

## Chapter XLIV. Colbert.

Colbert was not far off. During the whole evening he had remained in one of the corridors, chatting with Bernouin and Brienne, and commenting, with the ordinary skill of people of court, upon the news which developed like air-bubbles upon the water, on the surface of each event. It is doubtless time to trace, in a few words, one of the most interesting portraits of the age, and to trace it with as much truth, perhaps, as contemporary painters have been able to do. Colbert was a man in whom the historian and the moralist have an equal right.

He was thirteen years older than Louis XIV., his future master. Of middle height, rather lean than otherwise, he had deep-set eyes, a mean appearance, his hair was coarse, black and thin, which, say the biographers of his time, made him take early to the skull-cap. A look of severity, of harshness even, a sort of stiffness, which, with inferiors, was pride, with superiors an affectation of superior virtue; a surly cast of countenance upon all occasions, even when looking at himself in a glass alone--such is the exterior of his personage. As to the moral part of his character, the depth of his talent for accounts, and his ingenuity in making sterility itself productive, were much boasted of. Colbert had formed the idea of forcing governors of frontier places to feed the garrisons without pay, with what they drew from contributions. Such a valuable quality made Mazarin think of replacing Joubert, his intendant, who had recently died, by M. Colbert, who had such skill in nibbling down allowances. Colbert by degrees crept into court, notwithstanding his lowly birth, for he was the son of a man who sold wine as his father had done, but who afterwards sold cloth, and then silk stuffs. Colbert, destined for trade, had been clerk in Lyons to a merchant, whom he had quitted to come to Paris in the office of a Chatlet procureur named Biterne. It was here he learned the art of drawing up an account, and the much more valuable one of complicating it.

This stiffness of manner in Colbert had been of great service to him; it is so true that Fortune, when she has a caprice, resembles those women of antiquity, who, when they had a fancy, were disgusted by no physical or moral defects in either men or things. Colbert, placed with Michel Letellier, secretary of state in 1648, by his cousin Colbert, Seigneur de Saint-Penange, who protected him, received one day from the minister a commission for Cardinal Mazarin. His eminence was then in the enjoyment of flourishing health, and the bad years of the Fronde had not yet counted triple and quadruple for him. He was at Sedan, very much annoyed at a court intrigue in which Anne of Austria seemed inclined to desert his cause.

Of this intrigue Letellier held the thread. He had just received a

letter from Anne of Austria, a letter very valuable to him, and strongly compromising Mazarin; but, as he already played the double part which served him so well, and by which he always managed two enemies so as to draw advantage from both, either by embroiling them more and more or by reconciling them, Michel Letellier wished to send Anne of Austria's letter to Mazarin, in order that he might be acquainted with it, and consequently pleased with his having so willingly rendered him a service. To send the letter was an easy matter; to recover it again, after having communicated it, that was the difficulty. Letellier cast his eyes around him, and seeing the black and meager clerk with the scowling brow, scribbling away in his office, he preferred him to the best gendarme for the execution of this design.

Colbert was commanded to set out for Sedan, with positive orders to carry the letter to Mazarin, and bring it back to Letellier. He listened to his orders with scrupulous attention, required the instructions to be repeated twice, and was particular in learning whether the bringing back was as necessary as the communicating, and Letellier replied sternly, "More necessary." Then he set out, traveled like a courier, without any care for his body, and placed in the hands of Mazarin, first a letter from Letellier, which announced to the cardinal the sending of the precious letter, and then that letter itself. Mazarin colored greatly whilst reading Anne of Austria's letter, gave Colbert a gracious smile and dismissed him.

"When shall I have the answer, monseigneur?"

"To-morrow."

"To-morrow morning?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The clerk turned upon his heel, after making his very best bow. The next day he was at his post at seven o'clock. Mazarin made him wait till ten. He remained patiently in the ante-chamber; his turn having come, he entered; Mazarin gave him a sealed packet. On the envelope of this packet were these words:--Monsieur Michel Letellier, etc. Colbert looked at the packet with much attention; the cardinal put on a pleasant countenance and pushed him towards the door.

"And the letter of the queen-mother, my lord?" asked Colbert.

"It is in with the rest, in the packet," said Mazarin.

"Oh! very well," replied Colbert; and placing his hat between his knees, he began to unseal the packet.

Mazarin uttered a cry. "What are you doing?" said he, angrily.

"I am unsealing the packet, my lord."

"You mistrust me, then, master pedant, do you? Did any one ever see such impertinence?"

"Oh! my lord, do not be angry with me! It is certainly not your eminence's word I place in doubt, God forbid!"

"What then?"

"It is the carefulness of your chancery, my lord. What is a letter? A rag. May not a rag be forgotten? And look, my lord, look if I was not right. Your clerks have forgotten the rag; the letter is not in the packet."

"You are an insolent fellow, and you have not looked," cried Mazarin, very angrily; "begone and wait my pleasure." Whilst saying these words, with perfectly Italian subtlety he snatched the packet from the hands of Colbert, and re-entered his apartments.

But this anger could not last so long as to be replaced in time by reason. Mazarin, every morning, on opening his closet door, found the figure of Colbert like a sentinel behind the bench, and this disagreeable figure never failed to ask him humbly, but with tenacity, for the queen-mother's letter. Mazarin could hold out no longer, and was obliged to give it up. He accompanied this restitution with a most severe reprimand, during which Colbert contented himself with examining, feeling, even smelling, as it were, the paper, the characters, and the signature, neither more nor less than if he had to deal with the greatest forger in the kingdom. Mazarin behaved still more rudely to him, but Colbert, still impassible, having obtained a certainty that the letter was the true one, went off as if he had been deaf. This conduct obtained for him afterwards the post of Joubert; for Mazarin, instead of bearing malice, admired him, and was desirous of attaching so much fidelity to himself.

It may be judged by this single anecdote, what the character of Colbert was. Events, developing themselves, by degrees allowed all the powers of his mind to act freely. Colbert was not long in insinuating himself to the good graces of the cardinal: he became even indispensable to him. The clerk was acquainted with all his accounts without the cardinal's ever having spoken to him about them. This secret between them was a powerful tie, and this was why, when about to appear before the Master of another world, Mazarin was desirous of taking good counsel in disposing the wealth he was so unwillingly obliged to leave in this world. After the visit of Guenaud, he therefore sent for Colbert, desired him to sit down, and said to him: "Let us converse, Monsieur Colbert, and seriously, for I am very ill, and I may chance to die."

"Man is mortal," replied Colbert.

"I have always remembered that, M. Colbert, and I have worked with that end in view. You know that I have amassed a little wealth."

"I know you have, monseigneur."

"At how much do you estimate, as near as you can, the amount of this wealth, M. Colbert?"

"At forty millions, five hundred and sixty thousand, two hundred livres, nine cents, eight farthings," replied Colbert.

The cardinal heaved a deep sigh, and looked at Colbert with wonder, but he allowed a smile to steal across his lips.

"Known money," added Colbert, in reply to that smile.

The cardinal gave quite a start in bed. "What do you mean by that?" said he.

"I mean," said Colbert, "that besides those forty millions, five hundred and sixty thousand, two hundred livres, nine cents, eight farthings, there are thirteen millions that are not known."

"Ouf!" sighed Mazarin, "what a man!"

At this moment, the head of Bernouin appeared through the embrasure of the door.

"What is it?" asked Mazarin, "and why do you disturb me?"

"The Theatin father, your eminence's director, was sent for this evening; and he cannot come again to my lord till after to-morrow."

Mazarin looked at Colbert, who rose and took his hat, saying: "I shall come again, my lord."

Mazarin hesitated. "No, no," said he; "I have as much business to transact with you as with him. Besides, you are my other confessor--and what I have to say to one the other may hear. Remain where you are, Colbert."

"But my lord, if there be no secret of penitence, will the director consent to my being here?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that; come into the ruelle."

"I can wait outside, monseigneur."

"No, no, it will do you good to hear the confession of a rich man."

Colbert bowed and went into the ruelle.

"Introduce the Theatin father," said Mazarin, closing the curtains.