CHAPTER XII

THE ASCENDANCY OF FRANCE UNDER LOUIS XIV. (1643–1715)

REFERENCES: WAKEMAN, The Ascendancy of France, pp. 153–64, Chapters IX., X., XI., XIV., XV.; KITCHIN, History of France, Vol. III., pp. 58–360; HASSALL, Mazarin; HASSALL, Louis XIV.; ADAMS, Growth of the French Nation, Chapter XIII.; PERKINS, France under Richelieu and Mazarin.

SOURCE READINGS: DUKE OF ST. SIMON, Memoirs of the, 4 vols. (a brilliant gallery of portraits of courtiers and ladies); MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ, Letters of; ROBINSON, Readings, Chapter XXI. (Richelieu, Colbert, Louis's Court, etc.).

The work of Richelieu.

THE work of Richelieu, as we have seen, cleared the way for the supremacy of France in Europe. By destroying the political privileges of the Huguenots and by breaking the power of the nobility he had freed the royal authority from the last restraints which weighed upon it, and had rendered it absolute. At the same time the great minister had engaged France in the Thirty Years' War, and had reaped for her the benefits of the Peace of Westphalia (1648). But just at this point, as France was about to assume a dominant position, she was threatened once more, and as it proved for the last time under the old monarchy, by civil war.

The regency of Anne of Austria.

Richelieu's king, Louis XIII., died only a few months after him, in 1643, leaving behind a five-year-old son, in whose name the queen, Anne of Austria, assumed the regency. At

the same time the post of leading minister, which had been occupied by Richelieu, fell to the confidant of the regent, another churchman and an Italian by birth, Cardinal Mazarin. Trained under the eyes of Richelieu, the new minister tried to carry out faithfully his predecessor's programme, and was rewarded, like his predecessor, with the aversion of the great nobles, the chief of whom was the famous general, the prince of Condé. The Peace of Westphalia had not yet been signed, when a domestic trouble occurred which the nobles tried to make serve their ends. The Parliament of Paris resisted a new tax, but before this very promising issue was fairly under way the nobles, rejoicing in the embarrassment of the government, insinuated themselves into the struggle. Thus, what had been at the outset an intelligent constitutional movement, degenerated quickly into a rebellion of the feudal order to recover its lost authority. The moment the civil war, known under the name of the Fronde, took this shape, it deserved to fail, for though France might have profited by the victory of a constitutional party committed to the idea of popular control, the country could not consent to fall back into the feudal disorder, from which it had been rescued by Richelieu. The people, quick to discern their own interest in a quarrel between king and nobles, supported the government, and after a struggle of five years (1648–53) Mazarin reëstablished peace and order. The Fronde[1] is the agony of the feudal nobility. To be sure, the nobles retained their vast estates and special privileges and continued to enjoy a splendid social position, but they degenerated more and more into a

The Fronde.

[1] The Fronde affords an interesting comparison with the civil war which was being waged contemporaneously in England. The English constitutional movement was successful, whereas the French movement was not, (1) because the English Parliament represented the nation, which was not the case with the Parliament of Paris; (2) because the English aristocracy was law-abiding and patriotic; and (3) because the English possessed political experience and had the moral force to hold fast to what they wanted.

nerveless body of docile courtiers, content to squander their means and energies upon the dances and dinners of Versailles.

The Peace of Westphalia was an arrangement between France and the Austrian branch of the House of Hapsburg. Because the Spanish branch, although signally worsted by France in conjunction with the Dutch, was unwilling to come to terms, war between France and Spain continued after 1648. When the Fronde broke out, the tables were turned, and the balance inclined for some years in favor of Spain; but as soon as the Fronde was beaten down, Mazarin was able to win back the lost ground and force Spain to terms. Owing to foreign war and internal revolution, Spain was, in fact, at her last gasp. When she signed with France the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659), she signed away with it the last remnant of the supremacy which she had once exercised in Europe. France, the victor, took the place of Spain in the councils of the Continent, and signalized her triumph by acquiring certain territories, lying on the north or French slope of the Pyrenees (Roussillon), and by getting a more favorable boundary toward the Spanish Netherlands (Artois).

The Peace of the Pyrenees, 1659.

With the glory of the Peace of the Pyrenees still lingering in the skies of France, Mazarin's life turned to its setting (1661). He will always be remembered among the great ministers of his adopted country. The young sovereign, Louis XIV., now stepped forward to take the government in hand, but when he announced with quiet pride that he would henceforth be his own prime minister, many smiled and doubted. But he kept his word, and while he lived the varied business of the French Government was transacted practically by himself. He is said to have boasted once: *l'état c'est moi* (I am the state). Whether the phrase is his or not, it expresses admirably the spirit of his reign, for he held himself to be the absolute head of the state, and regarded

The personal rule of Louis XIV.

his ministers not as the responsible heads of departments, but as clerks. It is characteristic that the sun was his favorite emblem, because he was pleased to imagine that as the earth drew its sustenance from the central luminary, so the life of France emanated from himself. *Le roi-soleil* (sun-king) was the title given him by idolizing courtiers. Absolutism, that is, monarchy strengthened by the ruin of the feudal powers, existed in Europe long before Louis XIV., but the French sovereign now hedged it round with a special divinity. He taught and put in practice the doctrine that a king was the plenipotentiary of God, and was like the rest of mankind only in his mortality. With this exalted idea in his mind Louis was convinced that his only fit background was not the French metropolis and capital, but a special residence or court. By means of his court, which he located at Versailles, where a whole royal city sprang into being at his fiat, he was removed from contact with the common herd, and could surround himself, like an Oriental divinity, with acolytes and worshippers. Everybody knows how Versailles aroused the admiration and envy of the world. That was not so much because of its, after all, trivial splendors, but because its central idol was, in the words of a contemporary, "the greatest actor of majesty that ever filled a throne."

Louis and the court of Versailles.

But strong and omnipresent as the ceremonial element was in Louis's conception of his office, he was not, as already indicated, merely an ornamental sovereign. Although but a commonplace man, ignorant and superstitious, he had a high sense of order and completeness, which enabled him to carry Richelieu's reorganization of France a considerable step forward. The complex administration of government was carefully divided into departments, and the diplomatic service, the army and navy reached a high degree of efficiency. But the most original work was done in the field of

Perfection of administration

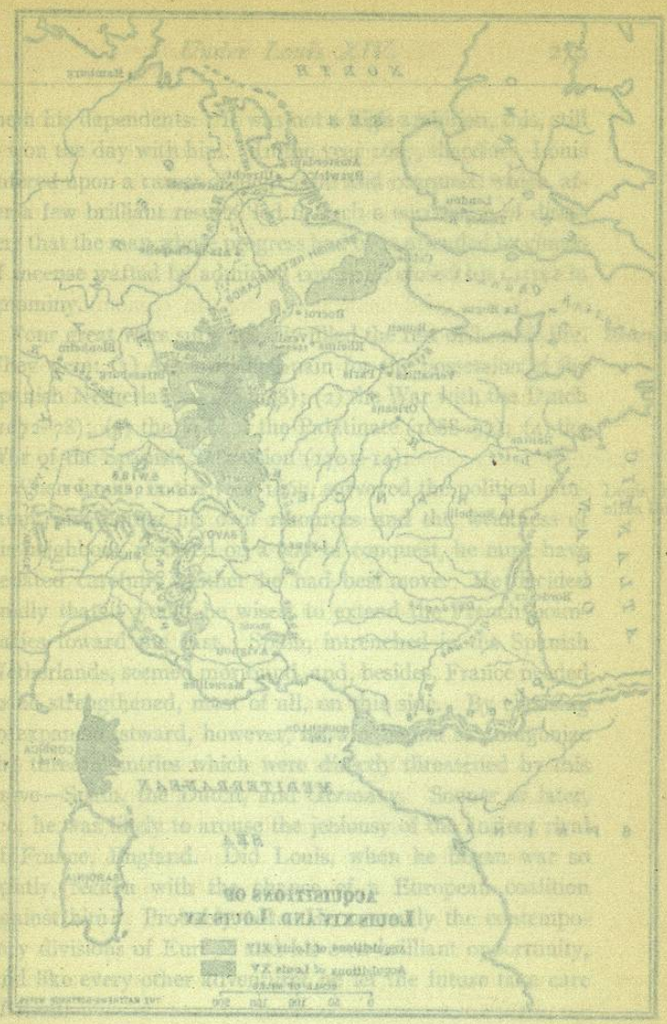
finance under the guidance of the tireless Colbert. Colbert (1619–83) had no sooner been put in control of the treasury department than he made an end of the customary carelessness and peculation and turned the annual deficit into a surplus.

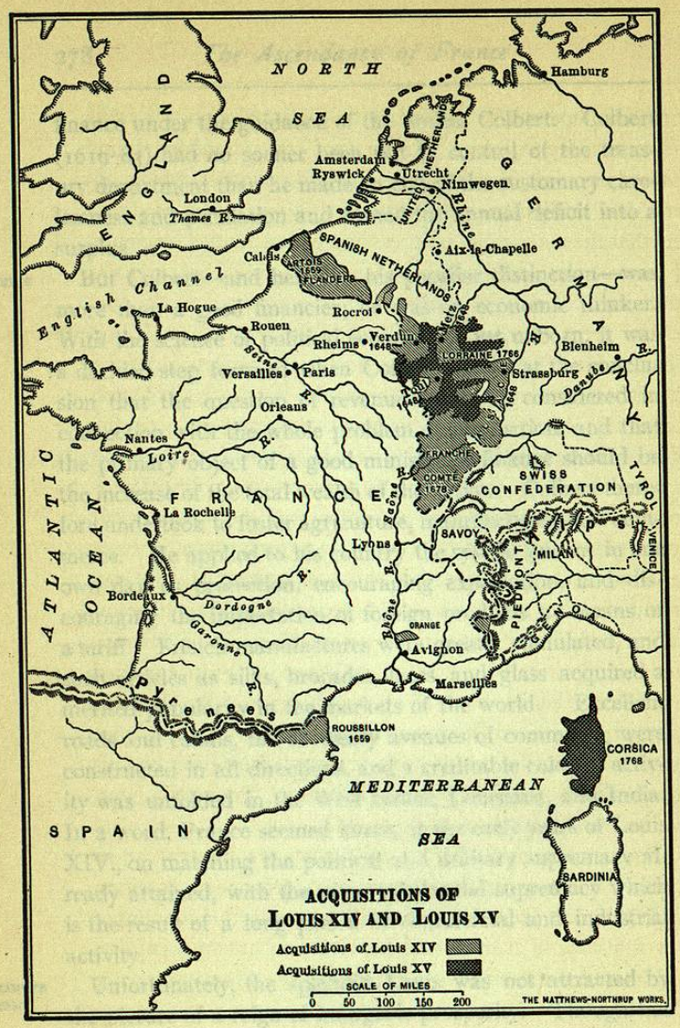
The economic policy of Colbert.

But Colbert—and here lies his peculiar distinction—was more than a good financier; he was an economic thinker. With the science of political economy as yet unborn, it was a decided step forward when Colbert arrived at the conclusion that the question of revenues must be considered in connection with the whole problem of production, and that the primary object of a good minister of finance should be the increase of the total wealth of the nation. Colbert therefore undertook to foster agriculture, manufactures, and commerce. He applied to his country the system known in our own day as protection, encouraging exportation, and discouraging the importation of foreign products by means of a tariff. French manufactures were greatly stimulated, and such articles as silks, brocades, laces, and glass acquired a merited popularity in the markets of the world. Excellent roads and canals, the necessary avenues of commerce, were constructed in all directions, and a creditable colonial activity was unfolded in the West Indies, Louisiana, and India. In a word, France seemed intent, in the early years of Louis XIV., on matching the political and military supremacy already attained, with the more substantial supremacy which is the result of a long period of commercial and industrial activity.

Louis becomes a conqueror.

Unfortunately, the splendid Louis was not attracted by the picture of a reign of bourgeois prosperity. Though but a young man, he was already the cynosure of Europe. In all truth he could say that he was the first power of the world. But in measure as he found that his neighbors were no match for him, he began to be tempted by the thought of making





them his dependents. It was not a high ambition, this, still it won the day with him. In the year 1667, therefore, Louis entered upon a career of aggression and conquest, which, after a few brilliant results, led to such a succession of disasters that the man whose progress had been attended by clouds of incense wafted by admiring courtiers, closed his career in ignominy.

His wars.

Four great wars substantially filled the rest of Louis's life. They were: (1) A War with Spain for the possession of the Spanish Netherlands (1667–68); (2) the War with the Dutch (1672–78); (3) the War of the Palatinate (1688–97); (4) the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14).

Louis antagonizes Europe.

When Louis, in the year 1667, surveyed the political situation, and noting his own resources and the weakness of his neighbors, resolved on a war of conquest, he must have debated carefully whither he had best move. He decided finally that it would be wisest to extend the French boundaries toward the east. Spain, intrenched in the Spanish Netherlands, seemed moribund, and, besides, France needed to be strengthened, most of all, on this side. By choosing to expand eastward, however, he was bound to antagonize the three countries which were directly threatened by this move—Spain, the Dutch, and Germany. Sooner or later, too, he was likely to arouse the jealousy of the ancient rival of France, England. Did Louis, when he began war so lightly, reckon with the chance of a European coalition against him? Probably not. He saw only the contemporary divisions of Europe and his own brilliant opportunity, and like every other adventurer he let the future take care of itself.

The War of the Spanish Netherlands, 1667–68.

In 1667 Louis suddenly invaded the Spanish Netherlands. The fact that he tried to justify himself by putting forth some very doubtful claims of his Spanish wife, daughter of Philip IV., to these territories, only added hypocrisy to violence.

His well-appointed army took place after place. Spain was too weak to offer resistance, and if the Dutch, frightened at the prospect of such a neighbor as Louis, had not bestirred themselves, Louis would have overrun all the Spanish Netherlands. The Triple Alliance of the Dutch, England, and Sweden, formed by the rapid ingenuity of the republican patriot, John de Witt, who was at this time the leading spirit of the Dutch Government, bade Louis halt. Louis, on occasion, could distinguish the possible from the impossible. In answer to the threat of the Triple Alliance, he declared himself satisfied with a frontier strip, and retired. The Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle (Aachen) formally secured him in his bold acquisition (1668).

The isolation of the Dutch.

For the next few years Louis seemed to be dominated by a single thought—revenge upon the Dutch. The Dutch had been the soul of the Triple Alliance; the Dutch primarily hindered his expansion eastward. The plan he now formed was to sever the Dutch from all their friends and allies, and then fall upon them unawares. The diplomatic campaign preliminary to the declaration of war was crowned with complete success. Sweden and the emperor were secured by treaties of neutrality, and the despicable Charles II., by the Treaty of Dover (1670), was even pledged to join the forces of England with the French in the proposed war. In the spring of 1672 everything was ready. While the combined French and English fleets engaged the Dutch fleet under the celebrated Admiral Ruyter in the Channel, the French army, led by Condé and Turenne, invaded the territory of the Seven United Provinces by following the course of the Rhine.

The House of Orange to the front.

In a few weeks most of the provinces, owing to the decay into which the too secure de Witt had permitted the army and fortresses to fall, were in the hands of the French. And now a terrible indignation swept over the alarmed people.

They fell upon and murdered de Witt, and would be satisfied with nothing less than the triumphant reinstatement of the House of Orange, which, at the close of the Spanish war, the republican party, largely at the prompting of de Witt, had banished from the public service. In an outburst of enthusiasm William III. of Orange was made Stadtholder and supreme commander on sea and land. William, a young man but twenty-one years of age, was far from being a genius, but he was sprung from heroic stock, and the responsibility for a nation's safekeeping, put upon him in a stern crisis, brought out his best qualities. The English ambassador invited him to look about him and submit, urging that it was easy to see that the Dutch were lost. "I know one means of never seeing it," he replied, "to die on the last dyke." It was this spirit that now steeled the temper of the little people and enabled them to emulate the deeds of their ancestors against Spain.

The character of William.

Before Louis could take the heart of the Netherlands, the city of Amsterdam, the Dutch had, at the order of William, cut the dykes and restored their country to the original dominion of the waters. Louis found himself checked; his opportunity was lost. But Europe was now thoroughly aroused, and before many months had passed, there had rallied to the cause of the Dutch the emperor, the states of the Empire, and Spain. In the year 1674 the position of Louis was still further weakened. In that year the state of English public opinion forced Charles II. to abandon Louis and make his peace with the Dutch. Louis was thereupon left to face a great continental coalition, with no ally but remote Sweden. The odds in a struggle with all Europe were patently against Louis, and although the superiority of French organization and French generalship enabled him to win every pitched battle with his foes, he was glad enough to end the war when peace was offered. By the Treaty of Nim-

The Dutch war becomes general.