

JACQUES LEVRON

**DAILY LIFE  
AT VERSAILLES**  
IN THE SEVENTEENTH  
AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

*Translated by Claire Eliane Engel*

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## CHAPTER THREE

### THE KING'S DAY

In 1682 Louis XIV had been on the throne for forty years. He had won the greatest victories over his enemies and France was the most powerful nation in Europe. Throughout the civilized world all eyes were focused on the palace which occupied a preponderant place in the King's mind and was his principal interest.

Until then the court had been itinerant. As the work proceeded the time spent at Versailles became longer. Yet Louis XIV also lived at Fontainebleau, Compiègne and St Germain, where he had spent the first twenty years of his life. Even after 1682 he still allowed people to believe that the Versailles establishment was not permanent, and that he had left St Germain simply because of the alterations which were being effected. Actually, his mind was made up; he would never return to the Louvre or to any other palace. As Versailles became the seat of government, the nobility must come to live there if they wanted to enjoy their master's presence.

What had made the King change the fundamental character of the French monarchy so profoundly? On that subject all historians are agreed. Louis XIV sought to tame the nobility in order to rid them of their taste for conspiracy. He had been deeply shocked by the rebellion of the Fronde and the humiliating episodes of 1649, and had not forgotten his mother's and Mazarin's struggles against the rebellious princes and their natural ally, the people of Paris. It was to isolate them from the capital, where the evil ferment could always turn them from their duty, that he forced on them the rural life of Versailles.

This is the usual explanation. But there are reasons to doubt it. Chronology does not support this over-simple idea. That the unhappy days of 1649—when he was not yet eleven—and the night during which he had to run away from the Louvre to St Germain in a derelict coach had left their mark on him may be accepted. But in 1682, thirty years after the Fronde, there were no longer any rebellious noblemen to fear.

There was another reason for the King's choice: his taste for grandeur and pomp, combined with his innate pride. What he wanted was a stable court, settled around him in the finest palace in the world, to form a background to his daily life. He was flattered to reflect that the attendants who were ready to assist him in the most intimate offices were the Ducs de la Rochefoucauld, d'Aumont, de Gesvres and de Beauvilliers—the greatest names in France.

Louis had created the myth of Versailles: it was probably the greatest miracle performed by the Sun King.

For these noblemen, these dukes, these descendants of old and authentic families, were far from being fools, undiscerning sycophants or mediocrities. If there were a few nonentities among them—who were roundly scourged in Saint-Simon's memoirs—the majority lacked neither intelligence nor culture. They were rich, owning magnificent estates and houses in Paris. They were often pre-eminent in their provinces.

Louis XIV's skill had been to convince them of the fact that all their intelligence should be put into the observation of etiquette, that all their wealth was not worth the most humble garter in Versailles, and that, away from the sovereign, life was not worth living.

Let us here remember M. de Vardes. After an intrigue against Mme de la Vallière and an unfortunate remark about the Duchesse d'Orléans, the King's sister-in-law, he had been imprisoned in the Bastille and then exiled to Montpellier, where he remained for twenty years. When he returned, the King, who had forgiven him, could not refrain from making fun of his attire. Vardes had the tact to abase himself cleverly: 'Sir,' he said, 'when one is wretched enough to live so far away from you, not only is one unhappy, but also ridiculous.'

Outside the court there was no salvation and Stendhal underlined the fact mercilessly: 'Louis XIV's masterpiece was to create the tedium of exile.'

#### PROTOCOL, CEREMONIAL AND ETIQUETTE

Louis XIV's main design was to gather round him the most powerful representatives of the French nobility and to chain them to his triumphal chariot. This he had achieved in a few years. To

those whom he was unable to house at the palace he gave such tremendous financial privileges that they thought of nothing but owning a house or even a mere apartment in Versailles. Yet it was not enough to gather people together and turn them into devoted courtiers; it was necessary to occupy them, so that they would not be aware of the passage of time. The King succeeded in making them slaves to the most stringent etiquette.

He did not create it, but he turned it into a dogma. He abandoned some diversions and some of his freedom to submit to it himself and become its principal slave.

When his reign began, the King was carefree. At St Germain-en-Laye he was found running over the roofs at night to join a mistress. It is very difficult to visualize the Sun King in such a situation, or allowing his arm (was it really his arm?) to be pinched by his mistress, Mme de la Motte-Houdancourt, who did so once with such strength that he screamed: 'The bitch!' The scene took place in the Queen's chamber.

Such lapses were unthinkable after 1682. Etiquette reigned supreme, even over the time devoted to his love affairs. Etiquette was an exacting mistress. And although the King gladly relied on Monsieur, his brother, to watch over ceremonial, he made it quite clear that he wanted to be informed of the slightest details. That poor Marquis de Vardes, back from exile, had bowed to the Dauphin, who had been summoned by the King just after he had kindly welcomed his former victim. Vardes was severely reprimanded: 'That was a blunder, Vardes. You should know that no one may be saluted before me.' And Vardes apologized: 'Ah, Sir, do forgive me! I know nothing; I have forgotten everything.'

The perfect courtier had to know his etiquette and study it like his catechism. Everyone trembled at the thought of committing a blunder, and one understands why all noise ceased as soon as the ushers had shouted from afar: 'Gentlemen, the King!' Then a religious silence weighed upon the assembly, so that one heard nothing but the tapping of the royal cane on the floor. 'One is puny at court, and however proud one may be, one has to realize it. But the complaint is general and even the great are small.'

Such attention to minute detail in the most commonplace activities required an application to which everyone submitted with good grace. The slightest mistake drew endless comments and

was the subject of infinite discussion. Respect for the rules of precedence was another source of discussion. Courtiers—and not only courtiers but all Frenchmen—had always been sensible of the rights drawn from rank and prerogative. To usurp position led to the worst quarrels and in Versailles such rivalries were always very heated. The King personally worked out everyone's rank and created the rites surrounding his own person. To the very end of his reign he interested himself in these questions and issued new rules when he thought they were not precise enough. For example, in 1710 he decided which rank the Princesses of the Blood should take under certain circumstances and personally made his will known to those it concerned.

Saint-Simon, who was fascinated by such problems, never fails to inform us at great length: 'Princesses of the Blood should not eat at the Grand Couvert. After supper, they do not follow the King into his closet: such an honour is only for the sons, daughters, grandsons and grand-daughters of France. They are only invited on special occasions, wedding feasts in the royal family or other exceptional events.'

This rule was dated March 4, 1710. The Spanish War had brought France nothing but disappointment. The winter had been terrible, and the future was gloomy. At Versailles they froze in the galleries and the silver plate was sent to the mint. Meanwhile, the greatest of Kings was deciding the precedence of the Princesses of the Blood.

Louis XIV was well aware of the vanity of such details, but by enforcing them he was holding the attention of his courtiers. As he had no more money to give away, he put a heavy premium on his smallest favours. 'He was well aware', Saint-Simon wrote, 'that he had not favours enough to produce a lasting effect. Instead, he substituted jealousy for ideals, the tiny signs of preference which turned up every day and almost at any minute. No one was more ingenious at inventing the hopes to which these little marks of preference and these distinctions gave rise.'

#### THE LEVER

As from 1684 the King abandoned his former apartment. The Queen's death had freed him from any conjugal duty and if, in spite of his age, after the solemn ceremony of the *coucher*, he would

go and bestow his affections on Mme de Maintenon, he always went back to his own bed.

The King slept. In the palace life seemed suspended. For a few hours the courtiers had recovered a fragile freedom. The only people awake were the guards on duty in the guard-room next to the King's bed-chamber. Also his first valet, who never left his master, even at night, and who slept near him.

At seven in the morning the valet got up. Whether his name was Blouin or Bontemps, he was a most reliable man. He alone had permanent access to Louis, though he always knew how to keep modestly in his place. A quarter of an hour later, fully dressed and apparelled, the first valet silently let in the *feutiers*, the men who lit the fire. Then another opened the shutters, while a third rolled away the bed on which the first valet had slept and what was left of the collation kept ready for the King, in case he woke in the night and felt hungry.

It was now 7.30. The first valet approached the royal bed and, without disturbing the curtains around it, murmured 'Sir, it is time.' He then let in the first doctor and the first surgeon. The former examined his patient and ordered some remedy, and took the opportunity of an interview alone to beg a favour or to recommend an applicant. Sometimes, he would tell the King some important news which had arrived during the night. He was assisted by the first surgeon.

At 8.15 it was the turn of the first gentleman of the bed-chamber whose year it was to be on duty to enter. Four noblemen shared this highly prized office, each of them for a year. The first gentleman opened the curtains of the bed: he was the only one entitled to do so. The King's private life was ended. He had now to live in public, facing his audience. As if touched by a magic wand, the palace of Versailles woke up and the courtiers, in hierarchical order, were filling the antechambers.

Now began the various entrances, first that of the great, then that of the second rank, and then the entrance of people merely of quality.

The only people entitled to *grandes entrées* were the members of the Royal Family, the Princes of the Blood and the high officers of the Crown, who had assumed for generations the main domestic duties: the Grand Chamberlain, the Grand Master and the Masters of the Robes, and the First Valet of the Robes on duty. The other

three gentlemen of the bed-chamber and the three first valets were also allowed in.

The first valet approached the King and poured on his hands a few drops of spirits of wine; then the Grand Chamberlain produced the stoop, and the King made the sign of the cross. Everyone present then went up to the Council Room, the doors of which had been opened. A chaplain was waiting there. The service lasted barely a quarter of an hour, and the King followed it from his bed, usually adding a few personal prayers.

Then the main dignitaries poured back into the bed-chamber. The barber entered (Quentin, for a long time), together with the valet of the wig closet (next door to the wardrobe). The first valet supervised it. The King chose his wig out of a huge collection, made by the best wig-makers in the kingdom. In the Archives of Seine-et-Oise there is a curious contract, which had passed before a Versailles notary, between the first valet and a wig-maker of Lille, in Flanders, who undertook to 'procure a quantity of the best possible hair to be found, of the right length and colour, to provide the ornament of His Majesty's head and face', at a price of twenty *sous* an ounce, which was no small sum.

By now it was 8.30. The King got out of bed, put on his slippers and the dressing-gown which was held out to him by the first chamberlain. Then he went up to one of the armchairs on either side of the fireplace, sat down and the Grand Chamberlain removed his nightcap and the first barber or one of his assistants proceeded to comb him. The sovereign would gossip with the audience. This was the perfect opportunity for those who had something to tell, or to beg of him. Better do it at once: time was short. That was the end of the *petit lever*. At the door of the Oeil-de-Boef salon the Swiss was calling the second entrances, carefully checking the qualifications of the courtiers who were crowding to enter the King's chamber.

They were more numerous than those of the First Entrance, but they owed their privilege only to their very well-defined offices. Among them were the doctor and surgeon ordinary (of lesser rank than the first doctor), the four cabinet secretaries, the readers of the Chamber, the intendant and the comptroller of the silver plate, the first valets of the robes, besides the valet on duty, who was among the First Entrance. Finally, there were some highly favoured noblemen who had secured a *brevet d'affaires* by virtue of which it

was permissible to enter the King's chamber when he was on his *chaise percée*.

This is a delicate subject! But we must remember that our ancestors were not so prudish about these matters as we are. They saw nothing strange in receiving visitors when in such a posture. In the Middle Ages people went in groups to the privy, which was sometimes arranged to receive several people at once. In monasteries latrines were a succession of holes made one beside the other. The *chaise percée*, in use in the seventeenth century, was an improvement on that secular custom, as some sort of privacy was possible as well as some concealment from onlookers.

In the most modern and comfortable house, the *chaise percée* was a regular piece of furniture. It was covered with fringed velvet, provided with an earthenware basin, and also with a folding table which enabled one to read or write while satisfying the laws of nature. But as it is difficult to throw off old habits, people often brought such chairs together (every room had its own) so as to gossip agreeably.

The King resumed his place in an ordinary armchair. The barber finished doing his hair and fixed on his head the wig he had selected. That was the morning wig, not so high as the one he was to be seen wearing later in the day.

Until then, apart from members of the Royal Family, no one other than high officers had come near the King. Now it was the turn of the 'persons of quality' to attend the *grand lever*. Their entrance was a matter of great ceremonial. Each gave his name to the Usher, who repeated it to the First Gentleman, who in turn repeated it to the King. Some of them remained by the door and, as they were so far away, chattered so loudly that they had to be silenced.

The King then asked for his breakfast. It was a few minutes past nine. The breakfast was rather light: usually, just two cups of herb tea or broth, but they were most solemnly served, after having been formally tasted.

The King would then complete his dressing. He was shaved by the barber only every other day. Then he was dressed. He himself removed his dressing-gown and his night-shirt, together with the relics he habitually wore. His shirt was brought and presented to him by the Dauphin if he was there. If not, it was handed by the Duc de Bourgogne, de Berry or d'Orléans. Everything proceeded

slowly; the dressing went on without the King leaving his armchair. But he was well used to it and did 'practically everything by himself, skilfully and gracefully'. Various noblemen crowded round him to help.

Neckties were produced, from which he selected one which he knotted himself. Three handkerchiefs were brought, from which he took two. Then his clock-maker, who had wound up the King's watch, handed it to him.

The King was ready. He went back to his bed-side, knelt on his prayer-stool and offered a few prayers, the second of the day. Louis XIV was pious and, however irregular his life, he never forgot that he was God's anointed, and God's representative at the head of a Most Christian Monarchy, and His first servant.

The King's piety, which became more fervent as the years went by, and as Mme de Maintenon's influence made itself more felt, was always deep and sincere. Moreover, he showed great care to obey all the laws of the Church. This heavy eater was determined to follow punctiliously the Church's fasts and abstinences, and the court had to conform. A few days before each Ash Wednesday, he never omitted to preach a little sermon to those who attended the *grand lever* to remind them of their duty. He went even further. He asked the provost of the household, the Marquis de Sourches, to report to him any infringement he might have observed, and he did not fail to show by his coldness his displeasure to forgetful courtiers. Were there any? According to La Bruyère, they were devout in order to please a devout King; they would have become atheist under an atheist King.

The King had finished praying. He stood up and, after having changed his wig, entered his study. He was followed by those whose presence was necessary, either because he wished to have them near him or because he had to give them orders for the day, 'so that everyone should know what the King had to do that day'.

Then the procession was formed again and in great pomp walked across the former Royal Apartments towards the chapel. During the whole second half of his life, after the Queen's death, Louis always heard mass at ten, then went back to his study to hold a council or audience until dinner time. On the other hand, before Maria-Thérèse's death, he only went to mass at twelve. At least, that is what Primo Visconti wrote: 'The King remained with the

council from ten till twelve, when he went off to mass, always with the Queen and their family'.

Daily attendance at mass was compulsory for all the members of the household, the officers and the courtiers. Preceded by ushers and the members of the bed-chamber, the King walked slowly, rosary in hand. He followed mass with great respect, demanding complete silence. The assistants had to kneel when the bell rang for the *Sanctus*, and remain kneeling until the priest's communion.

#### THE KING AT WORK

For three hours Louis had been awake and had busied himself only with the ceremonies of the *lever* and with prayers. God having been served, he was now ready to attend to his regal business in his study.

It was the room he liked best in the palace, for as we know, there was in his view nothing more delightful than his daily work. The mornings were devoted to the meetings of the councils, of which the most important was the State Council, usually held on Sunday and sometimes continued into Monday when the business had not been completed. It sat again on Wednesday. The Finance Council sat on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The Councils Extraordinary, such as that of Despatches, sat once or twice a month, according to circumstances.

During the meetings of the councils ministers were allowed to sit in a row facing the King. However, it was usual for them to remain standing during the Council of Despatches.

There was no council meeting on Thursday. This day was reserved by the King for private audiences, mainly those with architects and gardeners. Officers of the bed-chamber were often summoned to settle household details. When the King was worried by any problem, he would ask for a sheet of paper and in his large and studied handwriting would write himself a note, eventually to be used as an *aide-mémoire*. For instance, in 1686, when the school of St Cyr was founded to please the woman who had such a profound influence upon his mind, he wrote down all the things that had to be done to be sure that the house would open on the given day.

'Letters patent properly drawn up.  
'Things required for the endowment.

Furniture of all kinds.  
An agent to be chosen'.  
Etc.

On some days there was neither councils nor audiences. On Fridays the King received his confessor. He kept him as long as he thought fit, sometimes until dinner-time.

Work did not occupy all his time. The King would rest and relax without leaving his study. He would summon musicians or writers, who were always at their master's disposition. One might wonder whether Lully or Delalande were very happy, conducting their works in such restricted space. But the King was content, and the watchful courtiers profited by these improvised concerts or poetry recitals.

In fact the doors were seldom closed during audiences. Saint-Simon noticed that courtiers were crowded into the next room while the King was sitting at the far end, talking with the lucky man.

When the audience was over, the King rose. It was one o'clock. He walked back to his room once more. That was the time to push forward so as to be noticed by the King. Many anecdotes reveal the importance of that moment in the view of all the noblemen who had been waiting for it since morning.

As a matter of fact, to be able to seize the opportunity one had first to secure the protection of some high person close to the King. They alone could procure such a favour. For instance, there was the Mayor of Angers, Grandet, who had been entrusted by his compatriots to seek the King's permission to establish in their city a literary academy after the fashion of the French Academy. Grandet sought the help of the governor of his province, who happened to be the first Equerri, the Prince d'Armagnac, whose zeal and intelligence were highly appreciated by the King. But the Prince was reluctant to bother the King. By mere chance Grandet met in the ante-chambers of the palace one of the gentleman attendants, Chevais du Boulay, who promised to place him in an advantageous position. He got him into the front row when the King was passing. Grandet was a tall man and Louis noticed this newcomer and, by an astonishing feat of memory, remembered that he had already seen him a few years ago, and that he was from Anjou. He turned towards the Governor of Anjou, asking him

who was this man from his province. Grandet was at once presented and could put forward his request. He was granted a private audience, and pleaded his cause with an enthusiasm that did not displease the King. Shortly afterwards the letters patent, bearing on the foundation of the Academy, were duly granted.

All the petitioners did not enjoy such luck. After long and unsuccessful attempts, they could only put their letters on the petition table to attract the King's attention. The table was brought out into the guard's room each Monday; it was covered with a velvet gold-fringed cloth. During the first years of his reign, Louis liked to receive these requests personally, then he got bored by the tedious business and entrusted it to Louvois, and later Louvois' son, the Marquis de Courtanvaux. But he always insisted on being told about the most important petitions, and made sure they were all answered.

The King was back in his room. Dinner was served.

## DINNER

The King dined in his room and always alone. After the Queen's death, he was sometimes served in the ante-chamber of the Dauphine's suite. When she too died, he returned to the usual routine.

The dinner was always a *petit couvert* and even a *très petit couvert*, based upon the number of dishes and services prepared for His Majesty according to orders given in the morning during the *petite lever*. The King's table was brought in. Next, the principal courtiers and noblemen were admitted to the ceremony and remained standing at a certain distance from the table. Then the first gentleman went to call the King, who sat down.

Everyone knows that Louis XIV had a large appetite. According to the Palatine Princess—who does not always refrain from exaggeration and inaccuracy—he sometimes consumed four plates of soup, some game and salad, two slices of ham, a piece of mutton with garlic gravy, a full plate of pastries, fruit and a few hard-boiled eggs. But all those dishes were not taken away empty. Often, the King tasted only a small helping of each. Besides, it must be remembered that he had eaten nothing since the day before—apart from two cups of broth or herb tea for breakfast—and that he had worked for three hours.

Moreover, dinner was served with a slowness and a ritualistic pomp which would have exasperated all but the King. Each service was a truly theatrical display. This is how the King's meat was brought in:

'Two guards entered first. Then followed the usher of the room, the major-domo with his stick, the gentleman-in-waiting of the King's buttery, the Comptroller General, his office clerk, then the officers (that is, those of the food department) carrying the meat, the kitchen equerry and the keeper of the King's china. Behind them two more Royal Guards ended the procession.'

In all some fifteen persons had to make their way from the Grand Commun, where the victuals were cooked, to the King's chamber, through the courtiers who were present at the meal. Though all the dishes were covered—and this is the origin of the French word *couvert*, still used to designate the preparations for a meal—the King ran no risk of scalding his tongue, for the services followed one another without keeping him waiting, so that they were waiting at the door.

The ceremonial was just as rigorous when the King asked for a drink. The gentleman cup-bearer cried aloud: 'Drink for the King!' Then he bowed and went to the dresser, where the chief cup-bearer stood, who handed him a gold tray with a covered glass and two crystal decanters, one filled with wine and the other with water. Louis XIV never drank undiluted wine. He returned, escorted by the chief cup-bearer and his attendant. When the three had reached the table, they bowed low. The two cup-bearers both tasted the wine and water in silver-gilt cups; the gentleman cup-bearer bowed again, uncovered the glass and presented the carafes. The King helped himself to wine and water. Then the gentleman cup-bearer bowed once more and returned the tray to the chief cup-bearer, who took it and the glass back to the dresser. Thus three persons and some seven to eight minutes were required to provide the King with a glass of wine and water. Let us hope he was not too thirsty when he asked for it!

It is not surprising when describing this scene, which so closely resembles the mass (the bowing of the attendants when presenting the burettes to the priest) that the services of four hundred and ninety-eight persons were used in providing the King with a meal.



#### DAILY LIFE AT VERSAILLES

Louis XIV ate only with a knife and his fingers. The fork was first used in France in the reign of Henri IV. Louis XIV's grandson, the Duc de Bourgogne, had been taught how to use one. But his grandfather forbade him to use it when he was admitted to his table, and the Dauphin's son went back to old usages to please him.

No guest whatever was allowed to dine with the King; the rule was enforced all through the reign. Members of the Royal Family or Princes of the Blood could be present, but they never participated in it. On this point Saint-Simon was perfectly clear:

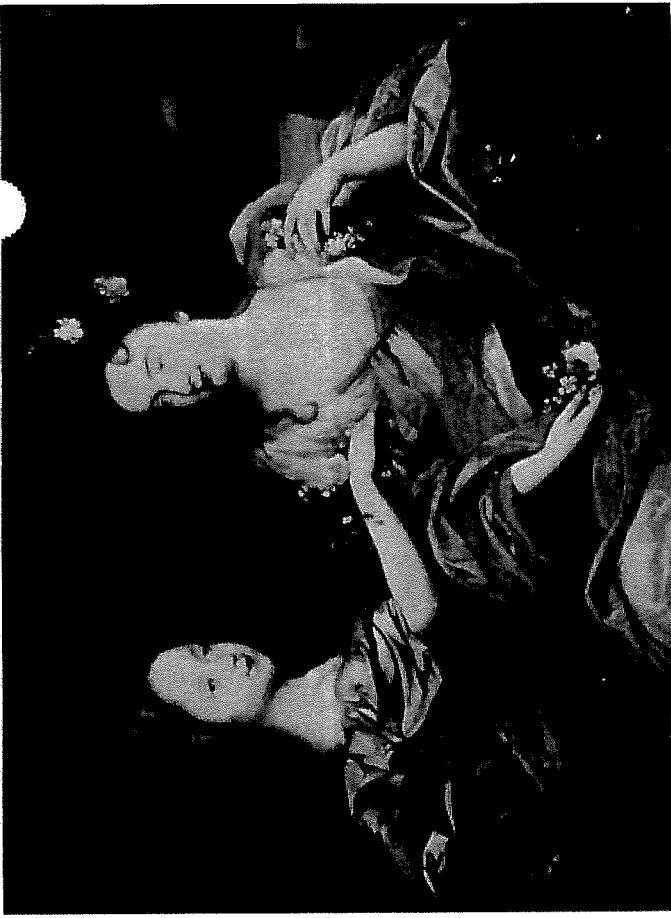
'Often enough did I see Monsieur, coming from St Cloud to see the King, or coming out of the Council of Despatches, the only council he attended. He gave the King his napkin and remained standing. A moment later, seeing that he was still there, the King asked him whether he would not like to sit down: he bowed and the King ordered a seat to be brought. A stool was put behind him. A moment later, the King said to him: "My brother, do sit down". Monsieur bowed again, and sat down until the meal was finished, and then he again handed the King a napkin.'

Thus, even the King's brother remained standing during a meal so long as the King had not asked him to be seated on a humble stool. One tends to think of courtiers at Versailles doubled up by perpetual bowing; but in fact their natural position was of perpetual standing.

#### AFTERNOON

When dinner was over, the King went back at once to his study. Sometimes, he would take along some noblemen he wanted to see privately. Mostly, he took a short period of relaxation with his dogs. Then he would call for his robe attendants and change. There would be in attendance just a few distinguished persons, selected by the first gentleman of the bed-chamber.

As soon as the King was dressed, he left his study and went out either to hunt or for a walk. He would go down into the Marble Courtyard by the little inside staircase which got him away from the crowd of courtiers. Those who had succeeded in slipping in hoped to be able to talk to him during these few minutes; it was one of the rare opportunities during the day when it was possible



3. Madame de Montepan and the Duc de Maine, by Mignard



4. Madame de Maintenon and her Niece, by Elle

#### THE KING'S DAY

to approach him. He could be handed a request or a petition as he crossed the Courtyard and before entering his coach.

Everything was ready. The Life Guards were standing at attention at the back of the Marble Courtyard, along the palace railings. The chosen few who were to accompany the King were already in their coach or on horseback. It was a magnificent display that no one tired of watching. 'Life Guards, courtiers, busy valets', wrote Primi Visconti, 'all reminded me of a queen-bee coming out into the fields with her swarm.'

At least once a week the King would hunt stags in the forest of Marly or in the woods around Versailles; he would go out shooting twice. On other days he would take out the court ladies. The Palatine Princess claimed that Louis hardly ever walked in the park. 'You are the only one who enjoys the beauties of Versailles', he is reported to have said to her one day. On the other hand, Saint-Simon recorded just the contrary, 'When the King does not hunt, he walks in his gardens or has a look at the buildings.' It may be that at the end of his life the King had had enough of his park, but for many years he delighted in it. There are many stories about his discussing the works in progress with his entourage. He was very fond of his gardens, so much so that he bustled himself in writing a short guide to the park for the use of foreigners, in which with a mixture of pride and good humour he described all the beauties he had contrived.

The walk often ended at Little Venice, where the Grand Canal flotilla was anchored. If the weather was fine and the master in a playful mood, he offered a collation to the ladies. Tables were brought and cakes and comfits produced, and the King was not the last to do them justice. The return ended at any hour, but seldom after five in the afternoon.

#### THE END OF THE DAY

At the end of the day the King remained on show. Returning after hunting, he changed again (for the third time since morning). This time he assumed his most magnificent garb. Then he would sit at his writing table, signing his 'friendship letters', the unofficial ones which his secretaries had written in accordance with his instructions. When something serious occurred, he would summon another council at the end of the afternoon.

Usually he did not spend more than an hour in his study and he would then visit Mme de Maintenon. Once or twice a week he would attend evening prayers in the chapel. Courtiers, especially the ladies of the court, crowded there, hoping to be noticed by the King and his sanctimonious attendant.

Prayers took place at five in winter, and at six in summer. There was no regulated procession to the chapel, and some people took advantage of the fact to approach him. In his memoirs the Marquis de Sourches tells of many favours obtained at this time.

After the service came the moment impatiently awaited by the crowd who had jostled since morning in ante-chambers and drawing-rooms: the *Appartement*, or reception. This was held three times a week. In this word actually coined by the King were implied all the pastimes that took place between seven and ten in the evening from October to Easter. Louis XIV insisted on this rite being observed. 'Madam,' he said to the Dauphine shortly after her wedding, 'I want you to hold an *appartement* and to dance at it. We are not like private people. We belong entirely to the public.'

The entertainments were varied: cards, billiards, dancing, concerts or sometimes plays. Buffets were set up, allowing spectators to eat cakes and ice-cream to their heart's content throughout the evening, and also to drink, since the heat, made worse by a huge quantity of candles, was overpowering. The King and the courtiers seemed not to mind it. Foreigners were less tolerant. The Countess of Osnabrück, who was at a reception in 1679, remarked that because of the 'crowds and the overwhelming heat the pleasures of the French court were mixed with much discomfort'.

Louis XIV was a friendly host. He would not allow people to rise at card tables when he came near them. He went from one to the other with perfect courtesy. Out of respect for him, guests did not raise their voices, so that only a subdued murmur could be heard which did not mar the elegance of the occasion.

The ball which brought the *appartement* to an end concluded at ten o'clock by a quadrille. After which came supper *en grand couvert*.

#### THE GRAND COUVERT

Supper *en grand couvert* was something exceptional, though Louis XIV on the other hand maintained the habit of supping in

public. He only abandoned it for sickness, mourning, or when he was eating meat on fast days. But he only transgressed for important reasons.

As long as the Queen lived the *grand couvert* took place in the ante-chamber. The tradition lasted during the Dauphine's lifetime. Only the Royal family sat at supper, and even the princesses of the blood were excluded. After the death of both the Queen and the Dauphine the King supped in the first ante-chamber, or footmen's ante-chamber, the windows of which overlooked the Marble Courtyard.

Thanks to the descriptions of Saint-Simon or the Marquis de Sourches it is easy to make out where the King sat: in the middle with his back to the fireplace. Behind him stood his first doctor and a few courtiers. Intoxicated with pride, the Duc de Saint-Simon does not hide the fact that he had often the honour to be among the elect. The other courtiers and the ladies, a little further off, remained standing. The King's armchair was of wood, painted red with gold lining-out, and covered with fringed crimson velvet.

Supper was less abundant than dinner. In order to sleep well, the King avoided too much food. During the ceremony, the King's little band played on a near-by dais. Supper was not prolonged beyond eleven o'clock.

#### THE COUCHER

After supper the King went to his study for a few moments, but not for long. He bade goodnight to the mass of courtiers, who then retired. He returned to his bed-chamber, escorted only by those who in the morning had attended the great and the second entrances. In fact, they took part in the same ceremonial but in reverse. Louis first went to his bedside to say his evening prayers, which he recited with the chaplain on duty, who held a candle to light the King's prayer-book, 'even though the whole room was very well lit'.

Before the King sat in his armchair to be undressed, a little comedy took place, which shows the value placed by courtiers of high rank on the smallest favours bestowed by the King. Who was to hold the candlestick? The chaplain handed it to the first valet, Bontemps or Blouin, who took it to the King. Louis glanced at those who surrounded him and in a loud voice named him who

was to hold it all through the ceremony. Saint-Simon wrote: 'It was a most valued distinction, and the King knew so well how to give importance to a trifle'. The lucky one removed his glove, stepped forward and held the candlestick throughout the *coucher*.

The King undressed with the aid of the first valet. He put on his nightshirt, his night jacket and his dressing-gown. He rose, went to the fireplace corner, bowing his head slightly. He gave his orders to the colonel of the French Guards. The people of quality then left, leaving behind the people of the first and second entrances and the bed-chamber attendants. Then began the *petit coucher*, which was short. After a few private matters, Louis removed his dressing-gown and got into bed. The lights were extinguished, with the exception of the night-lights. The only person to remain with the King was his valet, who had silently unfolded his camp bed.

It was past eleven. The King slept. The Life Guards were awake in their guard-room. The Swiss slumbered at the doors of the various suites. The palace seemed asleep. Tomorrow, the sun would rise upon a day exactly similar. Everyone would be back in his place. How easy to understand why even the King himself was bored by this endless performance! Happily, there were distractions which made some relaxation of this suffocating etiquette possible, and also a few unforeseen events.

## CHAPTER FOUR PLEASURES AND PASTIMES

To break the monotony of everyday routine, the King put aside a few hours each day for his favourite amusements, hunting or walking in the park in the afternoon along the Grand Canal or at Marly, and on his return, the pleasures of the *appartement*, cards, billiards, music and dancing.

### HUNTING

All the French Kings had a passion for hunting. The early ancestors of the Bourbons found in it not only an energetic and healthy sport, but by the pursuit of wild animals or mere game, of the kind that was harmful to crops, they performed a service to their subjects. Hunting, therefore, was both agreeable and useful.

It was quite different in Louis XIV's time. The Ile-de-France had been practically denuded of wild beasts and reservations had to be organized, so that the King could have his sport. The Parc-aux-Cerfs at Versailles, which acquired such bad repute because Louis XV owned there a small house where he kept his mistresses, had no other origin. But the park was too small. It had to be enlarged as early as 1678, and a pheasant farm was created, from which, wrote Dangeau, two thousand pheasants and five hundred partridges flew out at the same time on August 16, 1685. Breeding was organized in many well-provided places in this large area surrounded with walls (about 6,600 hectares) known at Versailles as the Grand Parc.

'Never give up business for pleasure's sake, but have a kind of rule which gives you some sort of freedom and entertainment. None is as innocent as hunting.' This advice, given by the King to the Duc d'Anjou, future King of Spain, had been his own rule throughout life.

He hunted at least three times a week. He soon gave up hawking,