips, which deigned to open in smiles. Such was the prince of that period: justly that evening styled "The King of all the Loves." There was something in his carriage which resembled the buoyant movements of an immortal, and he did not dance so much as seem to soar along. His entrance produced, therefore, the most brilliant effect. Suddenly the Comte de Saint-Aignan was observed endeavoring to approach either the king or Madame.

The princess - who was robed in a long dress, diaphanous and light as the finest network tissue from the hands of skillful Mechlin workers, one knee occasionally revealed beneath the folds of the tunic, and her little feet encased in silken slippers decked with pearls - advanced radiant with beauty, accompanied by her *cortege* of Bacchantes, and had already reached the spot assigned to her in the dance. The applause continued so long that the comte had ample leisure to join the king.

"What is the matter, Saint-Aignan?" said Spring.



"Nothing whatever," replied the courtier, as pale as death; "but your majesty has not thought of Fruits."

"Yes; it is suppressed."

"Far from it, sire; your majesty having given no directions about it, the musicians have retained it."

"How excessively annoying," said the king. "This figure cannot be performed, since M. de Guiche is absent. It must be suppressed."

"Ah, sire, a quarter of an hour's music without any dancing will produce an effect so chilling as to ruin the success of the ballet."

"But, come, since - "

"Oh, sire, that is not the greatest misfortune; for, after all, the orchestra could still just as well cut it out, if it were necessary; but - "

"But what?"

"Why, M. de Guiche is here."

"Here?" replied the king, frowning, "here? Are you sure?"

"Yes, sire; and ready dressed for the ballet."

The king felt himself color deeply, and said, "You are probably mistaken."

"So little is that the case, sire, that if your majesty will look to the right, you will see that the comte is in waiting."

Louis turned hastily towards the side, and in fact, on his right, brilliant in his character of Autumn, De Guiche awaited until the king should look at him, in order that he might address him. To give an idea of the stupefaction of the king, and that of Monsieur, who was moving about restlessly in his box, - to describe also the agitated movement of the heads in the theater, and the strange emotion of Madame, at the sight of her partner, - is a task we must leave to abler hands. The king stood almost gaping with astonishment as he looked at the comte, who, bowing lowly, approached Louis with the profoundest respect.

"Sire," he said, "your majesty's most devoted servant approaches to perform a service on this occasion with similar zeal that he has already shown on the field of battle. Your majesty, in omitting the dance of the Fruits, would be losing the most beautiful scene in the ballet. I did not wish to be the substance of so dark a shadow to your majesty's elegance, skill, and graceful invention; and I have left my tenants in order to place my services at your majesty's commands."

Every word fell distinctly, in perfect harmony and eloquence, upon Louis XIV.'s ears. Their flattery pleased, as much as De Guiche's courage had astonished him, and he simply replied: "I did not tell you to return, comte."

"Certainly not, sire; but your majesty did not tell me to remain."

The king perceived that time was passing away, that if this strange scene were prolonged it would complicate everything, and that a single cloud upon the picture would eventually spoil the whole. Besides, the king's heart was filled with two or three new ideas; he had just derived fresh inspiration from the eloquent glances of Madame. Her look had said to him: "Since they are jealous of you, divide their suspicions, for the man who distrusts two rivals does not object to either in particular." So that Madame, by this clever diversion, decided him. The king smiled upon De Guiche, who did not comprehend a word of Madame's dumb language, but he remarked that she pretended not to look at him, and he attributed the pardon which had been conferred upon him to the princess's kindness of heart. The king seemed only pleased with every one present. Monsieur was the only one who did not understand anything about the matter. The ballet began; the effect was more than beautiful. When the music, by its bursts of melody, carried away these illustrious dancers, when the simple, untutored pantomime of that period, only the more natural on account of the very indifferent acting of the august actors, had reached its culminating point of triumph, the theater shook with tumultuous

applause.

De Guiche shone like a sun, but like a courtly sun, that is resigned to fill a subordinate part. Disdainful of a success of which Madame showed no acknowledgement, he thought of nothing but boldly regaining the marked preference of the princess. She, however, did not bestow a single glance upon him. By degrees all his happiness, all his brilliancy, subsided into regret and uneasiness; so that his limbs lost their power, his arms hung heavily by his sides, and his head drooped as though he was stupefied. The king, who had from this moment become in reality the principal dancer in the quadrille, cast a look upon his vanquished rival. De Guiche soon ceased to sustain even the character of the courtier; without applause, he danced indifferently, and very soon could not dance at all, by which accident the triumph of the king and of Madame was assured.