

# LOUIS XIV

A full-length portrait of Louis XIV of France, painted by Philippe de Champaigne. The king is seated on a throne, wearing a dark blue robe with gold fleur-de-lis patterns and a red sash. He holds a golden scepter topped with a figure of a king. The background is a dark, ornate interior with a window on the right.

OLIVIER BERNIER



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Many who are subjects would be very poor rulers; it is far easier to obey a superior than to command one's own self; and when we can do anything we want, it is difficult to want only what is right.

Louis XIV



I

A GIFT FROM GOD

Louis XIII meant to go, Queen Anne did not expect him: It took the prayers of a nun, the bad temper of an attendant, and a violent, freezing rainstorm to bring them together, but when he came, she set herself to please. They shared the same bed because there was no other; nine months later to the day, France celebrated the birth of a baby boy whom his contemporaries and posterity alike have called the Sun King.

It was, many people said, a miracle, an act of God: After twenty-three years of unfruitful and increasingly bitter union, the king despised the queen and avoided her whenever possible. It was not only that Louis XIII vastly preferred the company of handsome young men, or that in the early days of their marriage Anne of Austria\* had miscarried three times: Since then, she had joined the group at Court who fought the prime minister, the cardinal de Richelieu, on every issue; worse still, she had actually engaged in a traitorous correspondence with her brother, King Philip IV of Spain, in the midst of a raging war.

Still, in spite of their hatred for each other, the king and queen both wanted an heir: As things stood, Louis XIII's brother Gaston would inherit the throne and destroy all he had accomplished, and the queen dreaded being sent away in disgrace. Unfortunately, the birth of a dauphin (girls, in France, could not inherit the throne) was hardly possible as long as Louis and Anne abstained from all physical contact. And given the situation, the king was most unlikely ever to sleep with the queen again.

When, on the afternoon of December 5, 1637, Louis XIII stopped in at the convent of the Visitandines in Paris, to see Louise de La Fayette, now a nun, and formerly his (chaste) love, he was on his way from Versailles, where he had a small hunting lodge, to Saint Maur, where he planned to spend the night, while the queen was settled at the Louvre for the winter.

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\* Anne of Austria, in spite of her name, was a Spanish Habsburg, the daughter of King Philip III.

And since, in the 1630s, royal residences were largely empty shells

furnished only when the king lived there, Louis XIII's bed, linens, and other necessities preceded him to Saint Maur.

As it was, the king found his conversation with Louise de La Fayette so absorbing that by the time he decided to leave, night had fallen, while a torrential rainstorm was in progress. In spite of this weather, he persisted in his earlier plan, but M. de Guitaut, the captain of the guard, suggested that he go to the Louvre instead. Of course, Louis XIII immediately pointed out that his apartment there was unfurnished, only to have M. de Guitaut suggest that he spend the night with the queen, adding that it would be inhuman on the king's part to expect his escort to ride out to Saint Maur in a rainstorm.

Instead, Louis decided to wait for a break in the weather. After a few moments, Guitaut repeated his suggestion. This time, the king answered that Anne of Austria, who had retained her Spanish habits, ate her suppers at an impossibly late hour. Daringly, Guitaut answered that the queen would, no doubt, change that to please him. This time, his master gave in. "He was forced to share the Queen's bed," Mme de Motteville, her faithful lady in waiting noted, ". . . so that it has been said that the encounter gave us our present King [Louis XIV]. When the Queen received this grace from Heaven, she badly needed it to save her from all the sufferings which seemed to await her [as the result of the correspondence]."1

There can hardly be any doubt that the birth of the dauphin was the direct result of that unexpected encounter. Exactly nine months later to the day, the queen gave birth to the long-awaited heir to the throne, and because neither parent had any doubt that this arrival was the work of Providence, the baby was named Louis-Dieudonné, Louis, the Gift of God.

The queen's unexpected pregnancy naturally caused a great stir. Already on January 14, 1638, Bouvard, the king's first physician, officially informed Richelieu of the event, thus causing the usually pessimistic cardinal immense pleasure. Still, there was much to worry about: Anne of Austria, after all, had a history of miscarriages, but by late April, it seemed, the worst

was over; for the first time in some twenty years, Louis XIII actually paid attention to his wife. "The King, at the beginning of [the Queen's] pregnancy, showed her how pleased he was, and was even tender with her,"<sup>2</sup> Mme de Motteville reported; indeed, a new harmony now united old enemies: Richelieu, well aware that, as the dauphin's mother, the queen would become a power in her own right, suddenly became obliging and amiable; while Anne, who was anxious not to be separated from her child, immediately started propitiating both the cardinal and the king. As for the latter, he gave up following his army to Picardy, where the front still was, to stay near his pregnant wife, and, of course, he was present at the birth itself. More, according to Alvise Contarini, the Venetian ambassador, he held Anne in his arms as she was giving birth.

Of course, the baby might have turned out to be a girl after all, a fact about which no one seemed to worry, and medical complications were not unlikely since the queen was about to give birth for the first time at the age of thirty-eight, but all went well. "The joy His Majesty feels in being a father is extraordinary," Contarini reported. "His Majesty went today four or five times to Monseigneur the Dauphin's room to see him breast-feeding\* . . . Monsieur<sup>†</sup> was stunned when Mme Péronne [the midwife] showed him that the Queen had given birth to a son";<sup>3</sup> as for the king, he insisted on taking the ambassador to the crib, there saying: "Here is a miraculous effect of the grace of our Lord, for that is how one must describe so beautiful a child born after my twenty-two years of marriage and my wife's four unhappy miscarriages."<sup>4</sup>

The king had good reason to rejoice: the birth of an heir must, everyone agreed, put an end to the long series of conspiracies based on the status of Gaston, duc d'Orléans; that should have become truer still when, in 1640, the queen was delivered of a second boy, Philippe, but old habits die hard. The last and per-

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\* Well-to-do women, in the seventeenth century, never breastfed their own babies; they hired nurses to take on that duty. When the king visited his son, therefore, he did not see the queen.

† Monsieur, with no name, was the title always borne by the king's brother.

haps most spectacular anti-Richelieu plot of the reign ran its course in 1641-42 and ended, but only just, with the cardinal's reaffirmed supremacy.

It seemed fairly sure, however, that, as the dauphin grew up, the duc d'Orléans, that linchpin of every plot, would become increasingly less important; on the other hand, France, like England, had a solid tradition of conflict between the sovereign and his heir, something the ever-suspicious Louis XIII knew very well. "Monseigneur the little Dauphin was not even three before he apparently worried and annoyed [the King]," Mme de Motteville wrote. "One day, coming back from some hunting trip, the little prince saw [his father] wearing a nightcap; he began to cry because he was frightened as he was not used to seeing him like that. The King was as angry as if it had been a thing of much consequence; he complained to the Queen, accused her of teaching his son to feel aversion for him and threatened her very roughly with the removal of both children from her care."<sup>5</sup> This incident took place in 1641; with the Cinq-Mars conspiracy the following year, the king's suspicion grew, and it took very fast footwork and many a humble protest of devotion to both king and cardinal before Anne could be sure of keeping her children. What that may have cost the proud Habsburg is not hard to imagine; still, she maintained her status: Keeping the two boys not only satisfied her very real maternal feelings, it also ensured that, should something happen to the king, she would be in a position of power.

Those who banked on the king's death had been disappointed often before; as for Richelieu, who also suffered from a variety of excruciatingly painful diseases, his contemporaries seem to have thought him immortal. Thus, when on December 17, 1642, he succumbed to a final illness, his death took everyone by surprise. It was followed by a moment of intense suspense: Would the king, now that he was free of the cardinal's forceful personality, change his policies and the rest of his ministers? Would he be ruled by a new favorite favorable to the anti-Richelieu party? It is, in fact, a measure of Louis XIII's steadfastness that he did no such thing. Richelieu was succeeded by the very man he had chosen for his place, a brilliantly intelligent Italian of rather humble origin, Giulio Mazzarini.