

A Portrait of the Sun King

From the Writings of Louis de Saint-Simon, Giovanni Battista Primi Visconti, and Ezechiel von Spanheim

Louis de Rouvroy, Duke of Saint-Simon



[*Introductory note.* The following is the classic account of daily life at the court of Versailles, the extravagant royal residence built by Louis XIV, the Sun King, who reigned from 1643 to 1715. It comes from the memoirs of a high-ranking courtier, Louis de Rouvroy, Duke of Saint-Simon (1675-1755), who spent much of his young adulthood in military service and attending the King. Saint-Simon had kept a diary during his years at Versailles, which he expanded and published as a memoir toward the end of his life. In his description of daily life at Versailles, Saint-Simon describes how Louis XIV carefully managed a vast and

elaborate system of favors and punishments to keep the French nobility under control—a kind of golden cage that offered an opulent and glamorous existence for its inhabitants, but also an utterly enslaving one. As such, Saint-Simon would have us believe, the court of Versailles was the ideal tool for domesticating France’s unruly aristocracy—which had attempted to free itself from royal control at the beginning of Louis’ exceptionally long reign. Under Louis XIV, royal absolutism was built upon the foundation of court society. According to the sociologist Norbert Elias, it was the final stage in a “transformation of the nobility from a class of knights into a class of courtiers.”¹

It is fitting, then, that Saint-Simon’s memoir should be filled with equal measures of admiration and hostility toward Louis. The latter derives, at least in part, from the fact that Saint-Simon himself fell from royal favor disagreeing publicly with the King. On the whole, historians treat Saint-Simon’s memoir with caution: on the one hand, he offers priceless insights into the intricacies of court society; on the other, his preoccupation with social blinded him to other aspects of that environment.]

Louis XIV was made for a brilliant Court. In the midst of other men, his figure, his courage, his grace, his beauty, his grand mien, even the tone of his voice and the majestic and natural charm of all his person, distinguished him till his death as the King Bee, and showed that [even] if he had only been born a simple gentleman, he would equally have excelled in *fêtes*, pleasures, and gallantry, and would have had the greatest success in love. The intrigues and adventures that early in his life he had been engaged in...had exercised an unfortunate influence on him: he received those impressions with which he could never after successfully struggle. From this time, intellect, education, nobility of sentiment, and high principle in others became objects of suspicion to him, and soon of

¹ Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

hatred. The more he advanced in years the more this sentiment was confirmed in him. He wished to reign by himself. Unceasingly, his jealousy on this point became weakness. He reigned, indeed, in little things; the great things he could never reach: and even in the former, he was often governed. The superior ability of his early ministers and his early generals soon wearied him. He liked nobody to be in any way superior to him. Thus he chose his ministers, not for their knowledge, but for their ignorance; not for their capacity, but for their want of it. He liked to form them, as he said; liked to teach them even the most trifling things. It was the same with his generals. He took credit to himself for instructing them; wished it to be thought that from his cabinet he commanded and directed all his armies. Naturally fond of trifles, he unceasingly occupied himself with the pettiest details of his troops, his household, his mansions; would even instruct his cooks, who received, like novices, lessons they had known by heart for years. This vanity, this unmeasured and unreasonable love of admiration, was his ruin. His ministers, his generals, his mistresses, his courtiers, soon perceived his weakness. They praised him with emulation and spoiled him. Praises, or to say the truth, flattery pleased him to such an extent, that the coarsest [of men] was well received, the vilest even better relished. It was the sole means by which you could approach him. Those whom he liked owed his affection for them to their adulating him, of attributing everything to him, and of pretending to learn everything from him. Suppleness, meanness, an admiring, dependent, cringing manner—above all, an air of nothingness—were the sole means of pleasing him.

[...]

Let me touch now upon some other incidents in his career, and upon some points in his character.

He early showed a disinclination for Paris. The troubles that had taken place there during his minority mad him regard the place as dangerous²; he also wished to render himself venerable by hiding himself from the eyes of the multitude; all this considerations fixed him Saint-Germain³ soon after the death of his mother, the Queen. It was to that place he began to attract the world by *fêtes* and gallantries and by making it felt that he wished to be often seen.

² Saint-Simon is writing here of the “Fronde,” an attempt by the French nobility, allied with high-ranking members of the judiciary, to assert their autonomy from the royal court (1648-1653).

³ The royal palace at Saint Germain-en-Laye, located on the left bank of the Seine river, not far from Marly.

His love for Madame de la Vallière,⁴ which was first kept secret, occasioned frequent excursions to Versailles, then a little card castle, which had been built by Louis XIII—annoyed, and his suite still more so, at being frequently obliged to sleep in a wretched inn there, after he had been out hunting in the forest of Saint Léger. That monarch rarely slept at Versailles more than one night, and then out of necessity; his son King [Louis XIV] slept there so that he might be more in private with his mistress, pleasures unknown to the hero and just man [Louis XIII], worthy son of Saint Louis, who built the little château.

These excursions of Louis XIV by degrees gave birth to those immense buildings he erected at Versailles; and their convenience for a numerous court, so different from the apartments at Saint-Germain, led him to take up his abode there entirely shortly after the death of the Queen [Marie-Thérèse in 1683]. He built an infinite number of apartments, which were asked for by those who wished to pay their court to him; whereas at Saint-Germain nearly everybody was obliged to lodge in town, and the few who found accommodation at the château were strangely inconvenienced.

The frequent *fêtes*, the private promenades at Versailles, the journeys, were means on which the King seized in order to distinguish or mortify the courtiers, and thus render them more assiduous in pleasing him. He felt that of real favors he had not enough to bestow; in order to keep up the spirit of devotion, he therefore unceasingly invented all sorts of ideal ones, little preferences and petty distinctions, which answered his purpose as well.

He was exceedingly jealous of the attention paid him. Not only did he notice the presence of the most distinguished courtiers, but those of inferior degree as well. He looked to the right and to the left, not only upon rising but upon going to bed, at his meals, in passing through his apartments, or his gardens of Versailles, where alone the courtiers were allowed to follow him; he saw and noticed everybody; not one escaped him, not even those who hoped to remain unnoticed. He marked well all absentees from the Court, found out the reason for their absence, and never lost an opportunity of acting towards them, as the occasion might seem to justify. With some of the courtiers (the most distinguished), it was a demerit not to make the Court their ordinary abode; with others, it was a fault to come but rarely; for those who never or scarcely ever came it was certain disgrace. When their names were in any way mentioned, they would haughtily reply, "I do not know them." Those who presented themselves but seldom were characterized thus: "They are people I never see"; these decrees were irrevocable. He could not bear people who liked Paris.

⁴ Louise de la Vallière (1644-1710) was a lady in waiting to the Queen and became the King's first official mistress. La Vallière bore him three children; after Louis XIV's attention eventually shifted to the Marquise de Montespan, and Madame de la Vallière retired to a convent in 1674.

Louis XIV took great pains to be well informed of all that passed everywhere; in the public places, in the private houses, in society and familiar conversation. His spies and tell-tales were infinite. He had them of all species; many who were ignorant that their information reached him; others who knew it; others who wrote to him direct, sending their letters through channels he indicated; and all these letters were seen by him alone, and always before everything else; others who sometimes spoke to him secretly in his cabinet, entering by the back stairs. These unknown means ruined an infinite number of people of all classes, who never could discover the cause; often ruined them very unjustly; for the King, once prejudiced, never altered his opinion, or so rarely, that nothing was more rare. He had another fault, very dangerous for others and often for himself, since it deprived him of good subjects. He had an excellent memory; in this way, that if he saw a man who, twenty years before, perhaps, had in some manner offended him, he did not forget the man, though he might forget the offense. This was enough, however, to exclude the person from all favor. The representations of a minister, of a general, even of his confessor, could not move the King. He would not yield.

[...]

Having thus described with truth and the most exact fidelity all that has come to my knowledge through my own experience, or others qualified to speak of Louis XIV during the last twenty-two years of his life: and after having shown him such as he was, without prejudice (although I have permitted myself to use the arguments naturally resulting from things), nothing remains for me but to describe the outside life of this monarch, during my residence at the Court.

However insipid and perhaps superfluous details so well-known may appear after what has already been given, lessons will be found therein for kings who may wish to make themselves respected, and who may wish to respect themselves. What determines me still more is, that details wearying, nay annoying, to instructed readers, who had been witness of what I relate, soon escape the knowledge of posterity; and that experience shows us how much we regret that no one takes upon himself a labor, in his own time so ungrateful, but in future years so interesting, and by which princes, who have made quite as much stir as the one in question, are characterized. Although it may be difficult to steer clear of repetitions, I will do my best to avoid them.

I will not speak much of the King's manner of living when with the army. His hours were determined by what was to be done, though he held his councils regularly; I will simply say that morning and evening, he ate with people privileged to have that honor. When anyone wished to claim it, the first gentleman of the chamber on duty was appealed to. He gave the answer, and if favorable you presented yourself the next day to the King, who said to you, "Monsieur, seat yourself at table." That being done, all was done. Ever

afterwards you were at liberty to take a place at the King's table, but with discretion. The number of the persons from whom a choice was made was, however, very limited. Even very high military rank did not suffice. Monsieur de Vauban,⁵ at the siege of Namur, was overwhelmed by the distinction. The King did the same honor at Namur to the Abbé de Grancey, who exposed himself everywhere to confess the wounded and encourage the troops. No other Abbé was ever so distinguished. All the clergy were excluded save the cardinals, and the bishops, peers, or the ecclesiastics who held the rank of foreign princes.

At these repasts everybody was covered; it would have been a want of respect, of which you would have been immediately informed, if you had not kept you hat on your head. The King alone was uncovered. When the King wished to speak to you, or you had occasion to speak to him, you uncovered. You uncovered also when Monseigneur or Monsieur⁶ spoke to you or you to them. For princes of the blood,⁷ you merely put your hand to your hat. The King alone had an armchair. All the rest of the company, Monseigneur included, had seats, with backs of black morocco leather, which could be folded up to be carried, and which were called "parrots." Except at the army, the King never ate with any man, under whatever circumstances; not even with the Princes of the blood, save sometimes at their wedding feasts.

⁵ Saint-Simon refers to Sébastien le Pretre de Vauban, a son of the petty nobility who rose to high rank as a military engineer, eventually becoming Louis XIV's "Commissioner General of Fortifications." In that capacity, he supervised the construction of Louis XIV's frontier fortresses. Vauban fought in every one of Louis' wars; Saint-Simon is probably referring here to Vauban's victorious siege of Namur in 1692.

⁶ "Monseigneur" refers to Louis XIV's son and heir, Louis, the "Great Dauphin" (1661-1711), whom the Sun King outlived by three years; "Monsieur" refers to Louis XIV's only brother, the Philippe I, Duke of Orléans (1640-1701).

⁷ "Princes of the Blood" were males in the royal Bourbon lineage, but not of the immediate royal family. In Louis XIV's time, they included Louis II de Bourbon, the "Grand Condé" (1621-1686), his grandson Louis III de Bourbon, Prince de Condé (1668-1710)—married the King's illegitimate daughter by Madame de Montespan—, Louis Armand de Bourbon, Prince de Conti (1661-1685)—married to the King's illegitimate daughter by Madame de la Vallière—and François Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conti (1664-1709).

Giovanni Battista Primi Visconti, Count of San Maiolo.

[Another assessment of the Louis' character comes from the first-hand observations of Gian Baptista Primi Visconti, Count of San Maiolo, an Italian nobleman who stayed at court during the period when the new palace at Versailles was being built; he left in the year that Louis moved there for good.]

[1673] [This morning] I caught sight of the king on his way to Mass. Although I had never seen him before and he was lost in a crowd of courtiers, I immediately recognized him. He had a grand, majestic air, and by his stature and demeanor you could tell that if he hadn't already been a king, he would have deserved to be one in the eyes of the beholders....

The king does what he can to demonstrate that he is not at all dominated by his ministers, and no prince was ever less dominated. He wants to know everything: from his ministers about affairs of state, from his presidents about affairs of the parlements, from his judges about even the most insignificant matters, from his favorite ladies about gallantry. In short, in any given day there are few events about which he is not well-informed, and there are few persons whose names and habits he does not know. He has a discerning eye, he knows intimate things about everyone, and once he has seen a man or heard him talked about, he always remembers him.

In addition, his life is very regulated. He always gets up at eight o'clock, stays in his council meeting from ten to half past noon, when he always goes to Mass with the queen and his family. Thanks to this intense desire to preside over all the affairs of government, he has become skillful. Each question is digested by the time it reaches him because it has been drawn up in advance by the interested parties, then prepared by the clerks, and finally studied by the ministers who report on it [in the council meeting]. But with his marvelous talent he often manages to clarify something that neither the ministers nor their clerks had been able to untangle.

At one in the afternoon after hearing Mass, he visits his favorites until two, the hour when he always dines with the queen in public. In the course of the afternoon he goes hunting or promenading, or holds another council meeting. From dusk until ten o'clock he converses with the ladies, gambles, or goes to a play or to balls. At eleven o'clock, after supper, he goes down again to his favorites' apartment. He always sleeps with the queen. Thus he has divided up the hours of the day and night among business, pleasure, devotions, and duties, in such a way that the courtiers can always tell you what he is doing and where to go to pay him court.

In public he is full of gravity and very different from the times when he is on his own. Often when I have been in his bedroom with the other courtiers, I have noticed that if the door accidentally happens to be open or he steps outside,

he adopts a different expression as if he were going to appear on a stage; in short he knows well how to play the king. In addition, he has destroyed the chieftains and their factions and abolished the practice of patronage. The least positions at court and in the kingdom are now at his disposal. There are no intermediaries. If you want something, you have to go directly to him and not to anybody else. He listens to everyone, receives reports, and always replies with grace and majesty, "I will see," and everyone goes away satisfied.

How very different is the response of the ministers. The king wants them to bring all requests before the council because he wants the government to function with perfect harmony. For war, Louvois is the designated successor of Le Tellier; for finance, it is Jean-Baptiste Colbert; for foreign affairs, Arnauld de Pomponne; for the Huguenots it is Chateauneuf. Louvois is a hard and violent character with a severe expression. You would think he was mistreating you when he talks, so many people are afraid to approach him. As for Colbert, he is cold and dry with a somber air. He freezes petitioners. Pomponne is sweet and Chateauneuf very ceremonial; but the latter is a simple secretary of state, and Pomponne is not as vigorous a minister as Colbert and Louvois.

They have reason to worry because the king has an extraordinary memory and he expects that every appeal, no matter what it is, will be reported to him so that he can issue a pardon or do justice; therefore they enter every council meeting trembling. A simple glance from the king if they are imprecise is a reproach that leaves them devastated, for the king does not talk very much. The ministers have subordinates called clerks [commis], and it is harder to get an interview with them than with the ministers. They work day and night: The king wants everyone in his service to be continually active, each according to his calling. Laziness has never had a more powerful enemy.

He is always doing something—reviewing the troops, parading the soldiers, building fortifications, moving earth. He encourages navigation and keeps friends and enemies all over Europe in constant motion. He has a strong constitution and good health, and his health and good fortune seem to compete with each other, keeping the whole world out of breath. It is a beautiful sight to see him leaving the chateau with his guards, carriages, horses, courtiers, valets, and a multitude of people in great confusion, running noisily around him. It reminds me of the queen bee when she goes out into the fields with her swarm.

Saint-Simon again:

Let us return now to the Court.

At eight o'clock the chief *valet de chambre* on duty, who alone had slept in the royal chamber, and who had dressed himself, awoke the King. The chief

physician, the chief surgeon, and the nurse (as long as she lived) entered at the same time. The latter kissed the King; others rubbed and often changed his shirt, because he was in the habit of sweating a great deal. At the quarter, the grand chamberlain was called (or, in his absence, the first gentleman of the chamber), and those who had what was called the *Grandes entrées*.⁸ The chamberlain (or chief gentleman) drew back the curtains, which had been closed again, and presented holy water from the vase, at the head of the bed. These gentlemen stayed but a moment, and that was time to speak to the King, if anyone had anything to ask of him; in which case the rest stood aside. When, contrary to custom, nobody had anything to say, they were there but for a few moments. He who had opened the curtains and presented the holy water also presented a prayer book. Then all passed into the cabinet of the council. A very short religious service being over, the King called, they re-entered. The same officer gave him his dressing gown; immediately after, other privileged courtiers entered, and then everybody, in time to find the King putting on his shoes and stockings, for he did almost everything himself with address and grace. Every other day we saw him shave himself; and he had a little short wig in which he always appeared, even in bed, and on medicine days. He often spoke of the chase, and sometimes said a word to somebody. No toilette table was near him; he had simply a mirror held before him.

As soon as he was dressed, he prayed to God, at the side of the bed, where all the clergy present knelt, the cardinals without cushions, all the laity remaining standing; and the captain of the guards came to the balustrade during the prayer, after which the King passed into the cabinet.

He found there, or was followed by all who had the *entrée*, a very numerous company, for it included everybody in any [court] office. He gave orders to each for the day; thus within half of a quarter of an hour it was known what he meant to do; and then all this crowd left directly. The [royal] bastards,⁹ a few favorites, and the valets alone were left. It was then a good opportunity for talking with the King; for example, about plans of gardens or buildings; and conversation lasted more or less according to the person engaged in it.

⁸ The *Grande entrée* was the second in the sequence; it consisted of nobles upon whom the King had bestowed the office of "gentlemen of the bedchamber" or "gentlemen of the wardrobe." These offices could be purchased, subject to the King's approval, of course. During the reign of Louis XIV, these offices remained reserved for the nobility.

⁹ Louis sired quite a brood by his various mistresses, official and unofficial, of whom he legitimated several. These included the famously beautiful Marie-Anne de Bourbon (1666-1739), Louis-Auguste, the Duke of Maine (1670-1736) and the Louis Alexandre, Count of Toulouse (1677-1749). All in all, Louis XIV legitimated five "bastard" children. Saint-Simon rumored that Louis had sired a "woman of color, a Moorish woman" who had placed as an infant in the convent of Moret by the King's valet, Bontems.

All the Court, meantime, waited for the King in the gallery, the captain of the guard being alone in the chamber seated at the door of the cabinet. At morning, the Court awaited in the salon; at the Trianon¹⁰ in from of the rooms, as at Meudon; at Fontainebleau in the chamber and the antechamber. During this pause the King gave audiences when he wished to accord any, spoke with whoever he might wish to speak secretly to, and gave secret interviews to foreign ministers in the presence of Torcy.¹¹ They were called “secret” simply to distinguish them from the uncommon ones by the bedsides.

The King went to Mass, where his musicians always sang an anthem. He did not go below except on grand *fetes* or at ceremonies. While he was going to and returning from Mass, everybody spoke to him who wished, after apprising the captain of the guard, if they were not distinguished; and he came and went to the gallery by the door of the cabinet. During the Mass the ministers assembled in the King’s chamber, where distinguished people could go and speak or chat with them. The King amused himself a little upon returning from Mass and asked almost immediately for the council. Then the morning was finished.

Ezechiel von Spanheim

[A fuller account of the king’s *lever* comes from Baron Ezechiel von Spanheim (1629-1710), a learned, well-traveled German Protestant, who represented the Elector of Brandenburg at the court of Versailles from 1680 to 1689. Shortly after his return to Germany, Spanheim wrote a long report on his experiences. The following account comes from the period when the court was under the domination of Madame de Maintenon. Note the change in tone as the king grows older and settles down with a permanent partner who influences life at court in significant ways. Note also how formal the king’s ceremonies have become.]

My first observation is that although the custom has been established that devoted courtiers attend the king’s *lever* [getting-up ceremony] every morning, there are nevertheless various levels of admission. First come those who have the right to be admitted to the *petit lever*. They are summoned and then allowed to enter—the officers of the chamber such as the first gentleman of the chamber on duty, the grand master of the wardrobe, the first valet of the bedroom serving

for that quarter, and the king’s readers, who are summoned if any are present.... Thus even if princes of the blood, cardinals, or other great lords who do not have this right of first entrance are present in the antechamber, the door to the king’s *lever*—and at Versailles the entire apartment where the king sleeps and dresses—remains closed to them. I have seen this happen to the late prince of Condé, the present prince, and similar persons. The courtiers nevertheless gather in a crowd, waiting for the door to be opened up.

The second entrance is ordinarily reserved for princes and lords of the above-mentioned first rank, the captain of the king’s guards who is serving that quarter, and the first butler. They are summoned by name by the usher, and the door is opened when they present themselves and then closed again. After a certain length of time it is reopened, and the courtiers are allowed to enter freely, some of whom are first summoned by name in accordance with their reputation at court before the others are admitted.... If you enter in time and it is possible to get near, you can see that the king gets dressed from foot to head in the presence of the onlookers. His shirt is handed to him by a prince of the blood if there is one, or by the grand chamberlain if he is present, or, in his absence, by the first gentleman of the bedchamber in attendance. When the king is almost dressed, his hair is done in front of the onlookers on the days scheduled for this. He dines, and afterward he goes into the next room to his prayer stool, which is next to his bed, and says his prayers on his knees in plain sight of the courtiers, accompanied by the bishops or chaplains present, who are also kneeling behind him on the same platform. When this is done, the king retires into the chamber where he customarily holds council meetings, unless he has some public audience to give to the foreign ministers or to deputies from the clergy or the provinces who have been instructed to harangue him at such a meeting.

The *petit coucher* of the king, as it is called, is less frequent than his *lever*, and there are usually only a small number of courtiers present, given the fact that the king always goes to bed late. It should be noted that the king usually gives the *bourgeois* to a person in attendance of his choice, and that he gives it only to persons of a certain rank and distinguished status. This also represents a mark of honor and favor for the person who receives it.

A [second] observation is that, as presently constituted, the French court is so submissive to the king that it would be impossible to imagine greater eagerness to pay him court or more dedication in performing each person’s assigned functions with complete regularity - something that was not seen during the previous reigns or even during the minority, when absolute power over the government was in the hands of a first minister like Cardinal Mazarin or Cardinal Richelieu. The result is that all the courtiers, down to the least of them, make a special effort to see the king and be seen [by him] on every possible occasion, such as at his *lever*, when he leaves the council meeting and goes to church, or

¹⁰ “Trianon” refers to a small palace on the grounds of Versailles, which Louis XIV had built in 1678-1688 as a private residence for the royal family and their guests.

¹¹ A reference to Jean Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Torcy (1665-1746)—a nephew of Louis XIV’s great minister, who served in various posts, most notably as treasurer-general of France and as superintendent of the postal system.

when he takes his meals in public, as he ordinarily does; and this can only be ... because he has mastered all the graces and everything related to political, military, or ecclesiastical affairs. All of this has caused the French court to become enormous and to be packed with all kinds of people, especially those who have business at court and therefore follow it wherever it is, not to mention those drawn to it by the entertainments that take place from time to time or by the very habit of going there....

[Another] observation is that thanks to the salutary abolition of duels and the rigor with which it has been enforced, we no longer see those disorders, quarrels, and deadly consequences that made so much noise and damage under previous reigns; to which could be added the order restored through policing, resulting, among other things, in the renewed security of life at Versailles and the other places where the court stays.... And what will appear no less laudable is that debauchery, dissolute lifestyles, blasphemy, and other scandalous vices that were previously so common at court are no longer tolerated with impunity. Or at least they present an insurmountable obstacle to the advancement of those who indulge in them.

My [third and] last observation is that despite everything I have said about the court of France, there is still a great deal of constraint and deception in many people's conduct. Since most of them are motivated only by self-interest or ambition, they must avoid the appearance of anything that might work against this interest, and they must appear attached to the things that conform to the taste and temper of the present reign. This tendency is reinforced by the natural submissiveness of the French nation, to the point that they are slavish toward their king when they believe that he rules by himself.... Everything is more planned, more constrained, less free, less open, less joyful than the habitual genius of the French nation [would suggest], especially its courtiers, with the result that even the entertainments and festivals that the king gives for the principal ladies of the court seem all the less enjoyable in that they appear to be organized to please Madame de Maintenon, and they still seem to be governed by constraint. ... I might add, finally, that most of the great lords and courtiers one sees, except for a small number like the prince of Condé, live off of the benevolence of the king or the revenues of their posts, and thus they are cautious in their expenditures, less exalted in their manner, and subject to a blind, submissive dependence on the wishes of the court.

Saint Simon again:

On Sunday, and often on Monday, there was a council of state; on Tuesday was a finance council; on Wednesday a council of state [again]; on Saturday

finance council [again]. Once or twice a month there was a council of dispatches on Monday morning; but the order that the Secretaries of State took every morning between the King's rising and his Mass much abridged this kind of business. All the ministers were seated according to rank, except at the council of dispatches, where all stood except the sons of France, the Chancellor, and the Duc de Beauvilliers.

Thursday morning was almost always blank. It was the day for audiences that the King wished to give—often unknown to any—back-stair audiences. It was also the grad day taken advantage of by the bastards, the valets, etc., because the King had nothing to do. On Friday after the Mass the King was with his confessor, and the length of their audience was limited by nothing, and might last until dinner [i.e., one o'clock in the afternoon]. At Fontainebleau¹² on the mornings when there was no council, the King usually passed from Mass to Madame de Maintenon's¹³ [chambers], and so at Trianon and Marly.¹⁴ It was the time for their *tête-à-tête* without interruption. Often on the days when there was council the dinner hour was advanced, more or less for the chase or the promenade. The ordinary hour was one o'clock; if the council still lasted, then the dinner hour waited and nothing was said to the King.

The dinner was always "*au petit couvert*"—that is, the King ate by himself in his chamber upon a square table in front of the middle window. It was more or less abundant, for he ordered in the morning whether it was to be "a little" or "very little" service. But even at this last, there were always many dishes, and three courses, not counting the fruit. The dinner being ready, the principal courtiers entered; then all who were known; and the gentleman of the bedchamber on duty informed the King.

I have seen, but very rarely, Monseigneur and his sons standing at their dinners, the King not offering them a seat. I have continually seen the Princes of the Blood and the cardinals. I have often seen there also Monsieur, either on arriving from Saint-Cloud to see the King, or arriving from the council of dispatches (the only one he participated in), give the King his napkin, and remain standing. A little while afterwards, the King, seeing that he did not go away, asked him if he would not sit down; he bowed, and the King ordered a seat to be brought to him. A stool was put behind him. Some moments after the King said,

¹² Originally a royal hunting-lodge built in the reign of Louis IX (1214-1270), Fontainebleau was expanded over the centuries to become the largest country residence of the French kings. It was (and is) situated in a royal forest some 40 miles southeast of Paris.

¹³ Françoise d'Aubigné, Madame de Maintenon (1635-1719), Louis XIV's third official mistress and a widow, whom the King secretly married, perhaps as early as 1684, after the Queen's death in 1683. Madame de Maintenon was never granted public recognition as Queen, however. As Louis' confidante, Madame de Maintenon was enormously influential in affairs of state. Saint-Simon disliked her, as did many of the courtiers of higher birth.

¹⁴ A hunting palace located in the royal forests near Versailles.

“Nay then, sit down, my brother.” Monsieur bowed and seated himself until the end of the dinner, when he presented [the King’s] napkin.

At other times when he came from Saint-Cloud, the King, on arriving at table, asked for a plate for Monsieur, or asked him if he would dine. If he refused, he went away a moment after and there was no mention of a seat; if he accepted, the King was asked for a plate for him. The table was square, he placed himself at one end, his back to the cabinet. Then the Grand Chamberlain (or the first gentleman of the chamber) gave him drink and plates, taking them from him as he finished with them, exactly as he served the King; but Monsieur received all this attention with strongly marked politeness. When he dined thus with the King he much enlivened the conversation. The King ordinarily spoke little at table unless some familiar favorite was near. It was the same at his rising. Ladies scarcely ever were seen at these little dinners.

I have, however, seen the Maréchale de la Mothe, who came in because she had been used to do so as governess of the children of France, and who received a seat, because she was a Duchess. Grand dinners were very rare, and took place on grand occasions, and then ladies were present.

Upon leaving the table, the King immediately entered his cabinet. That was the time for distinguished people to speak to him. He stopped at the door a moment to listen, then entered; very rarely did anyone follow him, never without asking for permission to do so; and for this few had the courage. If followed, he placed himself in the embrasure of the window nearest the door of the cabinet, which immediately closed of itself, and which you were obliged to open yourself on leaving the King. This also was the time for the bastards and the valets.

The King amused himself by feeding his dogs, and remained with them more or less time, then asked for his wardrobe, changed before the very few distinguished people it pleased the first gentleman of the chamber to admit there, and immediately went out by the back stairs into the court of marble to get into his coach. From the bottom of that staircase to the coach, anyone spoke to him who wished.

The King was fond of air, and when deprived of it his health suffered; he had headaches and vapors caused by the undue use he had formerly made of perfumes, so that for many years he could not endure any, except for the odor of orange flowers; therefore if you had to approach anywhere near him you did well not to carry them.

As he was but little sensitive to heat or cold, or even to rain, the weather was seldom sufficiently bad to prevent his going out. He went out for three reasons: stag-hunting, once or twice a week; shooting in his parks (and no man handled a gun with more grace and skill), once or twice a week; and walking in his gardens for exercise, and to see his workmen. Sometimes he made picnics with ladies, in the forest at Marly or at Fontainebleau, and in finally, promenades

with all the Court around the canal [at Versailles], which was a marvelous spectacle. Nobody followed him in his other promenades but those who held principal offices, except at Versailles or in the gardens of Trianon. Marly had a privilege unknown to the other places. On going out from the château, the King said aloud, “Your hats, gentlemen,” and immediately courtiers, officers of the guard, everybody in fact, covered their heads, as he would have been much displeased had they not done so; and this lasted all the promenade, that is four or five hours in the summer, or in other seasons, when he dined early at Versailles to go and walk at Marly, and not sleep there.

The stag-hunting parties were on an extensive scale. At Fontainebleau, everyone went who wished; elsewhere only those were allowed to go who had obtained the permission once and for all, and those who had obtained leave to wear the *justau-corps*, which was a blue uniform with silver and gold lace, lined with red. The King did not like too many people at these parties. He did not care for you to go if you were not fond of the chase. He thought that ridiculous, and never bore ill will to those who stayed away altogether.

It was the same with the gaming table, which he like to see always well frequented—with high stakes—in the salon at Marly, for *lansquenet* and other card-games. He amused himself at Fontainebleau during bad weather by seeing good players at tennis, in which he had formerly excelled; and at Marly by seeing mall played, in which he had also been skillful. Sometimes when there was no council, he would make presents of fabric, silverware, or jewels to the ladies [of the court] by means of a lottery, for the [raffle] tickets of which they paid nothing. Madame de Maintenon drew lots with the others, and almost always gave at once what she had gained. The King took no ticket.

Upon returning home from walks or drives, anybody, as I have said, might speak to the King from the moment he left his coach till he reached the foot of his staircase. He changed dress again, and rested in his cabinet for an hour or more, then went to Madame de Maintenon’s, and on the way anyone who wished might speak to him.

At ten o’clock his supper was served. The captain of the guard announced this to him. A quarter of an hour later the King came to supper, and from the antechamber of Madame de Maintenon to the table again, anyone spoke to him who wished. This supper was always on a grand scale, the royal household (that is, the sons and daughters of France) at table, and a large number of courtiers and ladies present, sitting or standing, and on the evening before the journey to Marly all those ladies who wished to take part in it. That was called presenting yourself for Marly. Men asked in the morning, simply by saying to the King, “Sire, Marly.” In later years the King grew tired of this, and a valet wrote up in the gallery the names of those who asked. The ladies continued to present themselves [in the usual fashion].

After supper the King stood some moments, his back to the balustrade of the foot of his bed, encircled by all his Court; then, with bows to the ladies, passed into his cabinet, where on arriving he gave his orders. He passed a little less than an hour there, seated in an armchair, with his legitimate children and bastards, his grandchildren, legitimate and otherwise, and their husbands or wives. Monsieur in another armchair; the Princesses upon stools, Monseigneur and all the other Princes standing.

The King, wishing to retire, went and fed his dogs; then said goodnight, passed into his chamber to the *ruelle* of his bed, where he said his prayers, as in the morning, then undressed. He said goodnight with an inclination of his head, and while everybody was leaving the room stood at the corner of the mantelpiece, where he gave the order to the colonel of the guards alone. Then commenced what was called the *petit coucher* [i.e., the lesser bedding ceremony], at which only the specially privileged remained. It was short. They did not leave until he got into bed. It was a moment to speak to him. Then all left if they saw any one buckle to the King. For ten or twelve years before he died, the *petit coucher* ceased, in consequence of a long attack of gout [the King] had had; so that the Court was finished at the rising from supper.

On medicine days, which occurred about once a month, the King remained in bed, then heard Mass. The royal household came to see him for a moment and Madame de Maintenon seated himself in the armchair at the head of his bed. The King dined in bed about three o'clock, everybody being allowed to enter the room, then rose, and the privileged alone remained. He passed afterwards into his cabinet, where he held a council, and afterwards went, as usual, to Madame de Maintenon's and supplied at ten o'clock, according to custom.

During all his life, the King failed only once in his attendance at mass. It was with army, during a forced march; he missed no fast day, unless really indisposed. Some days before Lent, he publicly declared that he should be very much displeased if anyone ate meat or gave it to others, under any pretext. He ordered his *Grand prévôt* to see to this, and report all cases of disobedience. But no one dared disobey his commands, for they would soon have found out the cost. They extended even to Paris, where the lieutenant of police kept watch and reported. For twelve or fifteen years he had himself not observed Lent, however. At church he was very respectful. During his Mass everybody was obliged to kneel for the *Sanctus*, and to remain so until after the communion of the priest; and if he heard the least noise, or saw anybody talking during the mass, he was much displeased. He took the communion five times a year, in the collar of the Order, band, and cloak. On Holy Thursday, he served the poor at dinner; at the mass he said his chaplet (he knew no more), always kneeling, except at the Gospel.

He was always clad in gowns more or less brown, lightly embroidered, but never at the edges, sometimes with nothing but a velvet button, sometimes black velvet. He wore always a vest of cloth, or of red, blue, or green satin, much embroidered. He used no ring, and no jewels, except in the buckles of his shoes, garters, and hat, the latter always trimmed with Spanish point, with a white feather. He had always the *cordons bleus* outside, except at festivals, when he wore it inside, with eight or ten millions of precious stones attached.

Rarely a fortnight passed that the King did not go to Saint-Germain, even after the death of King James II.¹⁵ The Court of Saint-Germain came also to Versailles, but more often to Marly, and frequently to dine there; and no fête or ceremony took place to which they [James II and his entourage] were not invited, and at which they were not received with all honors. Nothing could compare with the politeness of the King for this Court, or with the air of gallantry and of majesty with which he received it at any time. Birthdays, or the festival days of the King and his family, so observed in the courts of Europe, were always unknown in that of the King; so that there never was the slightest mention of them, or any difference made on their account.

The King [in death] was but little regretted. His valets and a few other people felt his loss, scarcely anybody else. His successor was not yet old enough to feel anything. Madame [de Maintenon] entertained for him only fear and considerate respect. Madame la Duchesse de Berry did not like him, and counted now upon reigning undisturbed. Monsieur le Duc d'Orléans could scarcely be expected to feel much grief for him. And those who may have been expected did not consider it necessary to do their duty [...]

Paris, tired of a dependence that had enslaved everything, breathed again in the hope of liberty, and with joy at seeing at an end the authority of so many people who had abused it. The provinces, in despair of their ruin and annihilation, breathed again and leaped for joy; and *Parlement* and the [nobility of the] robe, destroyed by edicts and by revolutions, flattered themselves that they should find themselves free. The people ruined, overwhelmed, and desperate, gave thanks to God, with a scandalous *éclat*, for a deliverance, [which] their most ardent desires had not anticipated.

¹⁵ After his defeat at the Battle of the Boyne (11 July 1690), King James II of England went into exile in France, where he lived out his days a royal guest at the palace of Saint-Germain.