

59 A DAY IN THE LIFE OF LOUIS XIV

For much of his reign, Louis XIV resided at the palace of Versailles. There he established a lavish court, which the country's leading nobles were expected to attend. Life at Versailles revolved around the king, and the simplest events of his day, such as getting dressed or going to bed, were accompanied by pomp and ceremony in which the court was required to take part. In the excerpt below from The Memoirs of Saint-Simon, one of Louis' courtiers, the Duc de Saint-Simon, describes a typical day at Versailles. As you read the excerpt, consider what the day's activities tell you about the character of Louis XIV.

At eight o'clock every morning the King was awoken by his First Valet-de-Chambre, who slept in the room with him. At the same time the First Physician and First Surgeon were admitted; and as long as she lived the King's former wet-nurse also came in and would kiss him. He would then be rubbed down, because he perspired a great deal. At a quarter past eight the Great Chamberlain was admitted, together with those members of the court who had the *grandes entrées*. The Great Chamberlain then opened the curtains round the bed . . . and offered him holy water from a stoup at the head of the bed. This was the chance for any courtier who wished to ask a favor or to speak to the King, and if one did so the others withdrew to a distance.

The Chamberlain then handed the King the book of the Office of the Holy Ghost, and having done so retired to the next room with everyone else. The King said the Office . . . and then, putting on his dressing-gown, summoned them back into the room; meanwhile the second *entrée* was admitted and, a few minutes later, the body of the court. By the time they came in the King was getting into his breeches (for he put on nearly all his clothes himself), which he accomplished with considerable grace. He was shaved every other day, with the court watching; while it was being done he wore a short wig, without which he never allowed himself to be seen. . . . While his barber was at work he sometimes talked to those around him, about hunting or some other light topic. He had no dressing-table at hand, only a servant who held up a glass for him.

When he had finished dressing he knelt down at the side of his bed and said his prayers. . . . Next the King went into his study, followed by those permitted to do so—which, as a number of appointments carried this privilege, amounted to quite a gathering. He then announced his appointments for the day, so that everyone knew what he would be doing every quarter of an hour. Then the room was cleared. . . .

The courtiers waited in the Gallery until the king was ready to go to Mass, at which the choir always sang a motet. The Ministers were told as soon as he had gone to the chapel, and they then gathered in the King's study. . . . As soon as Mass was over the Council met, and that was

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the last engagement for the morning. One or other of the Councils met every day except Thursdays and Fridays—Thursday was kept free, and the few private audiences which the King very occasionally granted took place then; on Friday he used to make his confession, and his confessor would often stay with him until dinner-time. Dinner was [usually] at one. . . .

Dinner was always *au petit couvert*—that is to say, the King ate alone in his bedroom. . . . The meal was substantial whether he had ordered *petit couvert* or *très-petit couvert*, for even the latter consisted of three courses, each made up of several different dishes. . . . Monsieur [the King's brother] often attended, and when present always handed the King his napkin and then remained standing. If the King saw that he intended to remain, he would ask him if he wished to be seated: Monsieur would bow. . . and sit down. He would remain seated until the end of the meal, when he would again hand the King his napkin. . . .

As soon as he had finished his dinner the King rose from the table and went into his study, where he spent time feeding his pointers and playing with them. Then he changed. . . after which he went down to the Marble Court by his own private staircase. . . . He liked fresh air, and if he could not get it he suffered from headaches and vapours, which had originally been caused by too much perfume—with the consequence that for years he had not cared for anything except orange water, and anyone who was going to approach him had to be very careful about this.

He felt neither heat nor cold, and wet weather affected him very little—it had to be very bad indeed to stop him from going out. At least once a week, and more if he were at [his estates at] Marly or Fontainebleau, he went stag-hunting. Once or twice a week he shot his own coverts, usually choosing Sundays or feast-days when there were no works for him to inspect; he was a first-class shot. Most other days he would walk round having a look at whatever building was in progress. Occasionally he would take ladies out and have a picnic in the forests of Marly or Fontainebleau. . . .

If there was no Council he often went over to Marly or Trianon for dinner. . . . After dinner one of the Ministers usually came in with some work, and when that was done he would pass the rest of a summer afternoon strolling with the ladies or playing cards. Sometimes he would get up a lottery in which there were no blanks, and every ticket drew a prize of plate, jewellery, or a dress length of rich material, which was a delicate way of making presents to the ladies about him. . . .

The King's supper was served, always *au grand couvert*, at ten o'clock, and the entire Royal Family sat down with him. [A frequent complaint was that the King was late and the meal often did not start until eleven-thirty.] The meal was attended by a large number of people, both those who were entitled to be seated and those who were not. . . .

After supper the King would stand by the balustrade at the foot of his bed for a few minutes, with the whole court about him; then he would bow to the ladies and retire into his study, where he played for an hour or so with his children and grandchildren. . . .

Before he retired to bed the King went to feed his dogs; then he said good-night and, going into his room, knelt down at his bedside to say his prayers. After he had undressed he would bow, which meant 'Good-night,' and at that sign all the court retired. As they filed out he, standing by the fire-place, gave the password to the Captain of the Guard. It was the last opportunity for the day of speaking to the King, and if anyone stepped forward the others withdrew at once and left him alone with the King.

READING REVIEW

1. What normally was the king's last official engagement of the morning?
2. What in the excerpt suggests that Louis XIV enjoyed outdoor life?
3. What does the routine of life at Versailles tell you about Louis XIV's character?