

He looked and acted like a king. He loved praise and flattery and was very fond of pictures and statues of himself. He believed he was the greatest of all rulers—a king of kings.

Louis insisted on moving the French court ten miles from Paris to Versailles. Louis disliked Paris. He hated the narrow streets and was afraid of the crowds of people. He never forgot his fears during the Fronde, when he was at the mercy of the mob. He had to get out of Paris, no matter what the cost.

At Versailles, he built a palace worthy of a sun king. It was the finest palace in the world. It took over 30 years to build, and as many as 35,000 people worked on it at one time. No one knows how much Versailles cost. Louis made sure that he destroyed the records of expenses before he died.

In this story two young nobles meet at Versailles. They talk about life at the court. We can see how everything revolves around the thoughts and actions of the king.

Ask yourself why most of the nobles of France were at the court of Versailles. Why was Louis called the Sun King? Did he deserve the title?

## Versailles 1691

"Count Chaumont!" called Count Rideau as he recognized a familiar face in the crowd that filled the great Hall of Mirrors.

"I see that Louis finally forced you to come here. How do you like it?"

"It's good to see you again, Rideau," said Chaumont as they greeted each other. "It's been three years since you left our province of Normandy to come live here at Versailles. I've been here only three days, and already I wish I were back home!"

"Chaumont, now you realize that everything they say about Versailles is true. You can be happy here only if you can learn to do exactly as you are told," said Rideau.

Chaumont said, "Tell me, do you see the king very often? Are you at all close to him now? Will he talk to me?"

Rideau answered, "Only the most powerful nobles are close to the king. That doesn't include people like you and me. I haven't even reached the high position of handing the king his shirt or pants. The best I've been able to do so far is watch

him wash his face a few times. Oh, and once I saw him put on his wig. Only his favorites may actually hand him his food. I have never gotten that close."

"I'm sorry," said Chaumont, "but I must confess that I just don't understand what you're talking about. Who wants to watch the king eat or bring him his food? We're not servants, we're nobles! This is ridiculous!"

"Chaumont, you have to understand that Louis isn't just the king of France. He is the sun and the moon and the stars! He is the center of everything in our world. We nobles are here to honor him, to do everything to make him happy."

"Does being waited on by his nobles make him happy?" asked Chaumont.

"You'll find out," answered Rideau. "There is a set way of doing everything at court. These things please the king. He likes doing exactly the same thing at the same time each day. This is his life. You'll see. Someday you'll be happy to do things you now think are so silly for the king. Who knows, someday he may even speak to you! But don't expect it; he's not a great talker. Some claim he says so little because then he won't have a chance to say the wrong things."

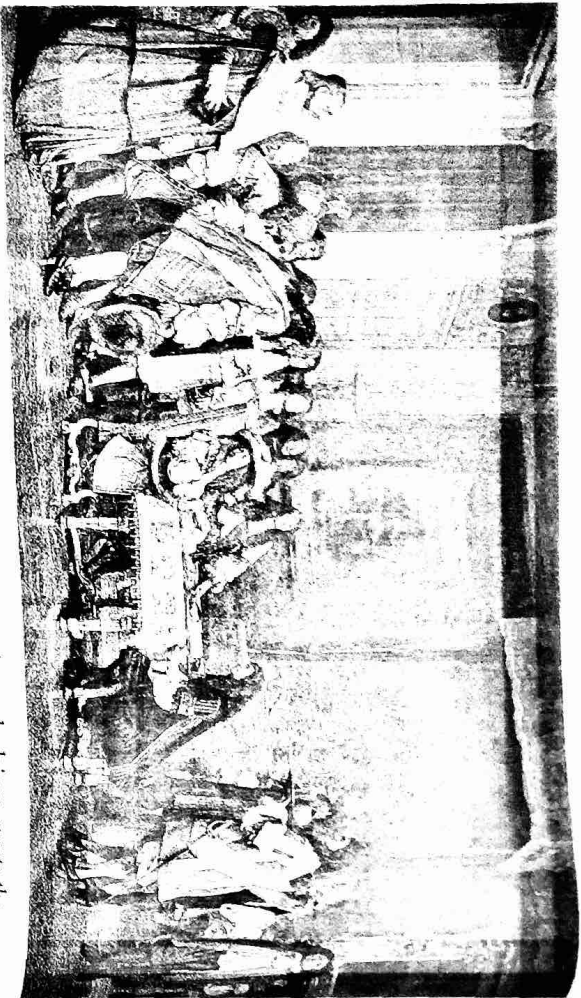
"Do you know that he has been his own prime minister since Mazarin died? He tries to do too much. Not even the 'Great Monarch' can run a country as large as France all by himself. He wants to know everything, sign everything."

"With all the parties and games going on around here, when does the king find time to govern?" asked Chaumont.

"Don't let appearances fool you," said Rideau. "Yes, he loves all the parties and rituals of Versailles. But he spends many hours a day on the business of running the country. Believe it or not, he is a hardworking king."

"Isn't he afraid of making mistakes?" asked Chaumont.

"My dear Chaumont, the king makes no mistakes. He is the all-powerful ruler. He is the image of God on earth. He thinks of himself as the greatest of men—and we nobles agree. That's why he took the sun as his emblem. Our King Louis XIV is the source of our light and life!"



Versailles, France: Louis XIV (center), surrounded by courtiers and advisers, meets the playwright Molière (seated at right). What does this scene tell you about the king?

"But that's blasphemy!" cried Chaumont. "That's disrespect for God—to compare Louis with God!"

"Chaumont," said Rideau coolly, "what I said is what the people at court are saying. Those are not my ideas."

"I want to be able to be myself, to express my own ideas," Chaumont said. "Should I ask for permission to go home?"

"Ask, but you are now a member of this court. There is not much chance that you will be given permission," answered Rideau. "You may visit your home, but this is where you will spend the rest of your life!"

"Since you have just come here, chances are that you know much more about what's going on in the rest of France than I do. Tell me what you know."

"Well," said Chaumont, "Louis is a great spender. Taxes are very high. People say that the money goes in and out of the royal treasury faster than you can say 'Sun King.' But the spending isn't all personal. Let's not forget all of his wars. It's hard to think of a time when France, or should I say Louis, was not at war! First he wins some land and then he loses some land. He is bleeding our country to death!"

"Louis fights for the glory of France," replied Rideau. "We will not let any nation push us around. Why should we? We are great!"

"Yes, but does he have to fight the world?" responded Chaumont. "Doesn't France have enough land of its own? Don't we have enough problems?"

"What you are saying about our king makes sense to you as a newcomer to Versailles," said Rideau, speaking quietly once more. "But wait. The king will soon become the center of your world. You will accept whatever he does and whatever happens here."

"But what will happen to France and Europe after Louis dies? Who will pay for all of his waste, for his extravagance? Who will account for all the people's suffering?" asked Chaumont. Rideau thought for a moment. "In the end, we will all pay, I suppose."

## POSTSCRIPT

Louis XIV's extravagance (wasteful spending) and 50 years of war emptied the French treasury. Louis spent far more than his government took in in taxes. As a result, he was obliged to borrow money from bankers, force well-to-do citizens to "lend" the country money, and raise taxes. Many nobles managed to avoid paying these taxes without being punished. However, the peasants who could not afford to pay taxes were sent to prison.

It was said that 10 percent of the people were begging, and 50 percent were almost starving. By 1708 many farmers did not have the money to buy seed to plant their crops. In 1709 the very severe winter weather added to their suffering. As a result, food riots occurred in many cities, where starving mobs broke into bakeries and other food stores.

The king should have known that the people were suffering. As he drove from Versailles to Paris, his carriage was surrounded by people crying "Bread! Bread!" But Louis did not seem to care what happened to the poor.

## QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. How did Fronde affect the French monarchy?
2. Why was Louis XIV called the Sun King?
3. What was life like for nobles at the palace of Versailles?
4. Why was it difficult for the king to act as his own prime minister?
5. Why was it unlikely that Chaumont would ever receive permission to return home?

## UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

- A.** Which statements show that Louis XIV had complete control over France?
1. Louis XIV always asked the peasants for advice.
  2. The revolt called the Fronde did not affect Louis' actions.
  3. Louis liked being called the Sun King.
  4. Louis spent as little money as he could.
  5. Most French nobles were forced to live at Versailles.
  6. Louis believed in democratic government.
  7. Louis was his own prime minister during much of his rule.
  8. Louis felt that he was the image of God on earth.
- B.** Imagine that Louis XIV is alive today. How would life be different for all of us if Louis were president of the United States? What changes would Louis have to make to be a successful United States president?

## ACTIVITIES AND INQUIRIES

1. Imagine that you are Chaumont. Write a letter to a friend. Describe how you feel about your new life at the palace of Versailles.
2. Pretend that you are Rideau. You have found Chaumont's letter. You know that the king sees all mail before it is sent from the palace. What changes would you make in the letter to protect your friend Chaumont?
3. Look at the illustration on page 258. Describe what is happening.
4. Suppose that you were able to spend a day at the palace of Versailles in the time of Louis XIV. Write a diary describing the sights and events of your day at Versailles.