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A. J. Grant

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CHAPTER X.

LOUIS XIV AND COLBERT.

THE Peace of the Pyrenees, closely followed by the death of Mazarin, materially changed the situation in France. Since the time of Sully the power of the Monarchy had been maintained and enhanced chiefly by the great ministers of the King. Richelieu had broken the power of the nobility and restored and raised the international prestige of France. Mazarin had eluded or quelled the last rally of aristocratic revolt, and following in the steps of his predecessor, had exhibited France, both in war and diplomacy, as decidedly the first power in Europe. But Richelieu and Mazarin had left no obvious successor, though public opinion confidently expected that one would appear, for it had passed into a proverb that "the King and the ruler were two different persons." Such anticipations, however, were falsified by the unexpectedly energetic action of Louis XIV. The King was barely 22, and had not yet given any indications, even to those who stood nearest to him, of the self-confidence and tenacity that he was soon to manifest. He had seen, without any apparent jealousy, Mazarin regarded as the source of influence and power; the minister's rooms had been thronged with politicians, whilst the King's apartments were comparatively empty, but Louis, instead of resenting this, had exhibited towards his minister a certain amount of deference and submission. Immediately upon Mazarin's death he

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showed unmistakably his determination to govern. When those who had hitherto followed the orders of Mazarin asked where, for the future, they were to look for guidance, he unhesitatingly pointed to himself; for the future he would be his own first minister.

At the beginning of his direct personal rule he was unquestionably popular, except, perhaps, in certain disappointed aristocratic circles. Men had resented the foreign manners and tortuous policy of Mazarin; they welcomed the firm and clearly expressed will of the young King. His handsome appearance, the grace and dignity of his manners, all those personal qualities that helped to gain for him his title of “the Great,” were as clearly apparent now as they were ever to be; while his character had not yet developed that absorbing egotism that became its great defect later on. He had really great talents for administration, and they were more than equalled by his industry and persistence. During the first years of his personal rule he devoted all his energy to the reorganisation of France on the basis of the absolute authority of the Crown.

He was resolved to have no first minister, but ministers—servants—he must have; and these he chose, not from the ranks of the great nobles or high ecclesiastics, who might have been tempted to use their office for the enlargement of their own power, but rather from the smaller nobles and men of the middle class who would owe their elevation solely to himself, and might be trusted to serve the Monarchy with complete devotion without aspiring to the position of a Richelieu or a Mazarin. We are not left to conjecture to determine his motives. He explains his policy and its causes very clearly in his Memoirs. “It was not to my interest to take men of eminence for my ministers. I wanted before all things to let the public know, by the rank from which I chose them, that I had no intention of sharing power with them.”

It will be well here to consider the form of the central government of France during this reign, in which the absolutist

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tendencies of the Monarchy culminate. Louis XIV carefully organized it, and it remained as he left it, until the whole fabric of the Monarchy disappeared in the Revolution. Everything depended upon the King. Those who sat in the Council were men of his own choice; there was nowhere any trace of representation, or of any constitutional or real check to the royal will. After the King himself the one great source of power was the secret council (the *conseil d'en haut* or *conseil étroit et secret*). Here the King, surrounded by his Ministers of State, and by all those whom he summoned for the purpose, decided on great questions of policy, and marked out the general plan according to which his ministers were to conduct the affairs submitted to their care. But subordinate to this Council were five others: (1) the Council of Despatches (*conseil des dépêches*), corresponding very roughly with the modern Minister of the Interior, which watched over the ordinary course of domestic affairs and controlled the action of the *intendants*. (2) The *Council of Finances*, whose title sufficiently explains its functions. (3) The *conseil des parties*, which had no directly political function, but acted as a court of appeal in certain cases. (4) The Council of War, and (5) the Council of Commerce, which was, however, not definitely organised until the year 1700. The *personnel* of these councils depended on the will of the King, and it varied from time to time. But the members belonged to four classes; there were the Ministers of State, the Councillors of State, the *Maîtres des requêtes* (members of the legal profession who served on subordinate positions in the councils, and were usually promoted to be *intendants* or other officers of State), and finally the Secretaries of State. The chief agents of the Crown were, for the reign of Louis XIV, the four great Secretaries of State (those, namely for war, the navy, foreign affairs, and the King's household), the Chancellor and the Controller-general of finances; and under them there was a whole army of officials with the *intendants* at their head.

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We have considered their origin and their work in dealing with the administrative changes introduced by Richelieu; but under Louis XIV the system reaches its full development. The *intendants* are no longer now primarily instruments of national defence or agents of monarchical revolution. They are the ordinary and most important administrators of France.

The ministers who stood nearest to him during his earliest years were Le Tellier, the Minister of War; Lionne, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Fouquet, Superintendent of Finances, and—in a somewhat indefinite position at first—Colbert, who was destined to have most influence of all. Michel le Tellier had served Mazarin and the King during the stormy days of the Fronde, and was on that account the more trusted. War was his special department, and he was reckoned the first authority in Europe on all that concerned the details and the cost of the preparation of an army. But the King valued his opinion and took it on other matters besides those relating to war. His influence was possibly at first greater than that of any of his colleagues. Lionne had spent his youth in Rome, and had thoroughly penetrated the methods of Italian statesmanship, and even the Italians, who were counted the first nation in Europe for diplomacy, admitted his profound knowledge and remarkable diplomatic gifts.

These two men, Le Tellier and Lionne, continued to be, through a great part of Louis XIV's reign, the chief agents of his military successes, and to the last he trusted them completely. But Fouquet occupied a very different position. He had held his office for some time before the death of Mazarin, and besides his superintendence of the finances, he was connected with the Parlement of Paris, and had commercial and banking connections unsurpassed at that time in Europe. Unquestionably he had given the government valuable help during the late troubles. But even before Mazarin's death complaints had been lodged against him, and from the first Louis regarded him with a suspicion which deepened into

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positive hostility. For, in the first place, he possessed immense wealth and vast estates, and had bought the island of Belle Isle, and fortified it in such a way that he might almost defy the power of France. He played, too, as patron of letters and science, a part which Louis XIV was afterwards to make his own. Molière, La Fontaine, and many others owed much to his protection and financial help. He had surrounded himself with something like a court, and his motto, “*Quo non ascendam?*” seemed to suggest an ambition too great for a subject. Not only his wealth, but also the suspicions as to its origin made him seem dangerous to Louis. The whole financial system of France was in such confusion that it required later all the genius of Colbert to remedy it. Fouquet was charged by Colbert with maintaining and profiting by that confusion. He kept no accounts or none that were readily intelligible: his own wealth and the income of the State were inextricably, perhaps purposely, involved. He was in close and friendly intercourse with the “*partisans*” whom Colbert denounced as the chief enemies of the financial welfare of France. In short, he was identified with the old corrupt economical system of France, and his fall was necessary to its destruction. But his position was so strong, and the King’s tenure of power so recent, that the King dared not strike a direct blow at him. He must first be deceived into security. The King visited him upon his great domain at Vaux, was received by him with an immense display of wealth and power, and betrayed no sign of distrust or hostility; but he suddenly gave orders for his arrest and trial (Sept. 1661). Fouquet’s financial procedures, though perhaps covered by custom, had certainly been fraudulent; but the court only condemned him to banishment. Louis XIV revised his sentence, and condemned him to perpetual imprisonment in the fortress of Pinerolo. A more distinct announcement could hardly be made that the age of first ministers was past, and that for the future Louis intended both to rule and reign.

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The place thus made vacant by Fouquet's downfall was soon afterwards occupied, in fact though not in name, by Colbert. The King abolished the title of Superintendent of Finances as he abolished several of the titles that had prevailed under the earlier Monarchy because they had become associated with almost independent power on the part of their noble possessors. The time had passed, never to return, when the great nobles could claim as a right a place in the King's Council. Le Tellier, Lionne and Colbert were the King's councillors henceforth and, though all possessed the full confidence of the King, they were all of an origin far below that of the 'haute noblesse.' For the first period of Louis XIV's personal reign Colbert is the most important of the three. He belonged by birth to the middle class and had first shown his industry and high talents in a commercial house. Thence he had passed into the service of Le Tellier and very soon into that of Mazarin. It was through the Cardinal that he had first approached the centre of political affairs. He had been employed by Mazarin at first in the management of his own immense fortune and afterwards on affairs of State, and it was Mazarin who recommended him to Louis XIV. Yet it was rather to Richelieu that he looked as his pattern and guide. He believed himself to be continuing the great Cardinal's work. An anecdote of the time tells us that King Louis used to make merry over this devotion of Colbert to his greater predecessor's memory. When public affairs were being discussed the King would say, "Colbert is sure to begin by telling us what the great Cardinal Richelieu thought on the matter."

No one could be better fitted either by ability or character than Colbert for the task that Louis XIV had in hand. He never forgot his bourgeois origin and took no high title until nearly the end of his career. He had at Court the air rather of a busy clerk than of a Minister of State: his unassuming dress and his velvet bag stuffed with papers contrasted strikingly

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with the costume of the nobles. There was surely no danger that he would rival his monarch in public interest or draw men's eyes away from the throne to himself. But this unassuming exterior covered talents of the very highest order, amounting in sum almost to genius. His industry was unwearyed and without parallel among the servants of the State. He was not attracted by the luxury or debauchery that wore down the strength of Lorraine: men said that the only rest he knew was change from one kind of work to another. He used this industry to penetrate every part of the financial, industrial and commercial life of France: and this industry and knowledge were joined in him to an inflexible will and an absolute devotion to the well-being of France. Everyone who participated in the widespread financial corruption, however high his station, trembled before his unflinching investigation: the overthrow of Fouquet had been chiefly due to him, and his vain protests against the military ambitions of Louis give an almost pathetic proof of the sincerity of his patriotism.

His correspondence with the *intendants* has been preserved and gives us a very clear view of the care with which he presided over the course of affairs even in distant provinces. Hardly anything could be done by town, village, or district without reference to the King's Council. The same correspondence shows us too how the authority of the Crown really triumphed over the phantom barriers which seemed to check it. The provinces that possessed nominally representative estates (the *pays d'États*) were hardly better off than those directly governed by the Crown (the *pays d'élection*). For such estates could only be held by the King's summons, and they were dismissed at the King's command. Their members were mostly dependent upon royal support or nomination for election. Lastly, if any members proved independent or recalcitrant, a very complete machinery of coercion could be put in action against them, culminating in their arbitrary imprisonment by *lettres de cachet*. The Government interfered too with the

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government of the towns. The confusion of their finances was the cause or excuse for this interference. Colbert interfered constantly, and submitted the affairs of the municipalities to the influence or dictation of the *intendants*.

The reorganisation of France carried out by Colbert with the sanction of Louis XIV is a most notable event in European History. For a time the attention of the most powerful of European states seemed turned to the peaceful development of her own resources. Commercial and industrial progress was for the first time the chief object of a great nation's government. The effect was transient and perhaps premature, but it reflects great honour on the man from whose brain the ideas came, and some honour on the King who consistently supported his minister in the face of great popular opposition. The reforms of Colbert must be taken in their different divisions.

The chief financial evils of France were, firstly, the extreme confusion, amounting almost to an absence of all accounts; secondly, the unfair and increasing burdens which had during the late troubles been laid upon the poorer and unprivileged classes; thirdly, the methods employed in collecting the taxes. Under the last head comes especially the employment of "Partisans." These were men who in times of extremity had advanced money to the Government and had received in payment certain taxes or the taxes of certain districts, the collection of which was given into their own hands. Irresponsible and possessing only a transient financial interest in the country, they exacted the taxes with great rigour and often in excessive amounts. Their wealth was notorious; they were exceedingly unpopular and their procedure had apparently laid them open to the law. It was against them that Colbert turned in the first instance. In the years 1662 and 1663 seventy million livres are officially said to have been refunded by them and legal action against them went on for some time longer. The State at the same time took the collection of taxes entirely into its own hands, with re-

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markable results. The reduction in the cost of collection allowed decreased taxes to produce a higher revenue. It was not yet possible to strike a direct blow at the inequality in the financial burdens of the different classes and the practical exemption of the privileged orders: such a sweeping reform had to wait until the Revolution. But Colbert made some notable advances in that direction, and he would have liked to make more. Of all the taxes the *taille* pressed most heavily upon the peasantry. It had risen since the year 1633 from 20 to 53 million livres. Colbert was anxious to abolish it entirely and substitute a tax on all property, privileged and unprivileged alike. But though he failed in this he reduced the *taille* from 53 millions per annum to 35. In some districts the *taille* was reduced by 33 per cent. Many districts and individuals that had hitherto escaped from the *taille* were forced to bear their fair share of it. The *gabelle*, the State monopoly of salt, was more equally distributed, and the taxes generally were collected with less harshness. At the same time a better and clearer system of keeping accounts was introduced, which at last allowed the King really to understand the financial position of the kingdom. There are other financial reforms and changes which do not fall under either of the three heads that I have mentioned. Colbert for instance made unceasing war against the sale of titles of nobility that carried with them exemption from taxation; and the rate of interest on both State and municipal bonds was autocratically lowered. How great the result of his financial measures was will be apparent from one fact: in four years the expenditure decreased by twenty-two millions and a half of livres, while during the same years the revenues increased by thirty-six millions, although no new taxes had been imposed and some of the old ones had been diminished.

Colbert desired not merely to manage the present resources of State more economically, but also to add to them by the planting of new industries in France and by the development of the old. This is the effort which is

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most intimately attached to his name. The methods he employed have been severely criticised and their results have been questioned; but it cannot be denied that what he did made a profound change in French society. His aims and methods are plain. He desired to plant new industries and industrial methods in France, and to encourage their growth by destroying or diminishing, through heavy protective duties, the introduction of foreign manufactured articles. At present France bought many manufactured articles and sold few. England exported into France stockings; Holland woven goods of various descriptions; glass and lace work came from Italy. Some of these industries had previously been known in France and had languished. At the beginning of Colbert's influence the manufactures of France corresponded in no way either to her needs or to her capacity. Colbert desired to make France a great manufacturing and exporting, instead of a mainly purchasing, country, and into this task he threw himself with great energy and gained a great measure of success.

First, often in spite of considerable difficulties, he induced skilled artisans from foreign countries to settle in France, and teach their methods to French workmen. A considerable number of new industries were thus added, chiefly from 1660 to 1672. There rose up in various parts of France establishments for stocking-making, for silk-weaving, for glass and metal work and for many other processes. At the same time protective duties, in many instances amounting to absolute prohibition, and often increased from year to year, were placed on all articles coming from abroad. Not only, however, were these industries planted and protected by the Government; they were fostered, directed, but sometimes cramped by it. The King tried to make the purchase of articles manufactured in France fashionable, and himself spent large sums on them. The Trades Guilds were developed, and they were made the medium through which Colbert brought Government action to bear on the various industries. The size, character and price of the