



# VERSAILLES A HISTORY

ROBERT B. ABRAMS



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# I

“ALL SHIFTING SAND AND MARSH”

On August 17, 1661, on a dusty road in the Île-de-France, a parade of carriages and men on horses approached the château of Vaux-le-Vicomte, thirty-four miles southeast of Paris. France's superintendent of finance, Nicolas Fouquet, Marquis de Belle-Île and Comte de Melun et de Vaux, had invited 6,000 people to what would be remembered as one of the most magnificent and momentous fêtes in the nation's history. The guest of honor was the marquis's twenty-three-year-old sovereign, King Louis XIV.

Louis had been king for eighteen years; his father, Louis XIII, had died when he was only four. But it was only after the death of his godfather, Cardinal Jules Raymond Mazarin, that he had shown any inclination to rule. Until then, he had been happy to leave his country's affairs in the hands of Mazarin.

On his deathbed, the cardinal had beseeched Louis to take up the reins of government: "Govern! Govern! Let the politicians be your servants, never your masters." And he warned the king against the greed and machinations of the man expected to take Mazarin's place as chief minister: the clever, wealthy, and according to the cardinal, dishonest Fouquet. In truth, it was the cardinal who was the crook, having embezzled millions from the French treasury.

Louis loved the cardinal and had wept when he learned Mazarin had died. But he quickly pulled himself together and announced to his council in a loud, strong voice, "In future, I shall be my own chief minister."

Fouquet listened to Louis's words with concern, but he had no inkling of the fate that was about to befall him. Even when Mazarin's private secretary, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, reinforced the king's suspicions that Fouquet was stealing vast sums of money from the state, the marquis did not feel threatened. He was sure Louis would eventually grow tired of governing, return to his women and hunting, and allow power to pass to the council Fouquet controlled. As the marquis waited at his estate to welcome the king and other guests that August evening, Fouquet looked forward to a future of greater riches and power.

The marquis's château, the Vaux-le-Vicomte, had only just been completed. Designed by the great French architect Louis

Le Vau, the opulence of the building dazzled and delighted visitors. The interior, embellished by ceilings painted by the king's favorite artist, Charles Le Brun, was furnished without respect to expense: Rich tapestries of velvet and cloth of gold draped from floor to ceiling; Persian carpets rolled from one stately room into the next; cascades of crystal shimmered overhead; scores of gold clocks stood on marble and porphyry chimneypieces beneath gilded mirrors. In the gardens, laid out by André Le Nôtre, were stone and gilded statues, pools and waterfalls, lines of trees, and fountains erupting between neat, colorful flower beds.

Louis was both delighted and infuriated by the spectacle. The beauty of the place was undeniable, yet the sums that had been lavished on it belonged to France and to him. "Madame," he whispered to his mother, "shall we make these people disgorge?" He would have arrested the marquis that night had his mother not intervened. "No, not in his own house," she advised. "Not at an entertainment he is giving for you."

The entertainment was certainly superb. In the dining room, guests were served a light, delicious meal from silver plates; gold plates were reserved for the king. Over the mantel hung a portrait of Louis painted by Le Brun; when the king admired it, the marquis presented it to him. Other guests were given equally fine gifts, diamond tiaras, and even horses. After they ate, they were directed outside to a theater illuminated by flaring torches that also lit the surrounding lawns and fir trees. Asked by the marquis to make a gesture to start the performance, the king waved his hand: At once, a shell opened to reveal a sea nymph and the motionless statues and trees began to move and to speak; satyrs and fauns danced out of the shadows. This enchanting surprise was followed by a short comédie-ballet, *Les Fâcheux*, by Molière, and a display of fireworks, set off to the sound of drums and trumpets. As the king strolled back to the château, its walls and windows now illuminated by lanterns, hundreds of rockets shot into the sky.

Few of Louis's courtiers had ever been treated to such an extravaganza; few of them had ever seen a lovelier château. As the king rode back to his less impressive, medieval palace at Fontainebleau, he was more determined than ever to bring down the presumptuous Fouquet. Three weeks later, Louis charged



Fouquet with the misuse of state funds and imprisoned him in the fortress of Pignerol, where he remained until his death on March 23, 1680.

Louis also resolved to build his own, even more impressive château, employing Vaux-le-Vicomte's architect, painter, and gardener. As for the site, he had already chosen it.

On the other side of Paris, in a sandy clearing in the woods between Saint-Germain, where he was born, and Fontainebleau, his father had built a small hunting lodge.

Over the years, the brick and stone building had been expanded: Wings, designed by Philibert Le Roy, had been added to enclose a square courtyard on three sides; pavilions had been erected on each corner; a moat had been dug and small, formal gardens installed. The château at Versailles-au-Val-de-Galie remained, however, a modest country house, a *maison de plaisance*, with few large rooms other than a long, drafty hall where the courtiers slept, or in most cases, tried to sleep. Unpretentious and inconspicuous in its surroundings of woodland, marsh, and fen, it looked far from regal. Indeed, neither the building nor the desolate site held much charm for most visitors. But Louis loved the place. Its charm for him was heightened even further that summer of 1661 by the fact that he was in love.

He had been in love before - but never as deeply he was with Louise de La Vallière. When he was seventeen, he had become infatuated with the pretty niece of Cardinal Mazarin, the Italian noblewoman Anna Marie Mancini, and had even wanted to marry her, but his mother, the queen, had condemned the match as unsuitable. Obedient to his royal duties, Louis had agreed to wed instead his first cousin Marie-Thérèse, daughter of King Philip IV of Spain. Despairing, he assured Marie Mancini that, although he could not have her for his bride, it was she he loved and would always love. "You are the king," a tearful Marie replied. "You love me, yet I must go away."

Louis was not reassured by his first sight of his bride, Marie-Thérèse. She was young, with clear skin and pleasant eyes, but her clothes and hair were old-fashioned, and she was stout and not the least attractive to him.