

From Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751)

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From CHAPTER IV

Louis XIV., who was brought up in adversity, wandered, with his mother, his brother, and Cardinal Mazarin, from province to province, with not nearly so many troops to attend his person as he afterward had in time of peace for his ordinary guard; while an army of five or six thousand men, part sent from Spain, and part raised by the prince of Condé, pursued him to the very heart of his kingdom.

From CHAPTER XXIII

Hence all who have written the history of Louis XIV. have been very exact in dating his first attachment to the baroness of Beauvais, to Mademoiselle d'Argencourt, to Cardinal Mazarin's niece, who was married to the count of Soissons, Prince Eugene's father; and quite elaborate in setting forth his passion for Maria Mancini, that prince's sister, who was afterward married to Constable Colonne.

He had not assumed the reins of empire when these amusements busied and plunged him into that languid state in which Cardinal Mazarin, who governed with a despotic sway, permitted him to remain. His bare attachment to Maria Mancini was an affair of great importance; for he was so passionately fond of her as to be tempted to marry her, and yet was sufficiently master of himself to quit her entirely. This victory which he gained over his passion made the first discovery of the greatness of his soul; he gained a more severe and difficult conquest in leaving Cardinal Mazarin in possession of absolute sway. Gratitude prevented him from shaking off that yoke which now began to grow too heavy. It was a well-known anecdote at court that, after the cardinal's death, he said: "I do not know what I should have done, had he lived any longer."

He employed this season of leisure in reading books of entertainment, and especially in company with the constable, who, as well as his sisters, had a facetious turn. He delighted in poetry and romances, which secretly flattered his own character, by pointing out the beauty of gallantry and heroism. He read the tragedies of Corneille, and formed that taste which was the result of solid sense, and of that readiness of sentiment which is the characteristic of a real genius.

The conversation of his mother and the court ladies contributed very much to give him this taste and that peculiar delicacy which began now to distinguish the court of France. Anne of Austria had brought with her a kind of generous and bold gallantry, not unlike the Spanish disposition in those days; to this she had added politeness, sweetness, and a decent liberty, peculiar to the French only. The king made greater progress in this school of entertainment from eighteen to twenty than he had all his life in that of the sciences under his tutor, Abbé Beaumont, afterward archbishop of Paris; he had very little learning of this last sort. It would have been better had he at least been instructed in history, especially the modern, but what they had at that time was very indifferently written. He was uneasy at having perused nothing but idle romances, and the disagreeableness he found in necessary studies. A translation of Cæsar's "Commentaries" was printed in his name, and one of Florus in that of his brother; but those princes had no other hand in them than having thrown away their time in writing a few observations on some passages in those authors.

He who was chief director of the king's education under the first Marshal Villeroi, his governor, was well qualified for the task, was learned and agreeable, but the civil wars spoiled his education; and Cardinal Mazarin was content he should be kept in the dark. When he conceived a passion for Maria Mancini, he soon learned Italian, to converse with her, and at his marriage he applied himself to Spanish, but with less success. His neglect of study in his youth, a fearfulness of exposing himself,

and the ignorance in which Cardinal Mazarin kept him, persuaded the whole court that he would make just such a king as his father, Louis XIII.

There was only one circumstance from which those capable of forming a judgment of future events could foresee the figure he would make; this was in 1655, after the civil wars, after his first campaign and consecration, when the parliament was about to meet on account of some edicts: the king went from Vincennes in a hunting dress, attended by his whole court, and entering the parliament chamber in jack-boots, and his whip in his hand, made use of these very words: "The mischiefs your assemblies produce are well known; I command you to break up those you have begun upon my edicts. M. President, I forbid you to permit these assemblies, and any of you to demand them."

His height, already majestic; his noble action, the masterly tone and air he spoke with, affected them more than the authority due to his rank, which hitherto they had not much respected: but these blossoms of his greatness seemed to fall off a moment after; nor did the fruits appear till after the cardinal's death.

CHAPTER VI

Never was a court so full of intrigues and expectations as that of France, while Cardinal Mazarin lay dying. Those among the women who had any claim to beauty, flattered themselves with the hopes of governing a young prince, who was only twenty-two years old, and whom love had already influenced to make a tender of his crown to a favorite mistress. The young courtiers imagined that they should easily renew the reign of favorites. Every one of the officers of state thought that he should fill the first place in the ministry, not one of them suspecting that a king who had been brought up in such an ignorance of state affairs would venture to take the burden of government upon his own shoulders. Mazarin had kept the king in a state of nonage as long as he was able, and had not till very lately let him into the mystery of reigning, and then only because he had insisted upon being instructed.

They were so far from wishing to be governed by their sovereign that of all those who had been concerned with Mazarin in the administration, not one applied to the king to know when he would give them an audience; on the contrary, every one asked him to whom they were to apply, and were not a little surprised when Louis answered, "To me;" their astonishment was still increased, on finding him persevere. He had for some time consulted his own strength, and made a trial in secret of his capacity for reigning. His resolution once taken, he maintained it to the last moment of his life. He appointed every minister proper limits to his power, obliging them to give him an account of everything at certain hours, showing them as much confidence as was necessary to give a proper weight to their office, and carefully watching over them to prevent their abuse of it. He began by restoring order in the finances, which had been miserably mismanaged through a continuance of rapine.

He established proper discipline among the troops. His court was at once magnificent and decent; even the pleasures appeared there with a degree of lustre and greatness. The arts were all encouraged and employed, to the glory of the king and kingdom.

CHAPTER XXVI

From all we have said it appears that Louis XIV loved grandeur and glory in everything. A prince who should perform as great things as he, and yet be modest and humble, would be the first of kings, and Louis only the second.

If he repented, on his deathbed, of having undertaken war without just reason, it must be owned that he did not judge by events; for, of all his wars, the most just, and the most indispensable—that in 1701—was the only unfortunate one.

CHAPTER XXVII

From this general view, we see what changes Louis XIV introduced into the state; changes indeed advantageous, as they still exist. His ministers had an emulation among themselves, who should second him best. The whole detail, the whole execution is undoubtedly owing to them, but the general disposition to him. It is certain that the magistrates would not have reformed the laws, the finances would not have been put again in order, discipline introduced into the armies, general police in the kingdom; that there would have been no fleets; the arts would not have been encouraged; and all this in concert, and at the same time, with perseverance, and under different ministers, if there had not been found a master who had in general all these grand views, with a will determined to accomplish them.

He did not separate his own glory from the advantage of France, nor look upon the kingdom with the same eye as a lord does upon his lands, from which he draws all he can, that he may live luxuriously. Every king who loves glory, loves the public good....

This then in general is what Louis XIV did and attempted, that he might render his own nation more flourishing. It seems to me that one cannot behold all these labors and all these efforts without some acknowledgment, and being animated with the love of the public good, which inspired them. Let us but represent to ourselves what the state of the kingdom was in the days of The Fronde, and what it is at present. Louis XIV did more good to his own nation than twenty of his predecessors put together, and yet it falls infinitely short of what might have been done. The war, which was ended by the Peace of Ryswick, began the ruin of that commerce which Colbert had established, and the succeeding war completed it....

Had he not believed that he was sufficiently able, merely by his own authority, to oblige a million of men to change their religion, France had not lost so many subjects. This country, however, notwithstanding its various shocks and losses, is at present the most flourishing on the face of the earth, because all the good which Louis XIV did is still in existence, and the evil, which it was difficult for him to avoid in turbulent times, has been repaired....

Complaints are made, that no longer is to be seen at court so much grandeur and dignity as formerly; the truth is that there are no petty tyrants, as in the days of The Fronde, under the reign of Louis XIII., and in the preceding ages. But true greatness is now to be met with in those crowds of nobility, who were formerly debased for so long a time by serving subjects grown too powerful. There are seen gentlemen, and also citizens, who would have thought themselves honored in former days to be the domestics of these lords, become now their equals, and very often their superiors in the military service: and the more this service prevails over titles, the more flourishing is any state.

The age of Louis XIV has been compared to that of Augustus. Not that the power and personal events in both can be compared: for Rome and Augustus were ten times more considerable in the world than Louis XIV and Paris. But we must call to mind that Athens was equal to the Roman Empire in all things which do not derive their value from force and power. We must further consider, that if there is nothing at present in the world like ancient Rome and Augustus, yet all Europe together is much superior to the whole Roman Empire. In the time of Augustus there was but one nation, and at this day there are several who are well regulated, warlike, and enlightened, who are possessed of arts to which the Greeks and Romans were utter strangers; and among these nations there are none which has been more illustrious for about an age past than that formed in some measure by Louis XIV.