

Chapter XXXIX. Mazarin's Gaming Party.

In a large chamber of the Palais Royal, hung with a dark colored velvet, which threw into strong relief the gilded frames of a great number of magnificent pictures, on the evening of the arrival of the two Frenchmen, the whole court was assembled before the alcove of M. le Cardinal de Mazarin, who gave a card party to the king and queen.

A small screen separated three prepared tables. At one of these tables the king and the two queens were seated. Louis XIV., placed opposite to the young queen, his wife, smiled upon her with an expression of real happiness. Anne of Austria held the cards against the cardinal, and her daughter-in-law assisted her in the game, when she was not engaged in smiling at her husband. As for the cardinal, who was lying on his bed with a weary and careworn face, his cards were held by the Comtesse de Soissons, and he watched them with an incessant look of interest and cupidity.

The cardinal's face had been painted by Bernouin; but the rouge, which glowed only on his cheeks, threw into stronger contrast the sickly pallor of his countenance and the shining yellow of his brow. His eyes alone acquired a more brilliant luster from this auxiliary, and upon those sick man's eyes were, from time to time, turned the uneasy looks of the king, the queen, and the courtiers. The fact is, that the two eyes of the Signor Mazarin were the stars more or less brilliant in which the France of the seventeenth century read its destiny every evening and every morning.

Monseigneur neither won nor lost; he was, therefore, neither gay nor sad. It was a stagnation in which, full of pity for him, Anne of Austria would not have willingly left him; but in order to attract the attention of the sick man by some brilliant stroke, she must have either won or lost. To win would have been dangerous, because Mazarin would have changed his indifference into an ugly grimace; to lose would likewise have been dangerous, because she must have cheated, and the infanta, who watched her game, would, doubtless, have exclaimed against her partiality for Mazarin. Profiting by this calm, the courtiers were chatting. When not in a bad humor, M. de Mazarin was a very debonnaire prince, and he, who prevented nobody from singing, provided they paid, was not tyrant enough to prevent people from talking, provided they made up their minds to lose.

They were therefore chatting. At the first table, the king's younger brother, Philip, Duc d'Anjou, was admiring his handsome face in the glass of a box. His favorite, the Chevalier de Lorraine, leaning over the back of the prince's chair, was listening, with secret envy, to the Comte de Guiche, another of Philip's favorites, who was relating in

choice terms the various vicissitudes of fortune of the royal adventurer Charles II. He told, as so many fabulous events, all the history of his perigrinations in Scotland, and his terrors when the enemy's party was so closely on his track; of nights spent in trees, and days spent in hunger and combats. By degrees, the fate of the unfortunate king interested his auditors so greatly, that the play languished even at the royal table, and the young king, with a pensive look and downcast eye, followed, without appearing to give any attention to it, the smallest details of this Odyssey, very picturesquely related by the Comte de Guiche.

The Comtesse de Soissons interrupted the narrator: "Confess, count, you are inventing."

"Madame, I am repeating like a parrot all the stories related to me by different Englishmen. To my shame I am compelled to say, I am as exact as a copy."

"Charles II. would have died before he could have endured all that."

Louis XIV. raised his intelligent and proud head. "Madame," said he, in a grave tone, still partaking something of the timid child, "monsieur le cardinal will tell you that during my minority the affairs of France were in jeopardy,--and that if I had been older, and obliged to take sword in hand, it would sometimes have been for the purpose of procuring the evening meal."

"Thanks to God," said the cardinal, who spoke for the first time, "your majesty exaggerates, and your supper has always been ready with that of your servants."

The king colored.

"Oh!" cried Philip, inconsiderately, from his place, and without ceasing to admire himself,--"I recollect once, at Melun, the supper was laid for nobody, and that the king ate two-thirds of a slice of bread, and abandoned to me the other third."

The whole assembly, seeing Mazarin smile, began to laugh. Courtiers flatter kings with the remembrance of past distresses, as with the hopes of future good fortune.

"It is not to be denied that the crown of France has always remained firm upon the heads of its kings," Anne of Austria hastened to say, "and that it has fallen off of that of the king of England; and when by chance that crown oscillated a little,--for there are throne-quakes as well as earthquakes,--every time, I say, that rebellion threatened it, a good victory restored tranquillity."

"With a few gems added to the crown," said Mazarin.

The Comte de Guiche was silent: the king composed his countenance, and Mazarin exchanged looks with Anne of Austria, as if to thank her for her intervention.

"It is of no consequence," said Philip, smoothing his hair; "my cousin Charles is not handsome, but he is very brave, and fought like a landsknecht; and if he continues to fight thus, no doubt he will finish by gaining a battle, like Rocroi--"

"He has no soldiers," interrupted the Chevalier de Lorraine.

"The king of Holland, his ally, will give him some. I would willingly have given him some if I had been king of France."

Louis XIV. blushed excessively. Mazarin affected to be more attentive to his game than ever.

"By this time," resumed the Comte de Guiche, "the fortune of this unhappy prince is decided. If he has been deceived by Monk, he is ruined. Imprisonment, perhaps death, will finish what exiles, battles, and privations have commenced."

Mazarin's brow became clouded.

"It is certain," said Louis XIV., "that his majesty Charles II., has quitted the Hague?"

"Quite certain, your majesty," replied the young man; "my father has received a letter containing all the details; it is even known that the king has landed at Dover; some fishermen saw him entering the port; the rest is still a mystery."

"I should like to know the rest," said Philip, impetuously. "You know,--you, my brother."

Louis XIV. colored again. That was the third time within an hour. "Ask my lord cardinal," replied he, in a tone which made Mazarin, Anne of Austria, and everybody else open their eyes.

"That means, my son," said Anne of Austria, laughing, "that the king does not like affairs of state to be talked of out of the council."

Philip received the reprimand with good grace, and bowed, first smiling at his brother, and then at his mother. But Mazarin saw from the corner of his eye that a group was about to be formed in the corner of the room, and that the Duc d'Anjou, with the Comte de Guiche, and the Chevalier de Lorraine, prevented from talking aloud, might say, in a

whisper, what it was not convenient should be said. He was beginning, then, to dart at them glances full of mistrust and uneasiness, inviting Anne of Austria to throw perturbation in the midst of the unlawful assembly, when, suddenly, Bernouin, entering from behind the tapestry of the bedroom, whispered in the ear of Mazarin, "Monseigneur, an envoy from his majesty, the king of England."

Mazarin could not help exhibiting a slight emotion, which was perceived by the king. To avoid being indiscreet, rather than to appear useless, Louis XIV. rose immediately, and approaching his eminence, wished him good-night. All the assembly had risen with a great noise of rolling of chairs and tables being pushed away.

"Let everybody depart by degrees," said Mazarin in a whisper to Louis XIV., "and be so good as to excuse me a few minutes. I am going to dispatch an affair about which I wish to converse with your majesty this very evening."

"And the queens?" asked Louis XIV.

"And M. le Duc d'Anjou," said his eminence.

At the same time he turned round in his ruelle, the curtains of which, in falling, concealed the bed. The cardinal, nevertheless, did not lose sight of the conspirators.

"M. le Comte de Guiche," said he, in a fretful voice, whilst putting on, behind the curtain, his dressing-gown, with the assistance of Bernouin.

"I am here, my lord," said the young man, as he approached.

"Take my cards, you are lucky. Win a little money for me of these gentlemen."

"Yes, my lord."

The young man sat down at the table from which the king withdrew to talk with the two queens. A serious game was commenced between the comte and several rich courtiers. In the meantime Philip was discussing the questions of dress with the Chevalier de Lorraine, and they had ceased to hear the rustling of the cardinal's silk robe from behind the curtain. His eminence had followed Bernouin into the closet adjoining the bedroom.