

From the *Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*

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The Court

His natural talents were below mediocrity; but he had a mind capable of improvement, of receiving polish, of assimilating what was best in the minds of others without slavish imitation; and he profited greatly throughout his life from having associated with the ablest and wittiest persons, of both sexes, and of various stations. He entered the world (if I may use such an expression in speaking of a King who had already completed his twenty-third year), at a fortunate moment, for men of distinction abounded... Glory was his passion, but he also liked order and regularity in all things; he was naturally prudent, moderate, and reserved; always master of his tongue and his emotions... He was also naturally kind-hearted and just. God had given him all that was necessary for him to be a good King, perhaps also to be a fairly great one. All his faults were produced by his surroundings. In his childhood he was so much neglected that no one dared go near his rooms. He was often heard to speak of those times with great bitterness; he used to relate how, through the carelessness of his attendants, he was found one evening in the basin of a fountain in the Palais-Royal gardens....

His Ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers soon found out his weak point, namely, his love of hearing his own praises. There was nothing he liked so much as flattery, or, to put it more plainly, adulation; the coarser and clumsier it was, the more he relished it. That was the only way to approach him; if he ever took a liking to a man it was invariably due to some lucky stroke of flattery in the first instance, and to indefatigable perseverance in the same line afterwards. His Ministers owed much of their influence to their frequent opportunities for burning incense before him....

It was this love of praise which made it easy for Louvois to engage him in serious wars, for he persuaded him that he had greater talents for war than any of his Generals, greater both in design and in execution, and the Generals themselves encouraged him in this notion, to keep in favor with him... He took to himself the credit of their successes... with admirable complacency, and honestly believed that he was all his flatterers told him. Hence arose his fondness for reviews, which he carried so far that his enemies called him, in derision, "the King of reviews"; hence also his liking for sieges, where he could make a cheap parade of bravery, and exhibit his vigilance, forethought, and endurance of fatigue; for his robust constitution enabled him to bear fatigue marvelously; he cared nothing for hunger, heat, cold, or bad weather. He liked also, as he rode through the lines, to hear people praising his dignified bearing and fine appearance on horseback. His campaigns were his favorite topic when talking to his mistresses. He talked well, expressed himself clearly in well-chosen language; and no man could tell a story better. His conversation, even on the most ordinary subjects, was always marked by a certain natural dignity.

His mind was occupied with small things rather than with great, and he delighted in all sorts of petty details, such as the dress and drill of his soldiers; and it was just the same with regard to his building operations, his household, and even his cookery... his Ministers turned it to good account for their own purposes, as soon as they had learnt the art of managing him; they kept his attention engaged with a mass of details, while they contrived to get their own way in more important matters.

His vanity, which was perpetually nourished - for even preachers used to praise him to his face from the pulpit - was the cause of the aggrandizement of his Ministers. He imagined that they were great only through him, mere mouthpieces through which he expressed his will; consequently he made no objection when they gradually encroached on the privileges of the greatest noblemen. He felt that he could at any moment reduce them to their original obscurity; whereas, in the case of a nobleman, though he could make him feel the weight of his displeasure, he could not deprive him or his family of the advantages due to his birth. For this reason he made it a rule never to admit a *seigneur* to his Councils, to which the [Duke de Beauvilliers](#) was the only exception....

But for the fear of the devil, which, by God's grace, never forsook him even in his wildest excesses, he would have caused himself to be worshipped as a deity. He would not have lacked worshippers....

Life at Versailles

Very early in the reign of Louis XIV the Court was removed from Paris, never to return. The troubles of the minority had given him a dislike to that city; his enforced and surreptitious flight from it still rankled in his memory; he did not consider himself safe there, and thought cabals would be more easily detected if the Court was in the country, where the movements and temporary absences of any of its members would be more easily noticed.... No doubt that he was also influenced by the feeling that he would be regarded with greater awe and veneration when no longer exposed every day to the gaze of the multitude.

His love-affair with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, which at first was covered as far as possible with a veil of mystery, was the cause of frequent excursions to Versailles. This was at that time at small country house, built by Louis XIII to avoid the unpleasant necessity, which had sometimes befallen him, of sleeping at a wretched wayside tavern or in a windmill, when benighted out hunting in the forest of St. Leger.... [Louis] enlarged the *château* by degrees till its immense buildings afforded better accommodation for the Court... The Court was therefore removed to Versailles in 1682, not long before the Queen's death. The new building contained an infinite number of rooms for courtiers, and the King liked the grant of these rooms to be regarded as a coveted privilege.

He availed himself of the frequent festivities at Versailles, and his excursions to other places, as a means of making the courtiers assiduous in their attendance and anxious to please him; for he nominated beforehand those who were to take part in them, and could thus gratify some and inflict a snub on others... It was [a] distinction to hold his candlestick at his *coucher*; as soon as he had finished his prayers he used to name the courtier to whom it was to be handed, always choosing one of the highest rank among those present....

Not only did he expect all persons of distinction to be in continual attendance at Court, but he was quick to notice the absence of those of inferior degree... he used to cast his eyes to right and left; nothing escaped him, he saw everybody. If anyone habitually living at Court absented himself he insisted on knowing the reason... anyone who seldom or never appeared there was certain to incur his displeasure. If asked to bestow a favor on such persons he would reply haughtily: "I do not know him"; of such as rarely presented themselves he would say, "He is a man I never see"; and from these judgments there was no appeal.

He always took great pains to find out what was going on in public places, in society, in private houses, even family secrets, and maintained an immense number of spies and tale-bearers. These were of all sorts; some did not know that their reports were carried to him; others did know it... Many a man in all ranks of life was ruined by these methods, often very unjustly, without ever being able to discover the reason; and when the King had once taken a prejudice against a man, he hardly ever got over it....

No one understood better than Louis XIV the art of enhancing the value of a favor by his manner of bestowing it; he knew how to make the most of a word, a smile, even of a glance...

He loved splendor, magnificence, and profusion in all things, and encouraged similar tastes in his Court; to spend money freely on equipages and buildings, on feasting and at cards, was a sure way to gain his favor, perhaps to obtain the honor of a word from him. Motives of policy had something to do with this; by making expensive habits the fashion, and, for people in a certain position, a necessity, he compelled his courtiers to live beyond their income, and gradually reduced them to depend on his bounty for the means of subsistence. This was a plague which, once introduced, became a scourge to the whole country, for it did not take long to spread to Paris, and thence to the armies and the provinces; so that a man of any position is now estimated entirely according to his expenditure on his table and other luxuries. This folly, sustained by pride and ostentation, has already produced widespread confusion; it threatens to end in nothing short of ruin and a general overthrow.

From Voltaire, *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751)

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From CHAPTER IV

Louis XIV., who was brought up in adversity, wandered, with his mother, his brother, and Cardinal Mazarin, from province to province, with not nearly so many troops to attend his person as he afterward had in time of peace for his ordinary guard; while an army of five or six thousand men, part sent from Spain, and part raised by the prince of Condé, pursued him to the very heart of his kingdom.

From CHAPTER XXIII

Hence all who have written the history of Louis XIV. have been very exact in dating his first attachment to the baroness of Beauvais, to Mademoiselle d'Argencourt, to Cardinal Mazarin's niece, who was married to the count of Soissons, Prince Eugene's father; and quite elaborate in setting forth his passion for Maria Mancini, that prince's sister, who was afterward married to Constable Colonne.

He had not assumed the reins of empire when these amusements busied and plunged him into that languid state in which Cardinal Mazarin, who governed with a despotic sway, permitted him to remain. His bare attachment to Maria Mancini was an affair of great importance; for he was so passionately fond of her as to be tempted to marry her, and yet was sufficiently master of himself to quit her entirely. This victory which he gained over his passion made the first discovery of the greatness of his soul; he gained a more severe and difficult conquest in leaving Cardinal Mazarin in possession of absolute sway. Gratitude prevented him from shaking off that yoke which now began to grow too heavy. It was a well-known anecdote at court that, after the cardinal's death, he said: "I do not know what I should have done, had he lived any longer."

He employed this season of leisure in reading books of entertainment, and especially in company with the constable, who, as well as his sisters, had a facetious turn. He delighted in poetry and romances, which secretly flattered his own character, by pointing out the beauty of gallantry and heroism. He read the tragedies of Corneille, and formed that taste which was the result of solid sense, and of that readiness of sentiment which is the characteristic of a real genius.

The conversation of his mother and the court ladies contributed very much to give him this taste and that peculiar delicacy which began now to distinguish the court of France. Anne of Austria had brought with her a kind of generous and bold gallantry, not unlike the Spanish disposition in those days; to this she had added politeness, sweetness, and a decent liberty, peculiar to the French only. The king made greater progress in this school of entertainment from eighteen to twenty than he had all his life in that of the sciences under his tutor, Abbé Beaumont, afterward archbishop of Paris; he had very little learning of this last sort. It would have been better had he at least been instructed in history, especially the modern, but what they had at that time was very indifferently written. He was uneasy at having perused nothing but idle romances, and the disagreeableness he found in necessary studies. A translation of Cæsar's "Commentaries" was printed in his name, and one of Florus in that of his brother; but those princes had no other hand in them than having thrown away their time in writing a few observations on some passages in those authors.

He who was chief director of the king's education under the first Marshal Villeroy, his governor, was well qualified for the task, was learned and agreeable, but the civil wars spoiled his education; and Cardinal Mazarin was content he should be kept in the dark. When he conceived a passion for Maria Mancini, he soon learned Italian, to converse with her, and at his marriage he applied himself to Spanish, but with less success. His neglect of study in his youth, a fearfulness of exposing himself,

and the ignorance in which Cardinal Mazarin kept him, persuaded the whole court that he would make just such a king as his father, Louis XIII.

There was only one circumstance from which those capable of forming a judgment of future events could foresee the figure he would make; this was in 1655, after the civil wars, after his first campaign and consecration, when the parliament was about to meet on account of some edicts: the king went from Vincennes in a hunting dress, attended by his whole court, and entering the parliament chamber in jack-boots, and his whip in his hand, made use of these very words: "The mischiefs your assemblies produce are well known; I command you to break up those you have begun upon my edicts. M. President, I forbid you to permit these assemblies, and any of you to demand them."

His height, already majestic; his noble action, the masterly tone and air he spoke with, affected them more than the authority due to his rank, which hitherto they had not much respected: but these blossoms of his greatness seemed to fall off a moment after; nor did the fruits appear till after the cardinal's death.

CHAPTER VI

Never was a court so full of intrigues and expectations as that of France, while Cardinal Mazarin lay dying. Those among the women who had any claim to beauty, flattered themselves with the hopes of governing a young prince, who was only twenty-two years old, and whom love had already influenced to make a tender of his crown to a favorite mistress. The young courtiers imagined that they should easily renew the reign of favorites. Every one of the officers of state thought that he should fill the first place in the ministry, not one of them suspecting that a king who had been brought up in such an ignorance of state affairs would venture to take the burden of government upon his own shoulders. Mazarin had kept the king in a state of nonage as long as he was able, and had not till very lately let him into the mystery of reigning, and then only because he had insisted upon being instructed.

They were so far from wishing to be governed by their sovereign that of all those who had been concerned with Mazarin in the administration, not one applied to the king to know when he would give them an audience; on the contrary, every one asked him to whom they were to apply, and were not a little surprised when Louis answered, "To me;" their astonishment was still increased, on finding him persevere. He had for some time consulted his own strength, and made a trial in secret of his capacity for reigning. His resolution once taken, he maintained it to the last moment of his life. He appointed every minister proper limits to his power, obliging them to give him an account of everything at certain hours, showing them as much confidence as was necessary to give a proper weight to their office, and carefully watching over them to prevent their abuse of it. He began by restoring order in the finances, which had been miserably mismanaged through a continuance of rapine.

He established proper discipline among the troops. His court was at once magnificent and decent; even the pleasures appeared there with a degree of lustre and greatness. The arts were all encouraged and employed, to the glory of the king and kingdom.

CHAPTER XXVI

From all we have said it appears that Louis XIV. loved grandeur and glory in everything. A prince who should perform as great things as he, and yet be modest and humble, would be the first of kings, and Louis only the second.

If he repented, on his deathbed, of having undertaken war without just reason, it must be owned that he did not judge by events; for, of all his wars, the most just, and the most indispensable—that in 1701—was the only unfortunate one.

CHAPTER XXVII

From this general view, we see what changes Louis XIV. introduced into the state; changes indeed advantageous, as they still exist. His ministers had an emulation among themselves, who should second him best. The whole detail, the whole execution is undoubtedly owing to them, but the general disposition to him. It is certain that the magistrates would not have reformed the laws, the finances would not have been put again in order, discipline introduced into the armies, general police in the kingdom; that there would have been no fleets; the arts would not have been encouraged; and all this in concert, and at the same time, with perseverance, and under different ministers, if there had not been found a master who had in general all these grand views, with a will determined to accomplish them.

He did not separate his own glory from the advantage of France, nor look upon the kingdom with the same eye as a lord does upon his lands, from which he draws all he can, that he may live luxuriously. Every king who loves glory, loves the public good....

This then in general is what Louis XIV. did and attempted, that he might render his own nation more flourishing. It seems to me that one cannot behold all these labors and all these efforts without some acknowledgment, and being animated with the love of the public good, which inspired them. Let us but represent to ourselves what the state of the kingdom was in the days of The Fronde, and what it is at present. Louis XIV. did more good to his own nation than twenty of his predecessors put together, and yet it falls infinitely short of what might have been done. The war, which was ended by the Peace of Ryswick, began the ruin of that commerce which Colbert had established, and the succeeding war completed it....

Had he not believed that he was sufficiently able, merely by his own authority, to oblige a million of men to change their religion, France had not lost so many subjects. This country, however, notwithstanding its various shocks and losses, is at present the most flourishing on the face of the earth, because all the good which Louis XIV. did is still in existence, and the evil, which it was difficult for him to avoid in turbulent times, has been repaired....

Complaints are made, that no longer is to be seen at court so much grandeur and dignity as formerly; the truth is that there are no petty tyrants, as in the days of The Fronde, under the reign of Louis XIII., and in the preceding ages. But true greatness is now to be met with in those crowds of nobility, who were formerly debased for so long a time by serving subjects grown too powerful. There are seen gentlemen, and also citizens, who would have thought themselves honored in former days to be the domestics of these lords, become now their equals, and very often their superiors in the military service: and the more this service prevails over titles, the more flourishing is any state.

The age of Louis XIV. has been compared to that of Augustus. Not that the power and personal events in both can be compared: for Rome and Augustus were ten times more considerable in the world than Louis XIV. and Paris. But we must call to mind that Athens was equal to the Roman Empire in all things which do not derive their value from force and power. We must further consider, that if there is nothing at present in the world like ancient Rome and Augustus, yet all Europe together is much superior to the whole Roman Empire. In the time of Augustus there was but one nation, and at this day there are several who are well regulated, warlike, and enlightened, who are possessed of arts to which the Greeks and Romans were utter strangers; and among these nations there are none which has been more illustrious for about an age past than that formed in some measure by Louis XIV.

Louis XIV, Edict of Fontainebleau (1685)

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Louis, by the grace of God king of France and Navarre, to all present and to come, greeting:

King Henry the Great, our grandfather of glorious memory, being desirous that the peace which he had procured for his subjects after the grievous losses they had sustained in the course of domestic and foreign wars, should not be troubled on account of the R.P.R. [Reformed Protestant Religion], as had happened in the reigns of the kings, his predecessors, by his edict, granted at Nantes in the month of April, 1598, regulated the procedure to be adopted with regard to those of the said religion, and the places in which they might meet for public worship, established extraordinary judges to administer justice to them, and, in fine, provided in particular articles for whatever could be thought necessary for maintaining the tranquility of his kingdom and for diminishing mutual aversion between the members of the two religions, so as to put himself in a better position to labor, as he had resolved to do, for the reunion to the Church of those who had so lightly withdrawn from it....

God having at last permitted that our people should enjoy perfect peace, we, no longer absorbed in protecting them from our enemies, are able to profit by this truce (which we have ourselves facilitated), and devote our whole attention to the means of accomplishing the designs of our said grandfather and father, which we have consistently kept before us since our succession to the crown.

And now we perceive, with thankful acknowledgment of God's aid, that our endeavors have attained their proposed end, inasmuch as the better and the greater part of our subjects of the said R.P.R. have embraced the Catholic faith. And since by this fact the execution of the Edict of Nantes and of all that has ever been ordained in favor of the said R.P.R. has been rendered nugatory, we have determined that we can do nothing better, in order wholly to obliterate the memory of the troubles, the confusion, and the evils which the progress of this false religion has caused in this kingdom, and which furnished occasion for the said edict and for so many previous and subsequent edicts and declarations, than entirely to revoke the said Edict of Nantes, with the special articles granted as a sequel to it, as well as all that has since been done in favor of the said religion.

- I. ...It is our pleasure, that all the temples of those of the said R.P.R. situate in our kingdom, countries, territories, and the lordships under our crown, shall be demolished without delay.
- II. We forbid our subjects of the R.P.R. to meet any more for the exercise of the said religion in any place or private house, under any pretext whatever...
- III. We likewise forbid all noblemen, of what condition soever, to hold such religious exercises in their houses or fiefs, under penalty to be inflicted upon all our said subjects who shall engage in the said exercises, of imprisonment and confiscation.
- IV. We enjoin all ministers of the said R.P.R., who do not choose to become converts and to embrace the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion, to leave our kingdom and the territories subject to us within a fortnight of the publication of our present edict....
- VII. We forbid private schools for the instruction of children of the said R.P.R., and in general all things what ever which can be regarded as a concession of any kind in favor of the said religion.
- VIII. As for children who may be born of persons of the said R.P.R., we desire that from henceforth they be baptized by the parish priests. We enjoin parents to send them to the churches for that purpose, under penalty of five hundred livres fine, to be increased as

circumstances may demand; and thereafter the children shall be brought up in the Catholic, apostolic, and Roman religion, which we expressly enjoin the local magistrates to see done.

- IX. And in the exercise of our clemency towards our subjects of the said R.P.R. who have emigrated from our kingdom, lands, and territories subject to us, previous to the publication of our present edict, it is our will and pleasure that in case of their returning within the period of four months from the day of the said publication, they may, and it shall be lawful for them to, again take possession of their property, and to enjoy the same as if they had all along remained there...
- X. We repeat our most express prohibition to all our subjects of the said R.P.R., together with their wives and children, against leaving our kingdom, lands, and territories subject to us, or transporting their goods and effects therefrom under penalty, as respects the men, of being sent to the galleys, and as respects the women, of imprisonment and confiscation.

Given at Fontainebleau in the month of October, in the year of grace 1685, and of our reign the forty-third.