

Chapter XLVI. The Donation.

Colbert reappeared beneath the curtains.

"Have you heard?" said Mazarin.

"Alas! yes, my lord."

"Can he be right? Can all this money be badly acquired?"

"A Theatin, monseigneur, is a bad judge in matters of finance," replied Colbert, coolly. "And yet it is very possible that, according to his theological views, your eminence has been, in a certain degree, in the wrong. People generally find they have been so,--when they die."

"In the first place, they commit the wrong of dying, Colbert."

"That is true, my lord. Against whom, however, did the Theatin make out that you had committed these wrongs? Against the king?"

Mazarin shrugged his shoulders. "As if I had not saved both his state and his finances."

"That admits of no contradiction, my lord."

"Does it? Then I have received a merely legitimate salary, in spite of the opinion of my confessor?"

"That is beyond doubt."

"And I might fairly keep for my own family, which is so needy, a good fortune,--the whole, even, of which I have earned?"

"I see no impediment to that, monseigneur."

"I felt assured that in consulting you, Colbert, I should have good advice," replied Mazarin, greatly delighted.

Colbert resumed his pedantic look. "My lord," interrupted he, "I think it would be quite as well to examine whether what the Theatin said is not a snare."

"Oh! no; a snare? What for? The Theatin is an honest man."

"He believed your eminence to be at death's door, because your eminence consulted him. Did I not hear him say--'Distinguish that which the king has given you from that which you have given yourself.' Recollect, my

lord, if he did not say something a little like that to you?--that is quite a theatrical speech."

"That is possible."

"In which case, my lord, I should consider you as required by the Theatin to--"

"To make restitution!" cried Mazarin, with great warmth.

"Eh! I do not say no."

"What, of all! You do not dream of such a thing! You speak just as the confessor did."

"To make restitution of a part,--that is to say, his majesty's part; and that, monseigneur, may have its dangers. Your eminence is too skillful a politician not to know that, at this moment, the king does not possess a hundred and fifty thousand livres clear in his coffers."

"That is not my affair," said Mazarin, triumphantly; "that belongs to M. le Surintendant Fouquet, whose accounts I gave you to verify some months ago."

Colbert bit his lips at the name of Fouquet. "His majesty," said he, between his teeth, "has no money but that which M. Fouquet collects: your money, monseigneur, would afford him a delicious banquet."

"Well, but I am not the superintendent of his majesty's finances--I have my purse--surely I would do much for his majesty's welfare--some legacy--but I cannot disappoint my family."

"The legacy of a part would dishonor you and offend the king. Leaving a part to his majesty, is to avow that that part has inspired you with doubts as to the lawfulness of the means of acquisition."

"Monsieur Colbert!"

"I thought your eminence did me the honor to ask my advice?"

"Yes, but you are ignorant of the principal details of the question."

"I am ignorant of nothing, my lord; during ten years, all the columns of figures which are found in France, have passed into review before me; and if I have painfully nailed them into my brain, they are there now so well riveted, that, from the office of M. Letellier, who is sober, to the little secret largesses of M. Fouquet, who is prodigal, I could recite, figure by figure, all the money that is spent in France from Marseilles to Cherbourg."

"Then, you would have me throw all my money into the coffers of the king!" cried Mazarin, ironically; and from whom, at the same time the gout forced painful moans. "Surely the king would reproach me with nothing, but he would laugh at me, while squandering my millions, and with good reason."

"Your eminence has misunderstood me. I did not, the least in the world, pretend that his majesty ought to spend your money."

"You said so, clearly, it seems to me, when you advised me to give it to him."

"Ah," replied Colbert, "that is because your eminence, absorbed as you are by your disease, entirely loses sight of the character of Louis XIV."

"How so?"

"That character, if I may venture to express myself thus, resembles that which my lord confessed just now to the Theatin."

"Go on--that is?"

"Pride! Pardon me, my lord, haughtiness, nobleness; kings have no pride, that is a human passion."

"Pride,--yes, you are right. Next?"

"Well, my lord, if I have divined rightly, your eminence has but to give all your money to the king, and that immediately."

"But for what?" said Mazarin, quite bewildered.

"Because the king will not accept of the whole."

"What, and he a young man, and devoured by ambition?"

"Just so."

"A young man who is anxious for my death--"

"My lord!"

"To inherit, yes, Colbert, yes; he is anxious for my death, in order to inherit. Triple fool that I am! I would prevent him!"

"Exactly: if the donation were made in a certain form he would refuse it."

"Well; but how?"

"That is plain enough. A young man who has yet done nothing--who burns to distinguish himself--who burns to reign alone, will never take anything ready built, he will construct for himself. This prince, monseigneur, will never be content with the Palais Royal, which M. de Richelieu left him, nor with the Palais Mazarin, which you have had so superbly constructed, nor with the Louvre, which his ancestors inhabited; nor with St. Germain, where he was born. All that does not proceed from himself, I predict, he will disdain."

"And you will guarantee, that if I give my forty millions to the king--"

"Saying certain things to him at the same time, I guarantee he will refuse them."

"But those things--what are they?"

"I will write them, if my lord will have the goodness to dictate them."

"Well, but, after all, what advantage will that be to me?"

"An enormous one. Nobody will afterwards be able to accuse your eminence of that unjust avarice with which pamphleteers have reproached the most brilliant mind of the present age."

"You are right, Colbert, you are right; go, and seek the king, on my part, and take him my will."

"Your donation, my lord."

"But, if he should accept it; if he should even think of accepting it!"

"Then there would remain thirteen millions for your family, and that is a good round sum."

"But then you would be either a fool or a traitor."

"And I am neither the one nor the other, my lord. You appear to be much afraid that the king will accept; you have a deal more reason to fear that he will not accept."

"But, see you, if he does not accept, I should like to guarantee my thirteen reserved millions to him--yes, I will do so--yes. But my pains are returning, I shall faint. I am very, very ill, Colbert; I am near my end!"

Colbert started. The cardinal was indeed very ill; large drops of sweat

flowed down upon his bed of agony, and the frightful pallor of a face streaming with water was a spectacle which the most hardened practitioner could not have beheld without much compassion. Colbert was, without doubt, very much affected, for he quitted the chamber, calling Bernouin to attend to the dying man, and went into the corridor. There, walking about with a meditative expression, which almost gave nobility to his vulgar head, his shoulders thrown up, his neck stretched out, his lips half open, to give vent to unconnected fragments of incoherent thoughts, he lashed up his courage to the pitch of the undertaking contemplated, whilst within ten paces of him, separated only by a wall, his master was being stifled by anguish which drew from him lamentable cries, thinking no more of the treasures of the earth, or of the joys of Paradise, but much of all the horrors of hell. Whilst burning-hot napkins, physic, revulsives, and Guenaud, who was recalled, were performing their functions with increased activity, Colbert, holding his great head in both his hands, to compress within it the fever of the projects engendered by the brain, was meditating the tenor of the donation he would make Mazarin write, at the first hour of respite his disease should afford him. It would appear as if all the cries of the cardinal, and all the attacks of death upon this representative of the past, were stimulants for the genius of this thinker with the bushy eyebrows, who was turning already towards the rising sun of a regenerated society. Colbert resumed his place at Mazarin's pillow at the first interval of pain, and persuaded him to dictate a donation thus conceived.

"About to appear before God, the Master of mankind, I beg the king, who was my master on earth, to resume the wealth which his bounty has bestowed upon me, and which my family would be happy to see pass into such illustrious hands. The particulars of my property will be found--they are drawn up--at the first requisition of his majesty, or at the last sigh of his most devoted servant,

"JULES, Cardinal de Mazarin."

The cardinal sighed heavily as he signed this; Colbert sealed the packet, and carried it immediately to the Louvre, whither the king had returned.

He then went back to his own home, rubbing his hands with the confidence of workman who has done a good day's work.