



Arkady Alexeev

**The Adventures of
Giulio Mazarini**

Richelieu's Admirer

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by

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CHAPTER SIX

The Alps that Xavier had to cross had always been a formidable barrier guarding northern Italy. Anyone who sees its peaks for the first time is overwhelmed with awe. The snow-capped summits look impenetrable and threatening. The mountains in the vicinity of Mont Blanc stand like sheer walls reaching the sky. Mont Blanc is 14,771 feet high and the surrounding peaks are not much lower. These ranges with high elevations arch south toward the town of Susa. The famous Susa pass leads from Savoy to a town of the same name which is situated on the road to Turin, the capital of Piedmont.

It was decided between Mazarini and Xavier that, riding west from Milan, Xavier would bypass such a large city as Turin and reach Susa by small country roads.

He left Milan on February 20, and arrived at the town of Susa in a week. Here he sold his horse and bought a donkey to carry two sacks with provisions, weapons, rock climbing gear and a tent. On the twenty-third he began his ascent toward the pass.

The road he set out on soon became a trail, although still quite wide. Xavier wasn't worried about being observed by the enemy because the Savoyard detachment at the pass was expecting the arrival of the French from Savoy and were not prepared for any hostile action from the Italian side.

For a whole day Xavier followed the trail, going higher and higher. The snow line was very low in the winter. Xavier spent most of the day trudging through snow drifts which sometimes

completely obliterated the trail. It was dusk when he decided to halt. He took the bags off his donkey's back, set up a tent, tied the donkey to a stunted pine tree several yards away, ate bread with sun-dried meat, chasing this food with handfuls of snow instead of water, gave some bread to his donkey, and huddled in the tent. The howling of the blizzard and wolves sounded like a lullaby to him and he quickly fell asleep.

He dreamed of endless snow fields blinding him with their whiteness. Then, in this white nothingness he saw a pack of wolves surrounding him. He heard their growling, which was mixed with the deafening wailing of the blizzard but for some reason was immobilized. It was as if an overpowering weakness whispered to him that he should not move, that he should not scare away the sweetness of sleep. Then everything became quiet, the dream was over and his sleep became deep and relaxed.

As soon as dawn began to cast its gray winter light on the mountains Xavier woke up and peered out of the tent. All was white around him and even his tent was half buried in the snow. The night blizzard must have been quite heavy.

For some reason a feeling of alarm crept into his soul. He crawled out of the tent and looked behind it. The donkey was gone.

Xavier went down the slope, climbed up – nothing. He kept roaming, gradually increasing the distance from the tent but in vain. Not even tracks. The blizzard covered everything with fresh snow.

How could the donkey have walked away? It had been tied to the tree. Xavier went back to the tent and approached the tree. There was a short remnant of rope hanging on the trunk. The donkey could not break the rope. Then an answer flashed in his mind: the wolves! The wolves! They were not just in the dream. They killed his donkey and dragged it away.

“My God, – thought Xavier, – this donkey saved my life. It was an easier prey than a man in a tent.”

His situation was now quite difficult. He had to carry all his equipment on his own back. The two sacks were not light. Besides, carrying a load up the trail is so exhausting that even the donkey sometimes could barely move up and was pulled by his owner.

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Xavier was of course a giant of a man, but the constant ascent and lack of air could sap even his forces.

He remembered the donkey, his faithful friend, its sad clever eyes and the wet tender nose, and felt a lump in his throat.

Having packed his things, having sighed several times at the thought of his donkey, Xavier slung the two bags on his shoulder and moved on. His progress was slow and difficult. Sometimes he took the bags off his shoulder and carried them in his hands, giving relief to his back muscles.

The blizzard covered most of the trail and where it was exposed, it was swept clean, showing its icy slippery surface. All the time Xavier had to guess where the trail was. That was a dangerous game. The fresh snow covered crevasses and wide cracks. One wrong step and he could fall through the thin crust into a chasm.

He saw a long snowy field in front of him with no trail visible, but at the end of the field it reappeared. In the middle of this expanse stood a lonely young spruce tree, as thin as a stick with just several unhealthy looking branches. It seemed strange that it had withstood the stormy wind of the blizzard.

“At least I know where to go, – thought Xavier. – First to the tree, then to the point where the trail can be seen again.”

He walked faster, now that he had a definite direction.

Suddenly, just when he reached the tree, his feet lost their support. With a muffled bang the snow all around him dropped away and a wide bottomless abyss opened up, with the tree standing on its very edge. Xavier would have fallen if, at the last moment, he had not grabbed the tree trunk with his right hand, in which he was carrying one of the bags. The bag swung around the tree and strengthened Xavier’s grip. But his whole body hung down with nothing to step on. What was even worse, the bag in his left hand had disappeared, having fallen into the abyss.

Lifting his left hand, which was now free from the heavy weight of the bag, Xavier grabbed the tree and now was hanging, holding on the trunk with both hands. Straining his Herculean muscles he began slowly to pull himself up. His hands were strong but his body was incredibly heavy. He jerked it, trying to move up,

and immediately heard an ominous crackling of the tree. One more pull and another crackling sound. The little tree began to bend. Slowly Xavier pulled up again, the tree almost lay down but at this moment he could put his elbows on the edge of the cliff. Now most of his body weight was supported by his elbows rather than the tree trunk. The tree straightened up, Xavier wriggled once more and was now with the whole of his torso on the cliff. In a moment he sat under the tree, which he had nearly uprooted, but which had saved his life.

The bag that was gone contained all his weapons – two muskets, two pistols, several knives, a lot of powder and ammunition. What was left was in the other bag: ropes and other rock climbing gear, a tent which was quite large because of the size of Xavier, a sleeping bag, warm clothes and a lot of food.

“I won’t starve or freeze but I cannot defend myself,” – thought Xavier.

It took him another six hours to reach the point where he at last saw a gorge between two sheer cliffs. That was the Susa pass.

Xavier was still below the level of the pass but he could see it clearly. Having dumped his bag with incredible relief, he hid behind a rock.

He could see a high barricade stretching across the pass, although it was hard to determine whether it was made of snow or of something else, like rocks or wood, covered with snow. To his surprise he did not see any defenders. That was strange. Defenders should be hiding behind the barricade on his, the Italian, side expecting the French to come from the Savoy side. The barricade had to be used as a fortress from whose walls the enemy could be shot at. The defenders could not be in front of the barricade; that would be absurd.

With great caution Xavier began moving towards the barricade. Now he was absolutely sure there was no one on his side of it.

“Are they gone, having been frightened by the approach of the French? – he thought. – Improbable. But we’ll see.”

As he had left his bag behind a rock he was going up easily and quickly. He came to the barricade and saw no one. The snowy

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wall now revealed stones inside. It was more solid than it had appeared from afar.

“Since they are not here, I must climb the cliff around the barricade and see what is behind it. I’ll either see the French or no one. If there is no one, that would mean they haven’t yet arrived or have already gone.”

It was still daylight and Xavier decided to begin his climb at once, starting at a distance from the barricade which was also the recommendation of the duke de Rethel. That would let him get quite high before he was above the snow-covered wall.

“Thank God, my climbing gear is intact,” – thought Xavier, remembering the spruce with a tender feeling.

He moved up wedging in stakes, using ropes and the smallest indentations in the rock to put his feet on.

At last he was above the wall on a sort of stone ledge with an alcove, which allowed him to pause. But the moment he stopped he saw a man standing in the alcove. It was a Savoyard soldier. He was aiming his pistol at the unexpected guest. If Xavier had not lost his weapons in the crevasse he would have had time to shoot first. But he had nothing. He dashed forward, trying to disarm the man. But the bullet was faster. It struck Xavier in his shoulder, which made him spin and fall face down on the rock of the balcony. The attacker jumped up to Xavier and plunged a big knife into his back. The soldier was trying to pull the knife out, when Xavier sat up and with a powerful force turned and dashed forward. He had no weapons, but he had his colossal strength. Looking his enemy in the face while the knife was still sticking out of his back, Xavier seized the Savoyard by his jacket. The soldier, appalled and trembling, groaned and hissed with fright. Xavier grabbed the Savoyard by his neck and legs, raised him overhead, and threw him down off the cliff. The strong thud he heard made it clear the soldier did not survive the fall.

Xavier tried to reach for the knife sticking out of his back, but could not. That was a serious wound. As for the pistol shot, fortunately, it had been poorly aimed and the bullet, hitting him in the shoulder, made him turn around and was flattened colliding with one of the big bones in Xavier’s powerful frame.

Still sitting on the rocks of the balcony, Xavier thought about what he could do. If he returned to where he started his climb behind the wall, he was doomed. The blood was flowing from his back and he already felt something like weakness filling his mighty body. He took off his underwear shirt, tore it into strips, and bandaged his left shoulder. That would stop the bleeding at that point. But he could not bandage the knife wound in his back. His only hope was to get to the French. If they were below, he would be saved. He would immediately climb down and be among friends.

To make sure the French were below, Xavier lay down on his stomach and crawled towards the edge of the balcony cliff.

What he saw was quite amazing.

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Cardinal Richelieu brought his army to the Susa pass and stopped several hundred yards away from the barricade he had known was there from his scouts. The barricade was very high and, his scouts reported, was built of heavy stones fused together by ice and snow.

Richelieu was nonplussed. Storming the barricade was out of the question. The enemy was invulnerable behind the wall, while his troops would be exposed to punishing fire.

Richelieu had about five hundred crack troops with several hundred of the so-called “*enfants perdus*” – the suicide squad. He could not risk these elite troops in a doomed assault.

What was left for him to do was wait for his king, Louis XIII, who was due here in a couple of days. He alone could take upon himself the responsibility of ordering either attack or retreat.

The king arrived one day earlier than expected.

In 1629, Louis XIII, was still quite young, just twenty-eight years of age. But he had matured early in his life, having fought for his political independence first with his own mother, Maria de Medici, then with the conspiracies of his good-for-nothing brother Gaston, then with public opinion, which derided him as an obedient tool in the hands of Richelieu. Only later generations would

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understand that that king was no one's man, that he supported some people but never obeyed.

Richelieu knew it better than anyone else. He did not undertake a single move without consulting his king.

The king arrived without any troops; he had overtaken them in his hurry to see Richelieu. He immediately closeted himself with the cardinal in his tent to discuss the situation.

Richelieu told Louis that the situation was very grave, that the barricade had turned out to be quite solid, that they didn't have heavy guns to destroy it, that they had too few troops, and that the Savoyard fire was going to be deadly.

– Your Majesty, I vote for retreat, we can't afford losing our best troops.

The king squinted at the cardinal.

– Your Eminence, do you think of retreat because you want to spare the troops or because you believe we are going to fail?

– I don't know definitely that we will fail, but I know, quite definitely, that we'll lose a lot of our best soldiers.

– Thank you, Monsieur Cardinal. I know that you can't take upon yourself a decision that may jeopardize my army. But the fact that you don't know definitely that we will fail, combined with my resolve to win, allows me to take such a decision.

– Your Majesty, if casualties are great, the French people may put the blame on you.

– No, Monseigneur, they won't, because I'll go to the attack with my troops. Risking my life, I'll justify risking the lives of my soldiers.

– Sire, I implore you. . . Could you possibly wait until the arrival of the main army that fell behind you? That will take about five days at the most.

– My dear Cardinal, I know that you are devoted to me. But I am just as devoted to France. What is the enemy strength behind this wall, according to your scouts?

– The information I have is not very recent. My scouts saw the Savoyard soldiers when they were climbing towards the pass. There were about five hundred of them.

– You see. I have more troops. Don't forget the “enfants perdus.” They are worth thousands of enemy soldiers. Now bring me the maps and all information you have on the enemy .

As a result of this council of war it was decided that the French soldiers would undertake a frontal assault on the barricade, led by the “enfants perdus”; then the five hundred troops following them would finish off the Savoyards.

– Your Majesty, – said Richelieu at the end of their session.

– I just wanted to make sure I understood your intentions: I hope you are not going to be among the “enfants perdus.”

– Why not? That was actually my plan.

– Sire, that's impossible.

– Why?

– Because the other name for the “enfants perdus” is “suicide squad.” A king can risk his life for the good of his country, but he must not commit a suicide for it.

The king was silent for a moment.

– Yes, you are right. I'll be at the head of the main troops following the “enfants perdus,” – he said at last.

The attack was appointed for the next day at dawn. Before night came, the troops were cleaning and greasing their weapons, while sitting by campfires.

When it was dusk an orderly asked to be allowed into Richelieu's tent. Having entered, he told the cardinal some improbable news: a man of huge stature was noticed dangling on the end of a rope hanging from a cliff right above the “enfants perdus” unit. Blood was flowing from his back and he could barely hold on to his rope. A pole had been put up, leaning on the cliff. The man slid down into the helping hands of the French soldiers, and fainted.

In the back of the giant was a big knife. The regiment surgeon was called. He said that the man had been saved by the fact that the knife had been left in his wound, preventing a free flow of blood; otherwise he would have bled to death long ago. He removed the knife and put a thick bandage on the wound.

Such was the story of the orderly.

– What did he say? – asked Richelieu.

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– Before he fainted he mumbled, in Spanish, that he wanted to see you, Your Eminence

– Did he say why?

– He kept saying just one word: Mazarini, Mazarini.

The Cardinal stood up abruptly.

– Bring him here immediately! – he exclaimed. – On a stretcher if necessary.

In a couple of minutes Xavier was brought in on a stretcher. He was unconscious. The soldiers put the stretcher on the floor and went out.

Richelieu took a flask with some liquid from a small chest of drawers and brought it up to the nose of the wounded man.

He stirred and opened his eyes.

– I am Cardinal Richelieu. Who are you?

– My name is Xavier. I am in the service of Signor Giulio Mazarini.

– Do you have any proof?

– There's a letter from my master in my right pocket.

Richelieu reached into the pocket and found the note. It contained a text which was identical to the one sent to Richelieu by d'Arville on the request of Mazarini, and a map of the Susa pass drawn for Mazarini by the Duke de Rethel.

– Do you have anything to tell me? – asked Richelieu.

– Yes . . . yes . . . important . . . terrible danger . . . a trap . . .

Xavier stirred and fainted again.

This time nothing helped Richelieu to revive him.

The cardinal left him, and went to the king's tent.

In several words he told the king of the unusual guest who had appeared in their camp, and the intrigued king went to the cardinal's tent.

Xavier was lying on the stretcher, still unconscious.

Louis XIII was surprised by the huge size of the wounded man.

– You say he is the servant of that Italian. . . what's his name? . . . who has been helping us of late?

– The Italian's name is Giulio Mazarini, or Jules Mazarin, as I call him.

– Yes, I remember. He helped the Duke de Rethel in his plans to marry Marie Gonzaga of Montferrat.

– Yes, Your Majesty. And that was just one of his services to France.

– But what’s so important about the appearance of this gigantic man in our camp?

– According to this note he was sent by Jules Mazarin to help us in crossing the Susa pass.

– Just one man? Although he is of enormous size I can’t see how one person can help the whole French army.

– Just the fact that he came from Monsieur Mazarin makes his arrival crucially important, Your Majesty.

– How?

– He braved the elements, the mountains, and an armed attack to tell us something of major significance. I would say, Your Majesty, the several words he uttered before fainting were sufficient for me to ask you to postpone tomorrow’s assault until the arrival of the main troops.

– Nothing can stop me, Monsieur Cardinal. Not even this giant of a man.

– Sire, he may stop you not by his strength or size. He may stop you by what he said.

– All right. What was it?

– He said: terrible danger . . . a trap . . .

– A trap? Did he explain?

– No, Sire. He didn’t have time before he fainted.

– Do you think he will survive?

– Our surgeon says he will. Then he’ll tell us all in detail.

– When can it be? – asked the king.

– In a couple of days, I’m sure.

– A trap . . . That’s serious.

– A trap, Your Majesty, relieves you of the duty to show your bravery. Because a trap is a weapon that has nothing to do with chivalry.

– Well, you recommend waiting for the arrival of my main forces? But when do you think that will happen?

– In several days. In a week at the most.

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– I'll wait, – said the king. – Whatever the trap is, I won't humiliate myself by getting into it.

*

Xavier came to in two days. But he was still too weak to speak coherently.

Richelieu did not rush him. He knew that the main French army was still bogged down in the snow and, instead of one week, would not arrive for at least three.

But the king was impatient. As soon as he found out that Xavier could talk he ordered that he be brought into his tent, escorted by the Cardinal.

Xavier was brought on a stretcher.

– What's so important, Señor, that you wanted to tell His Eminence the Cardinal? – asked the king in perfect Castilian Spanish.

– I said there was a trap . . . Now I can explain exactly what I meant . . . – answered Xavier still gasping.

– Please, do, my friend, – said the king.

– I climbed the rock above the barricade built by the Savoyards. There I found a protrusion like a balcony and was attacked by a Savoyard scout. I threw him off the cliff and looked down. Below me was a Savoyard camp of about a thousand men. But what I was absolutely surprised to see was another wall at a distance of about a thousand feet from the first one. The Savoyard force was thus between two walls.

Xavier stopped talking, gasping for air.

The king and Richelieu looked at each other, alarmed.

– Your Majesty, that means they have a place to lure us in, – said Richelieu.

– Exactly. If I had attacked them with my five hundred men they would have let us climb the first wall and then would have disappeared behind the second one, from which they would have annihilated us, crowded between the two walls.

– Yes, that's right, Your Majesty, – said Richelieu. – Besides, they wouldn't have needed any ladders to go behind the

second wall. They may have a secret opening in it which they would have quickly sealed with stones as soon as they were on the other side. Our troops between the two walls would have been slaughtered like partridges.

– Your Eminence, – said Xavier, – I did see a whole mound of big stones near the first wall. I didn't see the opening, but this stock of rocks proves it is there somewhere.

The king and Richelieu exchanged gazes.

– Thank you, Monsieur, – said the king, switching to French in his excitement, – your service is highly appreciated. I hope you will recover soon.

The king snapped his fingers; two servants came in and carried Xavier away on his stretcher.

*

Xavier was recovering amazingly quickly. In two weeks he could walk, and in three, his bandages were removed. His strength was returning to him just as fast. By the time the main French troops arrived, Xavier was again his old powerful self.

Three days after the French army arrived the king ordered a general attack on the first wall. Ladders were put up by the detachment of the “enfants perdus,” who scaled them under violent fire from the top of the wall.

King Louis XIII was at the head of the second wave of attackers, just a hundred feet behind the suicide squad.

The French troops were filling the space between the two walls.

The king's plan was to deny the Savoyards their escape route through the opening in the wall. So the French soldiers tried to encircle the enemy in the middle of the area between the walls. But that was not easy. The Savoyards fought like lions and slowly retreated toward the second wall.

– The king! – suddenly shouted several soldiers. – Help the king!

Louis XIII was so carried away by the battle that he unwittingly allowed himself to be surrounded by the enemy. The French rushed to help the king, but he was assaulted by a mob of

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armed Savoyards, and it was not easy to destroy them. Suddenly a giant soldier broke through the enemy ranks. He grabbed the Savoyards five at a time and, without stopping to kill them, just hurled them outside the crowd. Xavier, for it was of course him, quickly reached the king and stood by him, repulsing any attacker. This mêlée near the king allowed the main part of the Savoyard troops to flee through the opening in the wall, which they quickly filled up with huge stones as soon as they got to the other side.

Immediately the enemy appeared on top of the second wall and began to shoot at the French troops between the two ramparts.

A bugle sounded retreat. The soldiers looked at the wall they had to scale under fire in order to return to their camp, and their hearts sank in terror.

Then they saw their king. He, accompanied by a huge soldier, led a detachment retreating towards the first wall, into which they seemed to disappear. The back rows shouted to those behind them:

– The king orders all to follow him. There's a secret tunnel in the wall.

The troops did not have to be told that twice. In several minutes the seemingly trapped French detachments moved to the other side of the wall and sealed the tunnel with large stones.

This was a ruse the king and his cardinal had contrived in case the Savoyards could not be surrounded and annihilated. The tunnel had been made during the preceding night. But the French sappers stopped short of piercing the wall all the way through, leaving just the outward stones in place to cover the tunnel so that the Savoyards would not suspect anything. When the king decided to retreat, he asked Xavier to move away several big stones and open the tunnel.

During the whole night that followed, another blizzard was roaring. The French soldiers huddled in their tents, often making the sign of the cross when an especially strong gust of wind shook the tents and even the earth itself, as it seemed to them.

No one noticed that the tent given Xavier by the personal order of the king was empty. Xavier was gone, and on the worst possible night to travel anywhere outside.

The next morning nature relented. Only new snow drifts reminded the soldiers of the violent storm.

Everybody was waiting for the Savoyards to reappear on the wall facing the French, which would mean that everything would have to be started anew. But nothing happened. Not a single head rose above the wall, not a single shot was fired.

This situation continued for several hours. Where was the enemy? The King decided to find out. Using the detailed map of the Susa pass provided by Xavier, the king sent rock climbers to bypass the wall and see what was going on.

When the first of them was above the first wall he shouted back to the camp:

– There's no one here.

That was incredible. The king ordered his men to open the tunnel and get to the area between the walls. The French detachments quickly did that. There was no one between the walls.

They sent another rock climber to peer over the second wall.

He reached a point above it and was silent.

– What d'you see? – shouted the soldiers.

He was silent.

– What d'you see? – they cried again.

– Nothing. Just snow, – was the answer.

The French troops climbed over the wall. Nothing, not a single Savoyard.

– They must have gone away, – said the king to Richelieu. They both were with their troops.

Then suddenly a voice was heard coming from the top of the ridge above the gorge. It was Xavier. He stood there waving his hands.

– I lost my rope in the blizzard, – he cried. – Will someone climb here and give me a rope to get down?

Several soldiers climbed the cliffs and in a few minutes Xavier was down.

The king and his minister went up to the spot where Xavier lowered himself from the cliff.

– What have you been doing there, Monsieur? – asked the king in surprise.

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– I spent the night there, Your Majesty, but lost my rope and couldn't climb down.

– You spent the night there? – asked the king even more amazed.

– Did you see the Savoyards go away? – asked Richelieu.

– They didn't go away, Your Eminence.

– What do you mean?

– They are all here, under the snow.

– They couldn't be buried just by the blizzard, – said the king.

– No, they weren't, Your Majesty.

– Then how come they are under the snow?

– They were buried by an avalanche.

– An avalanche?

– But what did you do here, Monsieur Xavier? – asked the Cardinal.

– I made the avalanche.

– You made the avalanche?! – the Cardinal and Louis could not believe their ears.

– Yes, Your Eminence. When the blizzard started I decided to climb above the Savoyard camp and make a little avalanche. I understood that the howling of the wind in the blizzard would not let them hear the roaring of the avalanche. That's exactly what happened.

– But wait a minute, – interrupted him Richelieu, – you said you made an avalanche. How is it possible?

– I was on top of the cliff right above the Savoyards. The blizzard was very strong. It was swaying the rocks. I just pushed some of them down and they started the avalanche.

Everybody saw several huge boulders protruding from the snow.

– You pushed these boulders? – asked Richelieu incredulously.

– Yes, Your Eminence, it was easy. I am now fully recovered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After the Savoyard detachment was annihilated in that unexpected way, the French army dismantled the barricades and moved through the Susa pass to Piedmont. With reinforcements that caught up with the avant-garde, the French counted about 30,000 troops.

This formidable force descended from the mountains and occupied the town of Susa.

Charles Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy, understood that Savoy's and Piedmont's very existence was at stake. He immediately sent his emissaries to Susa to meet with Louis XIII and Richelieu. All he could do was plead for peace.

Richelieu, who conducted the negotiations, did not want to conceal the king's wrath at the deviousness and direct hostility of Savoy. He did not offer, he demanded. Savoy had to join a military alliance with France against Spain and the Empire (Austria). Savoy had to provide the French army every assistance possible including food provisions, military supplies and the quartering of the troops. Further, the Savoyards had to abandon any claim to Montferrat and withdraw their troops from there while recognizing Charles de Nevers, the new Duke of Mantua, and his sovereignty over Montferrat.

The Duke of Savoy accepted all these points and assured Richelieu that all the previous tensions were caused by Savoy's misunderstanding of the French goals.

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This new alliance with Savoy was quickly joined by Mantua and Venice, which was the only major Italian territory unoccupied by the Spaniards.

After the conference King Louis XIII left Richelieu in charge of the army and returned to France where he wanted to continue his mopping up operation against the Huguenots.

Now Richelieu was ready to move to that part of Montferrat that was occupied by the Spaniards in order to relieve Casale, still encircled by the Spanish forces.

*

Giulio Mazarini was relaxing in his Milan house after a difficult day of reviewing the pope's legation affairs with the new nuncio extraordinary, Cardinal Gian Giacomo Panziroli, who replaced Giovanni Sacchetti. The new nuncio, an ascetic looking old man, seemed to be much more exacting a person than Sacchetti, and Giulio had to open all the legation archives in order to acquaint him with the everyday business of the legation.

Now Mazarini was summarizing his impressions of the new nuncio: serious, gloomy, but not very bright, judging by his comments on certain events reflected in the documents shown him by Mazarini.

“I feel, with all his seriousness, he will saddle all the legation responsibilities on me even more than Sacchetti did.”

At that moment the door opened and in came Xavier. He was covered with dirt and dust, but was beaming with joy at seeing his friend and master.

Giulio sprang to his feet and hugged the giant, disregarding the dirt.

Then, after all words of welcome were said, Mazarini sent him to wash and change his clothes.

– Do it fast, – said Mazarini, – I am dying to hear your story.

When Xavier returned, Mazarini seated him in an armchair, and was ready to listen.

– Tell me at once, – said Giulio, – did you succeed?

– No.

Giulio was unsettled.

– What happened?

– I was stabbed by a Savoyard scout and was bedridden for a whole month.

– Where did it happen?

– On a cliff above the Savoyard camp.

– You were bedridden on a cliff?

– No, on a stretcher, in the French camp.

– But how did you get there if you were wounded?

– I threw the scout off the cliff and continued moving across the face of the rock above the barricade the Savoyards had built. There was a knife sticking from my back but I felt all right. Then, when I got to the French, this is where I failed.

– What do you mean?

– I fainted and could not help them as you had asked me to.

– But it was not your fault. You were wounded.

– Yes, Señor Julio, it was my fault, because I had lost all my weapons.

Xavier told Mazarini about the episode with the wolves who ate his donkey, and then how he almost fell into a crevasse.

– Xavier, if I'd known how dangerous your mission would be I'd never have sent you there. I relied too much on your strength.

– So did I. I wanted to make a little avalanche to bury the Savoyards, but instead I fainted.

– So, you didn't take part in the battle?

– Oh, yes, I did.

– But you said you were bedridden.

– The battle didn't happen until I was already recovered.

– A month after your arrival? What delayed the battle?

– I think I did.

– You?! How did you do it?

– On the eve of the battle Monsignor Richelieu saw me and said that my arrival had delayed the battle until the main French force appeared.

– But Xavier, it sounds like he was pleased by the delay . . . What did you say, when the French first saw you wounded, that might have delayed them?

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– I said there was a trap for them.

– A trap? What trap?

Xavier told his master about the double barricades and the attempt to lock the French up between them.

– Well, now I see why they delayed the battle until reinforcements came. Xavier, you didn't fail in anything. This warning alone saved thousands of French lives.

– That may be. But I hate being weak. If I had recovered earlier, I might have done earlier what I did to the Savoyards.

– What did you do to them?

– I buried them.

– How?

– I made an avalanche.

– But you said you couldn't make it.

– I couldn't in the beginning. But after a month of recovery I made it.

– And you call it a failure?

– Yes, Señor Julio, I am not sure His Majesty liked that.

– Why?

– He said: Monsieur Xavier, if you hadn't been wounded I wouldn't have needed to wait for the reinforcements.

– The king spoke to you?

– Yes, several times. For example, when I saved him from an assault of fifteen Savoyard soldiers and led him away through the tunnel in the wall. When we were on the other side he said "Ugh, that was a close call." I decided he wasn't very pleased to have been in danger.

– Well, Xavier, I must tell you your mission was far from a failure; it was a resounding success.

– Thank you, Señor Julio. Maybe the real answer will be found in the letter I am carrying for you from Monsignor Richelieu.

He took out a letter from one of his huge pockets.

Giulio opened it. The letter said:

"Dear Monsieur Mazarin,

Your ability to offer help when it is most needed is really extraordinary. I now speak not just for myself but also for His Majesty. We both will never forget it. This time your help took a

very unusual form, which we could not appreciate at once. You sent us a real hero who, risking his life, defeated the enemy almost single-handedly and, what is even more important, saved our king's life. I must inform you of the decision the king has made: should Monsieur Xavier ever be in French military service he will be promoted to an officer's rank.

Monsieur Mazarin, I would like to convey to you my feelings of friendship and my hope to meet you personally in the near future.

Cardinal Armand du Plessis de Richelieu.”

Mazarini showed the letter to Xavier.

– It's in French but I'll translate it for you.

After he did, Xavier smiled happily and said:

– They call me a hero. Maybe I didn't fail after all.

Mazarini continued asking Xavier about what happened after the Susa pass was taken. Xavier told him that he had stayed with the French until they arrived at the town of Susa. There he was allowed by Richelieu to return to Milan to see Mazarini.

– Xavier, you are the first to bring the news of the French victory at the Susa pass. I am sure no one in Milan yet knows about it. Did you hear anything about what the French would do next?

– No, Monsignor Richelieu didn't tell me anything about it.

– I see you were on friendly terms with His Eminence. You spoke to him whenever you wanted.

– I am not only His Eminence's friend.

– Who else's?

– His Majesty the King's. When I was following him through the tunnel to safety he told me “my friend, stop pushing me, I can walk myself.”

Mazarini smiled.

– But they didn't tell you about their plans?

– I never asked.

– Did the soldiers say anything?

– They kept repeating Casale, Casale, but I didn't ask them what they meant.

Mazarini now knew all he needed.

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– Xavier, – he said, – why don't you go to your room and relax. I may need you early tomorrow.

*

The next morning Mazarini woke Xavier, who was sleeping the sleep of the just, and told him to get ready for the road.

In half an hour they were riding due west. Mazarini decided to get to Casale and talk to General de Cordoba.

His idea was to create conditions that would help in reducing the number of casualties to the minimum (on both sides) when the French army rolled on to Casale.

Mazarini and his giant servant got to the Spanish camp around Casale the next day.

There were trenches all around the camp with soldiers on guard there, and there were several entrance checkpoints to allow traffic in and out. The problem was that Mazarini did not know the current password necessary to enter the camp. He could of course come to a checkpoint, give his name and ask the sentry to send word to the general, as he had done several times before. But now it would not help. General de Cordoba himself had told Mazarini about a month ago that since the French army began to move towards Italy he himself had issued an order that no one, with no exception, could even approach a checkpoint near Casale without knowing the password.

– So, Signor Mazarini, – he said, – when I need to see you I will either come to your legation myself or send you an ensign who will give you the password. Precautions, Signor Mazarini, precautions. It wasn't actually my decision. I got word from Madrid about stiffening camp security. By the way, they specifically mentioned your name as a civilian who had been visiting a military camp too often.

Now that seeing de Cordoba had become an absolute priority for Mazarini, he had to come up with some stratagem in order to penetrate the camp. Finally he thought of a plan, and this was why he took Xavier along. On the way he explained to his servant what would be done.

When they were not far from the Spanish camp they stopped in a small evergreen oak grove, dismounted and tied up their horses to a tree. Then Xavier emerged from the grove and went directly to a nearby checkpoint. Mazarini stayed in the grove.

Xavier went up to the sentry and told him in Spanish:

– Amigo, my name is Xavier Rodriguez. I am one of the body-guards of General de Cordoba.

– Where is your uniform?

– We body-guards never wear uniforms, in order to keep our duties secret. Five days ago our general let me go on furlough to Milan. I had to return yesterday but must have drunk too much and here I am late by one day.

– Password, – barked the sentry.

– I don't know today's password, I know yesterday's.

– Yesterday's? What was it?

– The wolves ate the poor donkey.

The sentry frowned.

– I don't know yesterday's password.

– Amigo, you can look up the book of entries and exits and find my name among those who exited in the record of five days ago.

– What's your name again?

– Xavier Rodriguez.

– All right, come with me to the booth. I'll try to find you.

The sentry let the visitor pass into the booth first, to make sure he was not left alone at the camp entrance, then followed him.

As soon as they got inside Mazarini, who had been watching from the grove, quickly went straight to the booth and, bending over in order not to be noticed from the window, quickly went past the gate bar into the territory of the camp.

He knew the camp very well. Passing several alleys with tents on both sides he turned to the big tent of the general. "If he is not there I'll let myself be detained and kept there under guard until he comes. If he is there I'll just call my name and he'll let me in," – thought Mazarini.

Everything worked according to the second scenario. In a jiffy Mazarini was in the tent.

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– Giulio, – exclaimed de Cordoba, – I’m so glad to see you! I wanted to go to Milan to talk to you. But here you are!

– Your Excellency, can you quickly order the release of my servant at the camp gate. He must be now in trouble with the sentry there.

– In trouble? Why?

– We didn’t know the password and he must have been detained.

– You didn’t know the password? But how did you enter?

Mazarini told the general about the scene at the gate in detail.

De Cordoba, listening to him, was frowning more and more.

– That means you entered the camp illegally, – he said with a sour grimace.

– Yes, that’s right.

– Listen, Giulio, we are good friends, but what you did may result in my court martial.

– It may if you don’t help my servant.

– What does your servant have to do with it?

– Your Excellency, do you think I came just to chat with you? Not at all. I came to tell you news of greatest importance, and my servant is a witness of this event. You will be the first to know what has just happened, what will be the talk of Europe in a short while. I could tell you what it is myself, but my Xavier, who saw everything with his own eyes, can answer your specific questions as a military man.

The general looked at Mazarini dubiously.

– All right, I’ll summon your servant here. But it had better be important.

He looked out of the tent, said something to a guard outside, and returned to Mazarini.

– Well, my dear friend, what can it be that you can’t tell me yourself?

– It is not what can’t I say, it is why can’t I say it.

– All right, why?

– Because if I tell you I'll violate a pledge of secrecy I gave to my legation superiors. But my servant didn't give any pledges, he can talk. Besides, he was there, he can tell more than I can.

– Where was he?

– General, it's part of the secret. It's so important that I won't participate in your conversation; I won't ask my servant a single question. You will have to obtain information from him on your own.

At that moment Xavier was brought into the tent. He looked impassive, as always.

– This is my servant Xavier, – said Mazarini.

– Xavier? All right. . . Xavier, what important event did you witness recently?

– I saw the French army at the Susa pass.

– At the Susa pass? When was it?

– I first saw it about a month ago.

The general looked alarmed.

– Why were you there?

– I was sent there by my master, Señor Mazarini.

– Why?

– I was to watch the pass as a scout.

– Your Excellency, – interfered Mazarini, – please don't ask Xavier why he was sent there. This is part of my relationship with the papal legation, and is not to be discussed.

– All right, – continued the general. – What did you see there?

– As I said, I saw a French army on one side of a barricade and I saw a Savoyard army on the other side of the barricade.

– So, there was a barricade there? – said de Cordoba feigning surprise.

– Yes, sir.

– Well, you saw them about a month ago, what did they do there?

– A month ago? Nothing, they just stood there on the two sides of the barricade.

– Nothing. . . Well, that's not much of an event. Do you have anything else to tell me?

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– My master told me just to answer your questions, Your Excellency.

– Hmm. . . I don't even know what else to ask. . .

Xavier was silent. Mazarini tried to hide a smile.

– Do I have to ask him anything else, – asked the general turning to Mazarini.

– It's up to you, Your Excellency.

– Hmm. . . All right. How tall was the wall?

– About twenty feet high.

– I must say, that's high. I think they are still standing there.

Are they?

– No, Sir, they are not.

– Of course! How couldn't I guess? The enemies understood the senselessness of this confrontation and left the Alps. Well, Xavier, that's important news. That's very important. I agree with your master, you've brought me information that is invaluable.

Xavier was silent.

– Oh, by the way, Xavier, do you think the barricade can withstand all those Alpine blizzards and continue protecting us from the French in the future?

– I don't think so.

– But why?

– Because it is not there any more.

The general was astounded. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

– What happened to it? The Savoyards destroyed it when the French had left?

– No, the French destroyed it.

– The French destroyed it?! But what happened to the Savoyards?

The general's voice became coarse with agitation.

– They are all dead, – said Xavier calmly.

– Oh, my God! Who killed them?

– An avalanche.

The general sank into his chair as if his legs could not hold him.

There was a pause.

At last the general pulled himself together.

– I suppose the French must have taken the pass. Where are they now?

– When I saw them a week ago they had descended from the mountains and were in the town of Susa.

– In the town of Susa! Oh, my God, they must have spread throughout Piedmont by now. Oh, my God. Did you hear them say anything about their further destination?

– Not much. But they kept saying Casale, Casale.

The general sprang to his feet and began to pace the tent. Then he stopped before Xavier.

– How many of them? – he asked, even more nervous than before.

– About 30,000.

– 30,000?! Oh, my God!

Now Mazarini decided to interfere.

– Your Excellency, Xavier has told you all he knows. Now let him wait for me outside the tent and let's have a talk.

– Yes, yes, a talk, a talk.

Xavier went out, after the general said a couple of words to the guard.

– Giulio, – almost whispered de Cordoba, – what shall I do? This is a huge army!

– I must give you another piece of information that Xavier didn't have time to tell you. I think I can disclose it without any harm to my relationship with the legation. The French are fighting like lions. They have a suicide detachment that they call the "enfants perdus".

– That's terrible. What shall I do?

– Besides, Your Excellency, Xavier heard them say that they would especially hunt for your head, as Richelieu had ordered them to bring you to French justice dead or alive.

De Cordoba looked as if he was dead already.

– But I have a suggestion, – continued Mazarini, – that can save your life and the lives of thousands of your soldiers.

– Oh, Giulio, what is it? Tell me at once.

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– Before it is too late, lift the siege of Casale and withdraw your troops to Lombardy.

– But that’s a terrible solution! – exclaimed the general. – For that I’ll definitely be court-martialed.

– Not at all, Your Excellency. You’ll be proclaimed an able strategist who did not want to waste the soldiers’ lives, who saved the Spanish army from calamity.

– You think so?

– Yes. Besides, you will save your own life, which is so valuable for the Spanish war effort.

– Yes, that’s correct, – said the general more assuredly. – Yes my life belongs to Spain, I can’t risk it.

– You now see the importance of the information I’ve brought you.

– Yes, Giulio. I’ll do exactly as you say. I’m not going to please Richelieu with Spanish casualties. Right away I’ll order the cessation of the siege and withdrawal to Lombardy.

*

In this way Giulio Mazarini prevented the two fighting roosters from destroying the lives of thousands of men.

Richelieu arrived at Casale several days after that memorable meeting of Mazarini and de Cordoba. He found the Spanish camp abandoned, and the French and Montferrat defenders jubilantly opened the gates to the cardinal’s troops.

At the same time the Count d’Arville disappeared from Milan. “That means the French have won, they don’t need their special agent here any more,” – thought Mazarini.

Richelieu left a garrison in Casale and appointed General Toiras to command it. The whole of Montferrat was liberated from the Spanish and Savoyard forces, and was again proclaimed a possession of the duchy of Mantua. Richelieu also left a token force in the Piedmontese town of Susa under Marshal de Créqui, and a military base was built in the Susa pass. All of that was achieved by the summer of 1629. After that, Richelieu and the main French army returned to France. Richelieu had reason to hope that northern Italy was now pacified. Unfortunately, hopes are often frustrated.