

Chapter XLVIII. Agony.

The day that the deed of gift had been sent to the king, the cardinal caused himself to be transported to Vincennes. The king and the court followed him thither. The last flashes of this torch still cast splendor enough around to absorb all other lights in its rays. Besides, as it has been seen, the faithful satellite of his minister, young Louis XIV., marched to the last minute in accordance with his gravitation. The disease, as Guenaud had predicted, had become worse; it was no longer an attack of gout, it was an attack of death; then there was another thing which made that agony more agonizing still,--and that was the agitation brought into his mind by the donation he had sent to the king, and which, according to Colbert, the king ought to send back unaccepted to the cardinal. The cardinal had, as we have said, great faith in the predictions of his secretary; but the sum was a large one, and whatever might be the genius of Colbert, from time to time the cardinal thought to himself that the Theatin also might possibly have been mistaken, and there was at least as much chance of his not being damned, as there was of Louis XIV. sending back his millions.

Besides, the longer the donation was in coming back, the more Mazarin thought that forty millions were worth a little risk, particularly of so hypothetic a thing as the soul. Mazarin, in his character of cardinal and prime minister, was almost an atheist, and quite a materialist. Every time that the door opened, he turned sharply round towards that door, expecting to see the return of his unfortunate donation; then, deceived in his hope, he fell back again with a sigh, and found his pains so much the greater for having forgotten them for an instant.

Anne of Austria had also followed the cardinal; her heart, though age had made it selfish, could not help evincing towards the dying man a sorrow which she owed him as a wife, according to some; and as a sovereign, according to others. She had, in some sort, put on a mourning countenance beforehand, and all the court wore it as she did.

Louis, in order not to show on his face what was passing at the bottom of his heart, persisted in remaining in his own apartments, where his nurse alone kept him company; the more he saw the approach of the time when all constraint would be at an end, the more humble and patient he was, falling back upon himself, as all strong men do when they form great designs, in order to gain more spring at the decisive moment. Extreme unction had been administered to the cardinal, who, faithful to his habits of dissimulation, struggled against appearances, and even against reality, receiving company in his bed, as if he only suffered from a temporary complaint.

Guenaud, on his part, preserved profound secrecy; wearied with visits

and questions, he answered nothing but "his eminence is still full of youth and strength, but God wills that which He wills, and when He has decided that man is to be laid low, he will be laid low." These words, which he scattered with a sort of discretion, reserve, and preference, were commented upon earnestly by two persons,--the king and the cardinal. Mazarin, notwithstanding the prophecy of Guenaud, still lured himself with a hope, or rather played his part so well, that the most cunning, when saying that he lured himself, proved that they were his dupes.

Louis, absent from the cardinal for two days; Louis, with his eyes fixed upon that same donation which so constantly preoccupied the cardinal; Louis did not exactly know how to make out Mazarin's conduct. The son of Louis XIII., following the paternal traditions, had, up to that time, been so little of a king that, whilst ardently desiring royalty, he desired it with that terror which always accompanies the unknown. Thus, having formed his resolution, which, besides, he communicated to nobody, he determined to have an interview with Mazarin. It was Anne of Austria, who, constant in her attendance upon the cardinal, first heard this proposition of the king's, and transmitted it to the dying man, whom it greatly agitated. For what purpose could Louis wish for an interview? Was it to return the deed, as Colbert had said he would? Was it to keep it, after thanking him, as Mazarin thought he would? Nevertheless, as the dying man felt that the uncertainty increased his torments, he did not hesitate an instant.

"His majesty will be welcome,--yes, very welcome," cried he, making a sign to Colbert, who was seated at the foot of the bed, and which the latter understood perfectly. "Madame," continued Mazarin, "will your majesty be good enough to assure the king yourself of the truth of what I have just said?"

Anne of Austria rose; she herself was anxious to have the question of the forty millions settled--the question which seemed to lie heavy on the mind of everyone. Anne of Austria went out; Mazarin made a great effort, and, raising himself up towards Colbert: "Well, Colbert," said he, "two days have passed away--two mortal days--and, you see, nothing has been returned from yonder."

"Patience, my lord," said Colbert.

"Are you mad, you wretch? You advise me to have patience! Oh, in sad truth, Colbert, you are laughing at me. I am dying and you call out to me to wait!"

"My lord," said Colbert, with his habitual coolness, "it is impossible that things should not come out as I have said. His majesty is coming to see you, and no doubt he brings back the deed himself."

"Do you think so? Well, I, on the contrary, am sure that his majesty is coming to thank me."

At this moment Anne of Austria returned. On her way to the apartments of her son she had met with a new empiric. This was a powder which was said to have power to save the cardinal; and she brought a portion of this powder with her. But this was not what Mazarin expected; therefore he would not even look at it, declaring that life was not worth the pains that were taken to preserve it. But, whilst professing this philosophical axiom, his long-confined secret escaped him at last.

"That, madame," said he, "that is not the interesting part of my situation. I made, two days ago, a little donation to the king; up to this time, from delicacy, no doubt, his majesty has not condescended to say anything about it; but the time for explanation is come, and I implore your majesty to tell me if the king has made up his mind on that matter."

Anne of Austria was about to reply, when Mazarin stopped her.

"The truth, madame," said he--"in the name of Heaven, the truth! Do not flatter a dying man with a hope that may prove vain." There he stopped, a look from Colbert telling him he was on the wrong track.

"I know," said Anne of Austria, taking the cardinal's hand, "I know that you have generously made, not a little donation, as you modestly call it, but a magnificent gift. I know how painful it would be to you if the king--"

Mazarin listened, dying as he was, as ten living men could not have listened.

"If the king--" replied he.

"If the king," continued Anne of Austria, "should not freely accept what you offer so nobly."

Mazarin allowed himself to sink back upon his pillow like Pantaloon; that is to say, with all the despair of a man who bows before the tempest; but he still preserved sufficient strength and presence of mind to cast upon Colbert one of those looks which are well worth ten sonnets, which is to say, ten long poems.

"Should you not," added the queen, "have considered the refusal of the king as a sort of insult?" Mazarin rolled his head about upon his pillow, without articulating a syllable. The queen was deceived, or feigned to be deceived, by this demonstration.

"Therefore," resumed she, "I have circumvented him with good counsels;

and as certain minds, jealous, no doubt, of the glory you are about to acquire by this generosity, have endeavored to prove to the king that he ought not to accept this donation, I have struggled in your favor, and so well I have struggled, that you will not have, I hope, that distress to undergo."

"Ah!" murmured Mazarin, with languishing eyes, "ah! that is a service I shall never forget for a single minute of the few hours I still have to live."

"I must admit," continued the queen, "that it was not without trouble I rendered it to your eminence."

"Ah, peste! I believe that. Oh! oh!"

"Good God! what is the matter?"

"I am burning!"

"Do you suffer much?"

"As much as one of the damned."

Colbert would have liked to sink through the floor.

"So, then," resumed Mazarin, "your majesty thinks that the king--" he stopped several seconds--"that the king is coming here to offer me some small thanks?"

"I think so," said queen. Mazarin annihilated Colbert with his last look.

At that moment the ushers announced that the king was in the ante-chambers, which were filled with people. This announcement produced a stir of which Colbert took advantage to escape by the door of the ruelle. Anne of Austria arose, and awaited her son, standing. Louis XIV. appeared at the threshold of the door, with his eyes fixed upon the dying man, who did not even think it worth while to notice that majesty from whom he thought he had nothing more to expect. An usher placed an armchair close to the bed. Louis bowed to his mother, then to the cardinal, and sat down. The queen took a seat in her turn.

Then, as the king looked behind him, the usher understood that look, and made a sign to the courtiers who filled up the doorway to go out, which they instantly did. Silence fell upon the chamber with the velvet curtains. The king, still very young, and very timid in the presence of him who had been his master from his birth, still respected him much, particularly now, in the supreme majesty of death. He did not dare, therefore, to begin the conversation, feeling that every word must have

its weight not only upon things of this world, but of the next. As to the cardinal, at that moment he had but one thought--his donation. It was not physical pain which gave him that air of despondency, and that lugubrious look; it was the expectation of the thanks that were about to issue from the king's mouth, and cut off all hope of restitution. Mazarin was the first to break the silence. "Is your majesty come to make any stay at Vincennes?" said he.

Louis made an affirmative sign with his head.

"That is a gracious favor," continued Mazarin, "granted to a dying man, and which will render death less painful to him."

"I hope," replied the king, "I am come to visit, not a dying man, but a sick man, susceptible of cure."

Mazarin replied by a movement of the head.

"Your majesty is very kind; but I know more than you on that subject. The last visit, sire," said he, "the last visit."

"If it were so, monsieur le cardinal," said Louis, "I would come a last time to ask the counsels of a guide to whom I owe everything."

Anne of Austria was a woman; she could not restrain her tears. Louis showed himself much affected, and Mazarin still more than his two guests, but from very different motives. Here the silence returned. The queen wiped her eyes, and the king resumed his firmness.

"I was saying," continued the king, "that I owed much to your eminence." The eyes of the cardinal had devoured the king, for he felt the great moment had come. "And," continued Louis, "the principal object of my visit was to offer you very sincere thanks for the last evidence of friendship you have kindly sent me."

The cheeks of the cardinal became sunken, his lips partially opened, and the most lamentable sigh he had ever uttered was about to issue from his chest.

"Sire," said he, "I shall have despoiled my poor family; I shall have ruined all who belong to me, which may be imputed to me as an error; but, at least, it shall not be said of me that I have refused to sacrifice everything to my king."

Anne of Austria's tears flowed afresh.

"My dear Monsieur Mazarin," said the king, in a more serious tone than might have been expected from his youth, "you have misunderstood me, apparently."

Mazarin raised himself upon his elbow.

"I have no purpose to despoil your dear family, nor to ruin your servants. Oh, no, that must never be!"

"Humph!" thought Mazarin, "he is going to restore me some scraps; let us get the largest piece we can."

"The king is going to be foolishly affected and play generous," thought the queen; "he must not be allowed to impoverish himself; such an opportunity for getting a fortune will never occur again."

"Sire," said the cardinal, aloud, "my family is very numerous, and my nieces will be destitute when I am gone."

"Oh," interrupted the queen, eagerly, "have no uneasiness with respect to your family, dear Monsieur Mazarin; we have no friends dearer than your friends; your nieces shall be my children, the sisters of his majesty; and if a favor be distributed in France, it shall be to those you love."

"Smoke!" thought Mazarin, who knew better than any one the faith that can be put in the promises of kings. Louis read the dying man's thought in his face.

"Be comforted, my dear Monsieur Mazarin," said he, with a half-smile, sad beneath its irony; "the Mesdemoiselles de Mancini will lose, in losing you, their most precious good; but they shall none the less be the richest heiresses of France; and since you have been kind enough to give me their dowry"--the cardinal was panting--"I restore it to them," continued Louis, drawing from his breast and holding towards the cardinal's bed the parchment which contained the donation that, during two days, had kept alive such tempests in the mind of Mazarin.

"What did I tell you, my lord?" murmured in the alcove a voice which passed away like a breath.

"Your majesty returns my donation!" cried Mazarin, so disturbed by joy as to forget his character of a benefactor.

"Your majesty rejects the forty millions!" cried Anne of Austria, so stupefied as to forget her character of an afflicted wife, or queen.

"Yes, my lord cardinal; yes, madame," replied Louis XIV., tearing the parchment which Mazarin had not yet ventured to clutch; "yes, I annihilate this deed, which despoiled a whole family. The wealth acquired by his eminence in my service is his own wealth and not mine."

"But, sire, does your majesty reflect," said Anne of Austria, "that you have not ten thousand crowns in your coffers?"

"Madame, I have just performed my first royal action, and I hope it will worthily inaugurate my reign."

"Ah! sire, you are right!" cried Mazarin; "that is truly great--that is truly generous which you have just done." And he looked, one after the other, at the pieces of the act spread over his bed, to assure himself that it was the original and not a copy that had been torn. At length his eyes fell upon the fragment which bore his signature, and recognizing it, he sunk back on his bolster in a swoon. Anne of Austria, without strength to conceal her regret, raised her hands and eyes towards heaven.

"Oh! sire," cried Mazarin, "may you be blessed! My God! May you be beloved by all my family. Per Baccho! If ever any of those belonging to me should cause your displeasure, sire, only frown, and I will rise from my tomb!"

This pantalonnade did not produce all the effect Mazarin had counted upon. Louis had already passed to considerations of a higher nature, and as to Anne of Austria, unable to bear, without abandoning herself to the anger she felt burning within her, the magnanimity of her son and the hypocrisy of the cardinal, she arose and left the chamber, heedless of thus betraying the extent of her grief. Mazarin saw all this, and fearing that Louis XIV. might repent his decision, in order to draw attention another way he began to cry out, as, at a later period, Scapin was to cry out, in that sublime piece of pleasantry with which the morose and grumbling Boileau dared to reproach Moliere. His cries, however, by degrees, became fainter; and when Anne of Austria left the apartment, they ceased altogether.

"Monsieur le cardinal," said the king, "have you any recommendations to make me?"

"Sire," replied Mazarin, "you are already wisdom itself, prudence personified; of your generosity I shall not venture to speak; that which you have just done exceeds all that the most generous men of antiquity or of modern times have ever done."

The king received this praise coldly.

"So you confine yourself," said he, "to your thanks--and your experience, much more extensive than my wisdom, my prudence, or my generosity, does not furnish you with a single piece of friendly advice to guide my future." Mazarin reflected for a moment. "You have just done much for me, sire," said he, "that is, for my family."

"Say no more about that," said the king.

"Well!" continued Mazarin, "I shall give you something in exchange for these forty millions you have refused so royally."

Louis XIV. indicated by a movement that these flatteries were displeasing to him. "I shall give you a piece of advice," continued Mazarin; "yes, a piece of advice--advice more precious than the forty millions."

"My lord cardinal!" interrupted Louis.

"Sire, listen to this advice."

"I am listening."

"Come nearer, sire, for I am weak!--nearer, sire, nearer!"

The king bent over the dying man. "Sire," said Mazarin, in so low a tone that the breath of his words arrived only like a recommendation from the tomb in the attentive ears of the king--"Sire, never have a prime minister."

Louis drew back astonished. The advice was a confession--a treasure, in fact, was that sincere confession of Mazarin. The legacy of the cardinal to the young king was composed of six words only, but those six words, as Mazarin had said, were worth forty millions. Louis remained for an instant bewildered. As for Mazarin, he appeared only to have said something quite natural. A little scratching was heard along the curtains of the alcove. Mazarin understood: "Yes, yes!" cried he, warmly, "yes, sire, I recommend to you a wise man, an honest man, and a clever man."

"Tell me his name, my lord."

"His name is yet almost unknown, sire; it is M. Colbert, my attendant. Oh! try him," added Mazarin, in an earnest voice; "all that he has predicted has come to pass; he has a safe glance, he is never mistaken either in things or in men--which is more surprising still. Sire, I owe you much, but I think I acquit myself of all towards you in giving you M. Colbert."

"So be it," said Louis, faintly, for, as Mazarin had said, the name of Colbert was quite unknown to him, and he thought the enthusiasm of the cardinal partook of the delirium of a dying man. The cardinal sank back on his pillows.

"For the present, adieu, sire! adieu," murmured Mazarin. "I am tired, and I have yet a rough journey to take before I present myself to my new

Master. Adieu, sire!"

The young king felt the tears rise to his eyes; he bent over the dying man, already half a corpse, and then hastily retired.