

Chapter XLVII. How Anne of Austria gave one Piece of Advice to Louis XIV., and how M. Fouquet gave him Another.

The news of the extreme illness of the cardinal had already spread, and attracted at least as much attention among the people of the Louvre as the news of the marriage of Monsieur, the king's brother, which had already been announced as an official fact. Scarcely had Louis XIV. returned home, with his thoughts fully occupied with the various things he had seen and heard in the course of the evening, when an usher announced that the same crowd of courtiers who, in the morning, had thronged his lever, presented themselves again at his coucher, a remarkable piece of respect which, during the reign of the cardinal, the court, not very discreet in its performance, had accorded to the minister, without caring about displeasing the king.

But the minister had had, as we have said, an alarming attack of gout, and the tide of flattery was mounting towards the throne. Courtiers have a marvelous instinct in scenting the turn of events; courtiers possess a supreme kind of science; they are diplomatists in throwing light upon the unraveling of complicated intrigues, captains in divining the issue of battles, and physicians in curing the sick. Louis XIV., to whom his mother had taught this axiom, together with many others, understood at once that the cardinal must be very ill.

Scarcely had Anne of Austria conducted the young queen to her apartments and taken from her brow the head-dress of ceremony, when she went to see her son in his cabinet, where, alone, melancholy, and depressed, he was indulging, as if to exercise his will, in one of those terrible inward passions--king's passions--which create events when they break out, and with Louis XIV., thanks to his astonishing command over himself, became such benign tempests, that his most violent, his only passion, that which Saint Simon mentions with astonishment, was that famous fit of anger which he exhibited fifty years later, on the occasion of a little concealment of the Duc de Maine's, and which had for result a shower of blows inflicted with a cane upon the back of a poor valet who had stolen a biscuit. The young king then was, as we have seen, a prey to a double excitement; and he said to himself as he looked in a glass, "O king!--king by name, and not in fact;--phantom, vain phantom art thou!--inert statue, which has no other power than that of provoking salutations from courtiers, when wilt thou be able to raise thy velvet arm, or clench thy silken hand? when wilt thou be able to open, for any purpose but to sigh, or smile, lips condemned to the motionless stupidity of the marbles in thy gallery?"

Then, passing his hand over his brow, and feeling the want of air, he approached a window, and looking down, saw below some horsemen talking together, and groups of timid observers. These horsemen were a fraction

of the watch: the groups were busy portions of the people, to whom a king is always a curious thing, the same as a rhinoceros, a crocodile, or a serpent. He struck his brow with his open hand, crying,--"King of France! what a title! People of France! what a heap of creatures! I have just returned to my Louvre; my horses, just unharnessed, are still smoking, and I have created interest enough to induce scarcely twenty persons to look at me as I passed. Twenty! what do I say? no; there were not twenty anxious to see the king of France. There are not even ten archers to guard my palace of residence: archers, people, guards, all are at the Palais Royal! Why, my good God! have not I, the king, the right to ask of you all that?"

"Because," said a voice, replying to his, and which sounded from the other side of the door of the cabinet, "because at the Palais Royal lies all the gold,--that is to say, all the power of him who desires to reign."

Louis turned round sharply. The voice which had pronounced these words was that of Anne of Austria. The king started, and advanced towards her. "I hope," said he, "your majesty has paid no attention to the vain declamations which the solitude and disgust familiar to kings suggest to the happiest dispositions?"

"I only paid attention to one thing, my son, and that was, that you were complaining."

"Who! I? Not at all," said Louis XIV.; "no, in truth, you err, madame."

"What were you doing, then?"

"I thought I was under the ferule of my professor, and developing a subject of amplification."

"My son," replied Anne of Austria, shaking her head, "you are wrong not to trust my word; you are wrong not to grant me your confidence. A day will come, and perhaps quickly, wherein you will have occasion to remember that axiom:--'Gold is universal power; and they alone are kings who are all-powerful.'"

"Your intention," continued the king, "was not, however, to cast blame upon the rich men of this age, was it?"

"No," said the queen, warmly; "no, sire; they who are rich in this age, under your reign, are rich because you have been willing they should be so, and I entertain against them neither malice nor envy; they have, without doubt, served your majesty sufficiently well for your majesty to have permitted them to reward themselves. That is what I mean to say by the words for which you reproach me."

"God forbid, madame, that I should ever reproach my mother with anything!"

"Besides," continued Anne of Austria, "the Lord never gives the goods of this world but for a season; the Lord--as correctives to honor and riches--the Lord has placed sufferings, sickness, and death; and no one," added she, with a melancholy smile, which proved she made the application of the funeral precept to herself, "no man can take his wealth or greatness with him to the grave. It results, therefore, that the young gather the abundant harvest prepared for them by the old."

Louis listened with increased attention to the words which Anne of Austria, no doubt, pronounced with a view to console him. "Madame," said he, looking earnestly at his mother, "one would almost say in truth that you had something else to announce to me."

"I have absolutely nothing, my son; only you cannot have failed to remark that his eminence the cardinal is very ill."

Louis looked at his mother, expecting some emotion in her voice, some sorrow in her countenance. The face of Anne of Austria appeared a little changed, but that was from sufferings of quite a personal character. Perhaps the alteration was caused by the cancer which had begun to consume her breast. "Yes, madame," said the king; "yes, M. de Mazarin is very ill."

"And it would be a great loss to the kingdom if God were to summon his eminence away. Is not that your opinion as well as mine, my son?" said the queen.

"Yes, madame; yes, certainly, it would be a great loss for the kingdom," said Louis, coloring; "but the peril does not seem to me to be so great; besides, the cardinal is still young." The king had scarcely ceased speaking when an usher lifted the tapestry, and stood with a paper in his hand, waiting for the king to speak to him.

"What have you there?" asked the king.

"A message from M. de Mazarin," replied the usher.

"Give it to me," said the king; and he took the paper. But at the moment he was about to open it, there was a great noise in the gallery, the ante-chamber, and the court.

"Ah, ah," said Louis XIV., who doubtless knew the meaning of that triple noise. "How could I say there was but one king in France! I was mistaken, there are two."

As he spoke or thought thus, the door opened, and the superintendent

of finances, Fouquet, appeared before his nominal master. It was he who made the noise in the ante-chamber, it was his horse that made the noise in the courtyard. In addition to all this, a loud murmur was heard along his passage, which did not die away till some time after he had passed. It was this murmur which Louis XIV. regretted so deeply not hearing as he passed, and dying away behind him.

"He is not precisely a king, as you fancy," said Anne of Austria to her son; "he is only a man who is much too rich--that is all."

Whilst saying these words, a bitter feeling gave to these words of the queen a most hateful expression; whereas the brow of the king, calm and self-possessed, on the contrary, was without the slightest wrinkle. He nodded, therefore, familiarly to Fouquet, whilst he continued to unfold the paper given to him by the usher. Fouquet perceived this movement, and with a politeness at once easy and respectful, advanced towards the queen, so as not to disturb the king. Louis had opened the paper, and yet he did not read it. He listened to Fouquet paying the most charming compliments to the queen upon her hand and arm. Anne of Austria's frown relaxed a little, she even almost smiled. Fouquet perceived that the king, instead of reading, was looking at him; he turned half round, therefore, and while continuing his conversation with the queen, faced the king.

"You know, Monsieur Fouquet," said Louis, "how ill M. Mazarin is?"

"Yes, sire, I know that," said Fouquet; "in fact, he is very ill. I was at my country-house of Vaux when the news reached me; and the affair seemed so pressing that I left at once."

"You left Vaux this evening, monsieur?"

"An hour and a half ago, yes, your majesty," said Fouquet, consulting a watch, richly ornamented with diamonds.

"An hour and a half!" said the king, still able to restrain his anger, but not to conceal his astonishment.

"I understand you, sire. Your majesty doubts my word, and you have reason to do so; but I have really come in that time, though it is wonderful! I received from England three pairs of very fast horses, as I had been assured. They were placed at distances of four leagues apart, and I tried them this evening. They really brought me from Vaux to the Louvre in an hour and a half, so your majesty sees I have not been cheated." The queen-mother smiled with something like secret envy. But Fouquet caught her thought. "Thus, madame," he promptly said, "such horses are made for kings, not for subjects; for kings ought never to yield to any one in anything."

The king looked up.

"And yet," interrupted Anne of Austria, "you are not a king, that I know of, M. Fouquet."

"Truly not, madame; therefore the horses only await the orders of his majesty to enter the royal stables; and if I allowed myself to try them, it was only for fear of offering to the king anything that was not positively wonderful."

The king became quite red.

"You know, Monsieur Fouquet," said the queen, "that at the court of France it is not the custom for a subject to offer anything to his king."

Louis started.

"I hoped, madame," said Fouquet, much agitated, "that my love for his majesty, my incessant desire to please him, would serve to compensate the want of etiquette. It was not so much a present that I permitted myself to offer, as the tribute I paid."

"Thank you, Monsieur Fouquet," said the king politely, "and I am gratified by your intention, for I love good horses; but you know I am not very rich; you, who are my superintendent of finances, know it better than any one else. I am not able, then, however willing I may be, to purchase such a valuable set of horses."

Fouquet darted a haughty glance at the queen-mother, who appeared to triumph at the false position in which the minister had placed himself, and replied:--

"Luxury is the virtue of kings, sire: it is luxury which makes them resemble God; it is by luxury they are more than other men. With luxury a king nourishes his subjects, and honors them. Under the mild heat of this luxury of kings springs the luxury of individuals, a source of riches for the people. His majesty, by accepting the gift of these six incomparable horses, would stimulate the pride of his own breeders, of Limousin, Perche, and Normandy; and this emulation would have been beneficial to all. But the king is silent, and consequently I am condemned."

During this speech, Louis was, unconsciously, folding and unfolding Mazarin's paper, upon which he had not cast his eyes. At length he glanced upon it, and uttered a faint cry at reading the first line.

"What is the matter, my son?" asked the queen, anxiously, and going towards the king.

"From the cardinal," replied the king, continuing to read; "yes, yes, it is really from him."

"Is he worse, then?"

"Read!" said the king, passing the parchment to his mother, as if he thought that nothing less than reading would convince Anne of Austria of a thing so astonishing as was conveyed in that paper.

Anne of Austria read in turn, and as she read, her eyes sparkled with joy all the greater from her useless endeavor to hide it, which attracted the attention of Fouquet.

"Oh! a regularly drawn up deed of gift," said she.

"A gift?" repeated Fouquet.

"Yes," said the king, replying pointedly to the superintendent of finances, "yes, at the point of death, monsieur le cardinal makes me a donation of all his wealth."

"Forty millions," cried the queen. "Oh, my son! this is very noble on the part of his eminence, and will silence all malicious rumors; forty millions scraped together slowly, coming back all in one heap to the treasury! It is the act of a faithful subject and a good Christian." And having once more cast her eyes over the act, she restored it to Louis XIV., whom the announcement of the sum greatly agitated. Fouquet had taken some steps backwards and remained silent. The king looked at him, and held the paper out to him, in turn. The superintendent only bestowed a haughty look of a second upon it; then bowing,--"Yes, sire," said he, "a donation, I see."

"You must reply to it, my son," said Anne of Austria; "you must reply to it, and immediately."

"But how, madame?"

"By a visit to the cardinal."

"Why, it is but an hour since I left his eminence," said the king.

"Write, then, sire."

"Write!" said the young king, with evident repugnance.

"Well!" replied Anne of Austria, "it seems to me, my son, that a man who has just made such a present, has a good right to expect to be thanked for it with some degree of promptitude." Then turning towards Fouquet:

"Is not that likewise your opinion, monsieur?"

"That the present is worth the trouble? Yes, madame," said Fouquet, with a lofty air that did not escape the king.

"Accept, then, and thank him," insisted Anne of Austria.

"What says M. Fouquet?" asked Louis XIV.

"Does your majesty wish to know my opinion?"

"Yes."

"Thank him, sire--"

"Ah!" said the queen.

"But do not accept," continued Fouquet.

"And why not?" asked the queen.

"You have yourself said why, madame," replied Fouquet; "because kings cannot and ought not to receive presents from their subjects."

The king remained silent between these two contrary opinions.

"But forty millions!" said Anne of Austria, in the same tone as that in which, at a later period, poor Marie Antoinette replied, "You will tell me as much!"

"I know," said Fouquet, laughing, "forty millions makes a good round sum,--such a sum as could almost tempt a royal conscience."

"But, monsieur," said Anne of Austria, "instead of persuading the king not to receive this present, recall to his majesty's mind, you, whose duty it is, that these forty millions are a fortune to him."

"It is precisely, madame, because these forty millions would be a fortune that I will say to the king, 'Sire, if it be not decent for a king to accept from a subject six horses, worth twenty thousand livres, it would be disgraceful for him to owe a fortune to another subject, more or less scrupulous in the choice of the materials which contributed to the building up of that fortune.'"

"It ill becomes you, monsieur, to give your king a lesson," said Anne of Austria; "better procure for him forty millions to replace those you make him lose."

"The king shall have them whenever he wishes," said the superintendent

of finances, bowing.

"Yes, by oppressing the people," said the queen.

"And were they not oppressed, madame," replied Fouquet, "when they were made to sweat the forty millions given by this deed? Furthermore, his majesty has asked my opinion, I have given it; if his majesty ask my concurrence, it will be the same."

"Nonsense! accept, my son, accept," said Anne of Austria. "You are above reports and interpretations."

"Refuse, sire," said Fouquet. "As long as a king lives, he has no other measure but his conscience,--no other judge than his own desires; but when dead, he has posterity, which applauds or accuses."

"Thank you, mother," replied Louis, bowing respectfully to the queen.

"Thank you Monsieur, Fouquet," said he, dismissing the superintendent civilly.

"Do you accept?" asked Anne of Austria, once more.

"I shall consider of it," replied he, looking at Fouquet.