

## Chapter VIII. What his Majesty King Louis XIV. was at the Age of Twenty-Two.

It has been seen, by the account we have endeavored to give of it, that the entree of King Louis XIV. into the city of Blois had been noisy and brilliant; his young majesty had therefore appeared perfectly satisfied with it.

On arriving beneath the porch of the Castle of the States, the king met, surrounded by his guards and gentlemen, with S. A. R. the duke, Gaston of Orleans, whose physiognomy, naturally rather majestic, had borrowed on this solemn occasion a fresh luster and a fresh dignity. On her part, Madame, dressed in her robes of ceremony, awaited, in the interior balcony, the entrance of her nephew. All the windows of the old castle, so deserted and dismal on ordinary days, were resplendent with ladies and lights.

It was then to the sound of drums, trumpets, and vivats, that the young king crossed the threshold of that castle in which, seventy-two years before, Henry III. had called in the aid of assassination and treachery to keep upon his head and in his house a crown which was already slipping from his brow, to fall into another family.

All eyes, after having admired the young king, so handsome and so agreeable, sought for that other king of France, much otherwise king than the former, and so old, so pale, so bent, that people called the Cardinal Mazarin.

Louis was at this time endowed with all the natural gifts which make the perfect gentleman; his eye was brilliant, mild, and of a clear azure blue. But the most skillful physiognomists, those divers into the soul, on fixing their looks upon it, if it had been possible for a subject to sustain the glance of the king,--the most skillful physiognomists, we say, would never have been able to fathom the depths of that abyss of mildness. It was with the eyes of the king as with the immense depths of the azure heavens, or with those more terrific, and almost as sublime, which the Mediterranean reveals under the keels of its ships in a clear summer day, a gigantic mirror in which heaven delights to reflect sometimes its stars, sometimes its storms.

The king was short of stature--he was scarcely five feet two inches: but his youth made up for this defect, set off likewise by great nobleness in all his movements, and by considerable address in all bodily exercises.

Certes, he was already quite a king, and it was a great thing to be a king in that period of traditional devotedness and respect; but as,

up to that time, he had been but seldom and always poorly shown to the people, as they to whom he was shown saw him by the side of his mother, a tall woman, and monsieur le cardinal, a man of commanding presence, many found him so little of a king as to say,--

"Why, the king is not so tall as monsieur le cardinal!"

Whatever may be thought of these physical observations, which were principally made in the capital, the young king was welcomed as a god by the inhabitants of Blois, and almost like a king by his uncle and aunt, Monsieur and Madame, the inhabitants of the castle.

It must, however, be allowed, that when he saw, in the hall of reception, chairs of equal height for himself, his mother, the cardinal, and his uncle and aunt, a disposition artfully concealed by the semi-circular form of the assembly, Louis XIV. became red with anger, and looked around him to ascertain by the countenances of those that were present, if this humiliation had been prepared for him. But as he saw nothing upon the impassible visage of the cardinal, nothing on that of his mother, nothing on those of the assembly, he resigned himself, and sat down, taking care to be seated before anybody else.

The gentlemen and ladies were presented to their majesties and monsieur le cardinal.

The king remarked that his mother and he scarcely knew the names of any of the persons who were presented to them; whilst the cardinal, on the contrary, never failed, with an admirable memory and presence of mind, to talk to every one about his estates, his ancestors, or his children, some of whom he named, which enchanted those worthy country gentlemen, and confirmed them in the idea that he alone is truly king who knows his subjects, from the same reason that the sun has no rival, because the sun alone warms and lightens.

The study of the young king, which had begun a long time before, without anybody suspecting it, was continued then, and he looked around him attentively to endeavor to make out something in the physiognomies which had at first appeared the most insignificant and trivial.

A collation was served. The king, without daring to call upon the hospitality of his uncle, had waited for it impatiently. This time, therefore, he had all the honors due, if not to his rank, at least to his appetite.

As to the cardinal, he contented himself with touching with his withered lips a bouillon, served in a golden cup. The all-powerful minister, who had taken her regency from the queen, and his royalty from the king, had not been able to take a good stomach from nature.

Anne of Austria, already suffering from the cancer which six or eight years after caused her death, ate very little more than the cardinal.

For Monsieur, already puffed up with the great event which had taken place in his provincial life, he ate nothing whatever.

Madame alone, like a true Lorrainer, kept pace with his majesty; so that Louis XIV., who, without this partner, might have eaten nearly alone, was at first much pleased with his aunt, and afterwards with M. de Saint-Remy, her maitre d'hotel, who had really distinguished himself.

The collation over, at a sign of approbation from M. de Mazarin, the king arose, and, at the invitation of his aunt, walked about among the ranks of the assembly.

The ladies then observed--there are certain things for which women are as good observers at Blois as at Paris--the ladies then observed that Louis XIV. had a prompt and bold look, which premised a distinguished appreciator of beauty. The men, on their part, observed that the prince was proud and haughty, that he loved to look down those who fixed their eyes upon him too long or too earnestly, which gave presage of a master.

Louis XIV. had accomplished about a third of his review when his ears were struck with a word which his eminence pronounced whilst conversing with Monsieur.

This word was the name of a woman.

Scarcely had Louis XIV. heard this word than he heard, or rather listening to nothing else; and neglecting the arc of the circle which awaited his visit, his object seemed to be to come as quickly as possible to the extremity of the curve.

Monsieur, like a good courtier, was inquiring of monsieur le cardinal after the health of his nieces; he regretted, he said, not having the pleasure of receiving them at the same time with their uncle; they must certainly have grown in stature, beauty and grace, as they had promised to do the last time Monsieur had seen them.

What had first struck the king was a certain constraint in the voices of the two interlocutors. The voice of Monsieur was calm and natural when he spoke thus; while that of M. de Mazarin jumped by a note and a half to reply above the diapason of his usual voice. It might have been said that he wished that voice to strike, at the end of the salon, any ear that was too distant.

"Monseigneur," replied he, "Mesdemoiselles de Mazarin have still to finish their education: they have duties to fulfill, and a position to make. An abode in a young and brilliant court would dissipate them a

little."

Louis, at this last sentence, smiled sadly. The court was young, it was true, but the avarice of the cardinal had taken good care that it should not be brilliant.

"You have nevertheless no intention," replied Monsieur, "to cloister them or make them borgeoises?"

"Not at all," replied the cardinal, forcing his Italian pronunciation in such a manner that, from soft and velvety as it was, it became sharp and vibrating; "not at all: I have a full and fixed intention to marry them, and that as well as I shall be able."

"Parties will not be wanting, monsieur le cardinal," replied Monsieur, with a bonhomie worthy of one tradesman congratulating another.

"I hope not, monseigneur, and with reason, as God has been pleased to give them grace, intelligence, and beauty."

During this conversation, Louis XIV., conducted by Madame, accomplished, as we have described, the circle of presentations.

"Mademoiselle Auricule," said the princess, presenting to his majesty a fat, fair girl of two-and-twenty, who at a village fete might have been taken for a peasant in Sunday finery,--"the daughter of my music-mistress."

The king smiled. Madame had never been able to extract four correct notes from either viol or harpsichord.

"Mademoiselle Aure de Montalais," continued Madame; "a young lady of rank, and my good attendant."

This time it was not the king that smiled; it was the young lady presented, because, for the first time in her life, she heard, given to her by Madame, who generally showed no tendency to spoil her, such an honorable qualification.

Our old acquaintance Montalais, therefore, made his majesty a profound courtesy, the more respectful from the necessity she was under of concealing certain contractions of her laughing lips, which the king might not have attributed to their real cause.

It was just at this moment that the king caught the word which startled him.

"And the name of the third?" asked Monsieur.

"Mary, monseigneur," replied the cardinal.

There was doubtless some magical influence in that word, for, as we have said, the king started in hearing it, and drew Madame towards the middle of the circle, as if he wished to put some confidential question to her, but, in reality, for the sake of getting nearer to the cardinal.

"Madame, my aunt," said he, laughing, and in a suppressed voice, "my geography-master did not teach me that Blois was at such an immense distance from Paris."

"What do you mean, nephew?" asked Madame.

"Why, because it would appear that it requires several years, as regards fashion, to travel the distance!--Look at those young ladies!"

"Well; I know them all."

"Some of them are pretty."

"Don't say that too loud, monsieur my nephew; you will drive them wild."

"Stop a bit, stop a bit, dear aunt!" said the king, smiling; "for the second part of my sentence will serve as a corrective to the first. Well, my dear aunt, some of them appear old and others ugly, thanks to their ten-year-old fashions."

"But, sire, Blois is only five days' journey from Paris."

"Yes, that is it," said the king: "two years behind for each day."

"Indeed! do you really think so? Well, that is strange! It never struck me."

"Now, look, aunt," said Louis XIV., drawing still nearer to Mazarin, under the pretext of gaining a better point of view, "look at that simple white dress by the side of those antiquated specimens of finery, and those pretentious coiffures. She is probably one of my mother's maids of honor, though I don't know her."

"Ah! ah! my dear nephew!" replied Madame, laughing; "permit me to tell you that your divinatory science is at fault for once. The young lady you honor with your praise is not a Parisian, but a Blaisoise."

"Oh, aunt!" replied the king with a look of doubt.

"Come here, Louise," said Madame.

And the fair girl, already known to you under that name, approached

them, timid, blushing, and almost bent beneath the royal glance.

"Mademoiselle Louise Francoise de la Beaume le Blanc, the daughter of the Marquise de la Valliere," said Madame, ceremoniously.

The young girl bowed with so much grace, mingled with the profound timidity inspired by the presence of the king, that the latter lost, while looking at her, a few words of the conversation of Monsieur and the cardinal.

"Daughter-in-law," continued Madame, "of M. de Saint-Remy, my maitre d'hotel, who presided over the confection of that excellent daube truffee which your majesty seemed so much to appreciate."

No grace, no youth, no beauty, could stand out against such a presentation. The king smiled. Whether the words of Madame were a pleasantry, or uttered in all innocency, they proved the pitiless immolation of everything that Louis had found charming or poetic in the young girl. Mademoiselle de la Valliere, for Madame and, by rebound, for the king, was, for a moment, no more than the daughter of a man of a superior talent over dindes truffees.

But princes are thus constituted. The gods, too, were just like this in Olympus. Diana and Venus, no doubt, abused the beautiful Alcmena and poor Io, when they condescended for distraction's sake, to speak, amidst nectar and ambrosia, of mortal beauties, at the table of Jupiter.

Fortunately, Louise was so bent in her reverential salute, that she did not catch either Madame's words or the king's smile. In fact, if the poor child, who had so much good taste as alone to have chosen to dress herself in white amidst all her companions--if that dove's heart, so easily accessible to painful emotions, had been touched by the cruel words of Madame, or the egotistical cold smile of the king, it would have annihilated her.

And Montalais herself, the girl of ingenious ideas, would not have attempted to recall her to life; for ridicule kills beauty even.

But fortunately, as we have said, Louise, whose ears were buzzing, and her eyes veiled by timidity,--Louise saw nothing and heard nothing; and the king, who had still his attention directed to the conversation of the cardinal and his uncle, hastened to return to them.

He came up just at the moment Mazarin terminated by saying: "Mary, as well as her sisters, has just set off for Brouage. I make them follow the opposite bank of the Loire to that along which we have traveled; and if I calculate their progress correctly, according to the orders I have given, they will to-morrow be opposite Blois."

These words were pronounced with that tact--that measure, that distinctness of tone, of intention, and reach--which made del Signor Giulio Mazarini the first comedian in the world.

It resulted that they went straight to the heart of Louis XIV., and the cardinal, on turning round at the simple noise of the approaching footsteps of his majesty, saw the immediate effect of them upon the countenance of his pupil, an effect betrayed to the keen eyes of his eminence by a slight increase of color. But what was the ventilation of such a secret to him whose craft had for twenty years deceived all the diplomatists of Europe?

From the moment the young king heard these last words, he appeared as if he had received a poisoned arrow in his heart. He could not remain quiet in a place, but cast around an uncertain, dead, and aimless look over the assembly. He with his eyes interrogated his mother more than twenty times: but she, given up to the pleasure of conversing with her sister-in-law, and likewise constrained by the glance of Mazarin, did not appear to comprehend any of the supplications conveyed by the looks of her son.

From this moment, music, lights, flowers, beauties, all became odious and insipid to Louis XIV. After he had a hundred times bitten his lips, stretched his legs and his arms like a well-brought-up child, who, without daring to gape, exhausts all the modes of evincing his weariness--after having uselessly again implored his mother and the minister, he turned a despairing look towards the door, that is to say, towards liberty.

At this door, in the embrasure of which he was leaning, he saw, standing out strongly, a figure with a brown and lofty countenance, an aquiline nose, a stern but brilliant eye, gray and long hair, a black mustache, the true type of military beauty, whose gorget, more sparkling than a mirror, broke all the reflected lights which concentrated upon it, and sent them back as lightning. This officer wore his gray hat with its long red plumes upon his head, a proof that he was called there by his duty, and not by his pleasure. If he had been brought thither by his pleasure--if he had been a courtier instead of a soldier, as pleasure must always be paid for at the same price--he would have held his hat in his hand.

That which proved still better that this officer was upon duty, and was accomplishing a task to which he was accustomed, was, that he watched, with folded arms, remarkable indifference, and supreme apathy, the joys and ennui of this fete. Above all, he appeared, like a philosopher, and all old soldiers are philosophers,--he appeared above all to comprehend the ennui infinitely better than the joys; but in the one he took his part, knowing very well how to do without the other.

Now, he was leaning, as we have said, against the carved door-frame when the melancholy, weary eyes of the king, by chance, met his.

It was not the first time, as it appeared, that the eyes of the officer had met those eyes, and he was perfectly acquainted with the expression of them; for, as soon as he had cast his own look upon the countenance of Louis XIV., and had read by it what was passing in his heart--that is to say, all the ennui that oppressed him--all the timid desire to go out which agitated him,--he perceived he must render the king a service without his commanding it,--almost in spite of himself. Boldly, therefore, as if he had given the word of command to cavalry in battle, "On the king's service!" cried he, in a clear, sonorous voice.

At these words, which produced the effect of a peal of thunder, prevailing over the orchestra, the singing and the buzz of the promenaders, the cardinal and the queen-mother looked at each other with surprise.

Louis XIV., pale, but resolved, supported as he was by that intuition of his own thought which he had found in the mind of the officer of musketeers, and which he had just manifested by the order given, arose from his chair, and took a step towards the door.

"Are you going, my son?" said the queen, whilst Mazarin satisfied himself with interrogating by a look which might have appeared mild if it had not been so piercing.

"Yes, madame," replied the king; "I am fatigued, and, besides, wish to write this evening."

A smile stole over the lips of the minister, who appeared, by a bend of the head, to give the king permission.

Monsieur and Madame hastened to give orders to the officers who presented themselves.

The king bowed, crossed the hall, and gained the door, where a hedge of twenty musketeers awaited him. At the extremity of this hedge stood the officer, impassible, with his drawn sword in his hand. The king passed, and all the crowd stood on tip-toe, to have one more look at him.

Ten musketeers, opening the crowd of the ante-chambers and the steps, made way for his majesty. The other ten surrounded the king and Monsieur, who had insisted upon accompanying his majesty. The domestics walked behind. This little cortege escorted the king to the chamber destined for him. The apartment was the same that had been occupied by Henry III. during his sojourn in the States.

Monsieur had given his orders. The musketeers, led by their officer,



took possession of the little passage by which one wing of the castle communicates with the other. This passage was commenced by a small square ante-chamber, dark even in the finest days. Monsieur stopped Louis XIV.

"You are passing now, sire," said he, "the very spot where the Duc de Guise received the first stab of the poniard."

The king was ignorant of all historical matters; he had heard of the fact, but he knew nothing of the localities or the details.

"Ah!" said he with a shudder.

And he stopped. The rest, both behind and before him, stopped likewise.

"The duc, sire," continued Gaston, "was nearly where I stand: he was walking in the same direction as your majesty; M. de Loignac was exactly where your lieutenant of musketeers is; M. de Saint-Maline and his majesty's ordinaries were behind him and around him. It was here that he was struck."

The king turned towards his officer, and saw something like a cloud pass over his martial and daring countenance.

"Yes, from behind!" murmured the lieutenant, with a gesture of supreme disdain. And he endeavored to resume the march, as if ill at ease at being between walls formerly defiled by treachery.

But the king, who appeared to wish to be informed, was disposed to give another look at this dismal spot.

Gaston perceived his nephew's desire.

"Look, sire," said he, taking a flambeaux from the hands of M. de Saint-Remy, "this is where he fell. There was a bed there, the curtains of which he tore with catching at them."

"Why does the floor seem hollowed out at this spot?" asked Louis.

"Because it was here the blood flowed," replied Gaston; "the blood penetrated deeply into the oak, and it was only by cutting it out that they succeeded in making it disappear. And even then," added Gaston, pointing the flambeaux to the spot, "even then this red stain resisted all the attempts made to destroy it."

Louis XIV. raised his head. Perhaps he was thinking of that bloody trace that had once been shown him at the Louvre, and which, as a pendant to that of Blois, had been made there one day by the king his father with the blood of Concini.

"Let us go on," said he.

The march was resumed promptly; for emotion, no doubt, had given to the voice of the young prince a tone of command which was not customary with him. When he arrived at the apartment destined for the king, which communicated not only with the little passage we have passed through, but further with the great staircase leading to the court,--

"Will your majesty," said Gaston, "condescend to occupy this apartment, all unworthy as it is to receive you?"

"Uncle," replied the young king, "I render you my thanks for your cordial hospitality."

Gaston bowed to his nephew, embraced him, and then went out.

Of the twenty musketeers who had accompanied the king, ten reconducted Monsieur to the reception-rooms, which were not yet empty, notwithstanding the king had retired.

The ten others were posted by their officer, who himself explored, in five minutes, all the localities, with that cold and certain glance which not even habit gives unless that glance belongs to genius.

Then, when all were placed, he chose as his headquarters the ante-chamber, in which he found a large fauteuil, a lamp, some wine, some water, and some dry bread.

He refreshed his lamp, drank half a glass of wine, curled his lip with a smile full of expression, installed himself in his large armchair, and made preparations for sleeping.