CHAPTER XVI.

LOUIS XIV.

We turn now from English affairs to contemplate the reign of Louis XIV. — a man who filled a very large space in the history of Europe during the seventeenth century. Indeed, his reign forms an epoch of itself, not so much from any impulse he gave to liberty or civilization, but because, for more than half a century, he was the central mover of European politics. His reign commemorates the triumph in France, of despotic principles, the complete suppression of popular interests, and almost the absorption of national interests in his own personal aggrandizement. It commemorates the ascendency of fashion, and the great refinement of material life. The camp and the court of Louis XIV. ingulphed all that is interesting in the history of France during the greater part of the seventeenth century. He reigned seventy-two years, and, in his various wars, a million of men are supposed to have fallen victims to his vain-glorious ambition. His palaces consumed the treasures which his wars spared. He was viewed as a sun of glory and power, in the light of which all other lights were dim. Philosophers, poets, prelates, generals, and statesmen, during his reign, were regarded only as his satellites. He was the central orb around which every other light revolved, and to contribute to his glory all were supposed to be born. He was, most emphatically, the state. He was France. A man, therefore, who, in the eye of contemporaries, was so grand, so rich, so powerful, and so absolute, claims a special notice. It is the province of history to record great influences, whether they come from the people, from great popular ideas, from literature and science, or from a single man. The lives of individuals are comparatively insignificant in the history of the United States; but the lives of such men as Cæsar, Cromwell, and Napoleon, furnish very great subjects for the pen of the philosophical historian, since great controlling influences emanated from them, rather than from the people whom they ruled.

Louis XIV. was not a great general, like Henry IV., nor a great statesman, like William III., nor a philosopher, like Frederic the Great, nor a universal genius, like Napoleon; but his reign filled the eyes of contemporaries, and circumstances combined to make him the absolute master of a great empire. Moreover, he had sufficient talent and ambition to make use of fortunate opportunities, and of the resources of his kingdom, for his own aggrandizement. But France, nevertheless, was sacrificed. The French Revolution was as much the effect of his vanity and egotism, as his own power was the fruit of the policy of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. By their labors in the cause of absolutism, he came in possession of armies and treasures. But armies and treasures were expended in objects of vain ambition, for the gratification of selfish pleasures, for expensive pageants, and for gorgeous palaces. These finally embarrassed the nation, and ground it down to the earth by the load of taxation, and maddened it by the prospect of ruin, by the poverty and degradation of the people, and, at the same time, by the extravagance and insolence of an overbearing aristocracy. The aristocracy formed the glory and pride of the throne and both nobles and the throne fell, and great was the fall thereof.

Our notice of Louis XIV. begins, not with his birth, but at the time when he resolved to be his own prime minister, on the death of Cardinal Mazarin, (1661.)

Louis XIV. was then twenty-three years of age — frank, beautiful, imperious, and ambitious. His education had been neglected, but his pride and selfishness had been stimulated. During his minority, he had been straitened for money by the avaricious cardinal; but avaricious for his youthful master, since, at his death, besides his private fortune, which amounted to two hundred millions of livres, he left fifteen millions of livres, not specified in his will, which, of course, the king seized, and thus became the richest monarch of Europe. He was married, shortly before the death of Mazarin, to the Infanta Maria Theresa daughter of Philip IV., King of Spain. But, long before his marriage, he had become attached to Mary de Mancini, niece of Mazarin, who returned his love with passionate ardor. She afterwards married Prince Colonna, a Roman noble, and lived a most abandoned life.

The enormous wealth left by Cardinal Mazarin was, doubtless, one motive which induced Louis XIV., though only a young man of twenty-three, to be his own prime minister. Henceforth, to his death, all his ministers made their regular reports to him, and none were permitted to go beyond the limits which he prescribed to them.

He accepted, at first, the ministers whom the dying cardinal had recommended. The most prominent of these were Le Tellier, De Lionne, and Fouquet. The last was intrusted with the public chest, who found the means to supply the dissipated young monarch with all the money he desired for the indulgence of his expensive tastes and ruinous pleasures.

The thoughts and time of the king, from the death of Mazarin, for six or seven years, were chiefly occupied with his pleasures. It was then that the court of France was so debauched, splendid, and far-famed. It was during this time that the king was ruled by La Vallière, one of the most noted of all his favorites, a woman of considerable beauty and taste, and not so unprincipled as royal favorites generally have been. She was created a duchess, and her children were legitimatized, and also became dukes and princes. Of these the king was very fond, and his love for them survived the love for their unfortunate mother, who, though beautiful and affectionate, was not sufficiently intellectual to retain the affections with which she inspired the most selfish monarch of his age. She was supplanted in the king's affections by Madame de Montespan, an imperious beauty, whose extravagances and follies shocked and astonished even the most licentious court in Europe; and La Vallière, broken-hearted, disconsolate, and mortified, sought the shelter of a Carmelite convent, in which she dragged out thirty-six melancholy and dreary years, amid the most rigorous severities of self-inflicted penance, in the anxious hope of that heavenly mansion where her sins would be no longer remembered, and where the weary would be at rest.

It was during these years of extravagance and pleasure that Versailles attracted the admiring gaze of Christendom, the most gorgeous palace which the world has seen since the fall of Babylon. Amid its gardens and groves, its parks and marble halls, did the modern Nebuchadnezzar revel in a pomp and grandeur

unparalleled in the history of Europe, surrounded by eminent prelates, poets, philosophers, and statesmen, and all that rank and beauty had ennobled throughout his vast dominions. Intoxicated by their united flatteries, by all the incense which sycophancy, carried to a science, could burn before him, he almost fancied himself a deity, and gave no bounds to his self-indulgence, his vanity, and his pride. Every thing was subordinate to his pleasure and his egotism — an egotism alike regardless of the tears of discarded favorites, and the groans of his overburdened subjects.

But Louis, at last, palled with pleasure, was aroused from the festivities of Versailles by dreams of military ambition. He knew nothing of war, of its dangers, its reverses, or of its ruinous expenses; but he fancied it would be a beautiful sport for a wealthy and absolute monarch to engage in the costly game. He cast his eyes on Holland, a state extremely weak in land forces, and resolved to add it to the great kingdom over which he ruled.

The only power capable of rendering effectual assistance to Holland, when menaced by Louis XIV., was England; but England was ruled by Charles II., and all he cared for were his pleasures and independence from parliamentary control. The French king easily induced him to break his alliance with the Dutch by a timely bribe, while, at the same time, he insured the neutrality of Spain, by inflaming the hereditary prejudices of the Spanish court against the Low Countries.

War, therefore, without even a decent pretence, and without provocation, was declared against Holland, with a view of annexing the Low Countries to France.

Before the Dutch were able to prepare for resistance, Louis XIV appeared on the banks of the Rhine with an army of one hundred and twenty thousand, marshalled by such able generals as Luxembourg, Condé, and Turenne. The king commanded in person, and with all the pomp of an ancient Persian monarch, surrounded with women and nobles. Without any adequate force to resist him, his march could not but be triumphant. He crossed the Rhine, — an exploit much celebrated, by his flatterers, though nothing at all extraordinary, — and, in the course of a few weeks, nearly all the United Provinces had surrendered to the royal victor. The reduction of Holland and Zealand alone was necessary to crown his en-

terprise with complete success. But he wasted time in vain parade at Utrecht, where he held his court, and where his splendid army revelled in pleasure and pomp. Amsterdam alone, amid the general despondency and consternation which the French inundation produced, was true to herself, and to the liberties of Holland; and this was chiefly by means of the gallant efforts of the Prince of Orange.

At this time, (1672,) he was twenty-two years of age, and had received an excellent education, and shown considerable military abilities. In consequence of his precocity of talent, his unquestioned patriotism, and the great services which his family had rendered to the state, he was appointed commander-in-chief of the forces of the republic, and was encouraged to aspire to the office of stadtholder, the highest in the commonwealth. And his power was much increased after the massacre of the De Witts — the innocent victims of popular jealousy, who, though patriotic and illustrious, inclined to a different policy than what the Orange party advocated. William advised the States to reject with scorn the humiliating terms of peace which Louis XIV. offered, and to make any sacrifice in defence of their very last ditch. The heroic spirit which animated his bosom he communicated to his countrymen, on the borders of despair, and in the prospect of national ruin; and so great was the popular enthusiasm, that preparations were made for fifty thousand families to fly to the Dutch possessions in the East Indies, and establish there a new empire, in case they were overwhelmed by their triumphant enemy.

Never, in the history of war, were such energies put forth as by the Hollanders in the hour of their extremity. They opened their dikes, and overflowed their villages and their farms. They rallied around the standard of their heroic leader, who, with twenty-two thousand men, kept the vast armies of Condé and Turenne at bay. Providence, too, assisted men who were willing to help themselves. The fleets of their enemies were dispersed by storms, and their armies were driven back by the timely inundation.

The heroism of William called forth universal admiration. Louis attempted to bribe him, and offered him the sovereignty of Holland, which offer he unhesitatingly rejected. He had seen the

lowest point in the depression of his country, and was confident of ultimate success.

The resistance of Holland was unexpected, and Louis, wearied with the campaign, retired to Versailles, to be fed with the incense of his flatterers, and to publish the manifestoes of his glory and success.

The states of Europe, jealous of the encroachments of Louis, at last resolved to come to the assistance of the struggling republic of Holland. Charles II. ingloriously sided with the great despot of Europe; but the Emperor of Germany, the Elector of Brandenburg, and the King of Spain declared war against France. Moreover, the Dutch gained some signal naval battles. The celebrated admirals De Ruyter and Van Tromp redeemed the ancient glories of the Dutch flag. The French were nearly driven out of Holland; and Charles II., in spite of his secret treaties with Louis, was compelled to make peace with the little state which had hitherto defied him in the plenitude of his power.

But the ambitious King of France was determined not to be baffled in his scheme, since he had all the mighty resources of his kingdom at his entire disposal, and was burning with the passion of military aggrandizement. So he recommenced preparations for the conquest of Holland on a greater scale than ever, and assembled four immense armies. Condé led one against Flanders, and fought a bloody but indecisive battle with the Prince of Orange, in which twelve thousand men were killed on each side. Turenne commanded another on the side of Germany, and possessed himself of the Palatinate, gained several brilliant successes, but disgraced them by needless cruelties. Manheim, and numerous towns and villages, were burnt, and the country laid waste and desolate. The elector was so overcome with indignation, that he challenged the French general to single combat, which the great marshal declined.

Louis himself headed a third army, and invaded Franche Comté, which he subdued in six weeks. The fourth army was sent to the frontiers of Roussillon, but effected nothing of importance.

This great war was prosecuted for four years longer, in which the contending parties obtained various success. The only decisive effect of the contest was to reduce the strength of all the

contending powers. Some great battles were fought, but Holland still held out with inferior forces. Louis lost the great Turenne, who was killed on the eve of a battle with the celebrated Montecuculi, who commanded the German armies; but, in a succeeding campaign, this loss was compensated by the surrender of Valenciennes, by the victories of Luxembourg over the Prince of Orange, and by another treaty of peace with Charles II.

At last, all the contending parties were exhausted, and Louis was willing to make terms of peace. He had not reduced Holland, but, on account of his vast resources, he had obtained considerable advantages. The treaty of Nimeguen, in 1678, secured to him Franche Comté, which he had twice conquered, and several important cities and fortresses in Flanders. He considerably extended his dominions, in spite of a powerful confederacy, and only retreated from the field of triumph to meditate more gigantic enterprises.

For nine years, Europe enjoyed a respite from the horrors of war, during which Louis XIV. acted like a universal monarch. During these nine years, he indulged in his passion of palace building, and surrounded himself with every pleasure which could intoxicate a mind on which, already, had been exhausted all the arts of flattery, and all the resources of wealth.

The man to whom Louis was most indebted for the means to prosecute his victories and build his palaces, was Colbert, minister of finance, who succeeded Fouquet. France was indebted to this able and patriotic minister for her richest manufactures of silks, laces, tapestries, and carpets, and for various internal improvements. He founded the Gobelin tapestries; erected the Royal Library, the colonnade of the Louvre, the Royal Observatory, the Hotel of the Invalids, and the palaces of the Tuileries, Vincennes, Meudon, and Versailles. He encouraged all forms of industry, and protected the Huguenots. But his great services were not fully appreciated by the king, and he was obnoxious to the nobility, who envied his eminence, and to the people, because he desired the prosperity of France more than the gratification of their pleasures. He was succeeded by Louvois, who long retained a great ascendency by obsequious attention to all the king's wishes.

At this period, the reigning favorite at court was Madame de

Montespan — the most infamous and unprincipled, but most witty and brilliant of all the king's mistresses, and the haughtiest woman of her age. Her tastes were expensive, and her habits extravagant and luxurious. On her the sovereign showered diamonds and rubies. He could refuse her nothing. She received so much from him, that she could afford to endow a convent — the mere building of which cost one million eight hundred thousand livres. Her children were legitimatized, and declared princes of the blood. Through her the royal favors flowed. Ambassadors, ministers, and even prelates, paid their court to her. On her the reproofs of Bossuet fell without effect. Secure in her ascendency over the mind of Louis, she triumphed over his court, and insulted the nation. But, at last, he grew weary of her, although she remained at court eighteen years, and she was dismissed from Versailles, on a pension of a sum equal to six hundred thousand dollars a year. She lived twenty-two years after her exile from court, and in great splendor, sometimes hoping to regain the ascendency she had once enjoyed, and at others in those rigorous penances which her church inflicts as the expiation for sin. To the last, however, she was haughty and imperious, and kept up the vain etiquette of a court. Her husband, whom she had abandoned, and to whom, after her disgrace, she sought to be reconciled, never would hear her name mentioned; and the king, whom, for nearly twenty years, she had enthralled, heard of her death with indifference, as he was starting for a hunting excursion. "Ah, indeed," said Louis XIV., "so the marchioness is dead! I should have thought that she would have lasted longer. Are you ready, M. de la Rochefoucauld? I have no doubt that, after this last shower, the scent will lie well for the dogs. Let us be off at once."

As the Marchioness de Montespan lost her power over the royal egotist, Madame de Maintenon gained hers. She was the wife of the poet Scarron, and was first known to the king as the governess of the children of Montespan. She was an estimable woman on the whole, very intellectual, very proper, very artful, and very ambitious. No person ever had so great an influence over Louis XIV. as she; and hers was the ascendency of a strong mind over a weak one. She endeavored to make peace at court, and to dissuade the king from those vices to which he had so long been