

# LOUIS XV



OLIVIER BERNIER



# LOUIS XV

OLIVIER BERNIER





## PREFACE

When he was a frail five-year-old child, the peace of Europe depended on his survival; when he was in his early thirties, he led his army into battle and won a great victory; when he reached sixty, appalled by the ineffectiveness of his own government, he carried through far-reaching and effective reforms: The century of Louis XV, Voltaire called it, and at the time, few doubted that his fifty-nine-year reign was one of the most important in French history.

Indeed, Louis XV seemed to have every quality needed to join Louis XIV, his great-grandfather, on that short list of monarchs who have deserved well of France. He was hard-working, conscientious, tolerant, and kind. He cared about the welfare of the state but also about the comfort of the people, so that his was an era of unprecedented prosperity. Almost uniquely, he preserved France from invasion. He understood and patronized the arts, and commissioned buildings - the Petit Trianon, for instance - which remind us that perfection is within reach. He married early, fathered nine children and then, true to the spirit of the time, went on to love a succession of beautiful women. Then, at the last, he broke the power of a selfish, reactionary elite so that the burden of taxation no longer rested exclusively on the shoulders of the poor. Why, then, is there not a long shelf of books about this wise and attractive monarch?

One reason, which will probably surprise no modern statesman, was that he cared nothing about publicity: Let people attack him as they might, he paid no attention and never condescended to answer. As a result, by the 1760s, disappointed factions at court were financing a flood of scurrilous pamphlets in which the king was pictured as a worn-out debauchee ruled by the whims of his mistress - an attitude summed up in the wholly apocryphal "after me the deluge." Then, because during the Revolution many people still remembered just how pleasant life had been under Louis XV, it became obvious that toppling his grandson, Louis XVI, wasn't enough. It was the monarchy itself that must become an object of scorn and hatred, so a whole new wave of pamphlets was written to attack the memory of Louis XV, and these often took the form of fake memoirs in which the public was offered the picture of a selfish, lazy rake.

Then, too, attacks came from a completely different side: In 1756, Louis XV broke with France's traditional hostility to the

Habsburgs because he realized that Prussia, not Austria, had become the danger to peace. Just how right he was the nineteenth century proved all too abundantly, but in his own lifetime he was attacked by all those - and they were a majority - who followed blindly after Prussia so that it soon became an accepted notion that the reversal of alliances had been a disaster. Soon, the new policy was portrayed as Madame de Pompadour's work: She had supposedly sold France for a few polite letters from the Empress Maria Theresa. Curiously, the fact that these letters never existed did nothing to stop the many attacks on king and favorite.

Actually, it is no wonder: In Louis XV's lifetime, these attacks at least served to express the rage of an impotent faction; during the Revolution, they were eagerly seized on as propaganda fodder; and when, in the 1860s, histories of the eighteenth century finally began to appear, their authors, who cared more for drama and "revelations" than truth, simply copied all the tired old lies. A feckless monarch obviously made for better copy than a wise and conscientious one. One example of this attitude will suffice. There exist two detailed accounts of the death of Louis XV, one by the duc de Croÿ, who was an eyewitness, a man of enormous conscience and exacting veracity; the other by an anonymous author who published his description in 1791. That alone should be enough to discredit him, as should the clearly revolutionary vocabulary he uses, but his story is far more entertaining than Croÿ's. Why settle for a brave and Christian death when a burlesque parodied from the comedies of Molière would be so much better? Of course, the burlesque prevailed.

Since then, there have been studies of different aspects of the reign of Louis XV - books like Jean Egret's *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire*, which focuses on the Parlement's tenacious opposition to king and reform; monographs on various economic aspects of the century; and one serious attempt at putting Louis XV and his era back into perspective, Pierre Gaxotte's *Le Siècle de Louis XV*. None of these books, however, focuses on the personality and achievements of the king himself; and Jacques Levron's affectionate biography, while excellent in its images of life at Versailles, leaves out most of Louis XV's political life. Clearly, it is time to take a fresh look at

the life and reign of this long-maligned king.

Nor is this review an impossible enterprise. It is not so very difficult to separate the fake letters from the real, the phony memoirs from the authentic. Then, too, there is an abundance of material on which the cautious author can lean: Louis XV was a great letter writer, several of his courtiers and ministers recorded everything they saw, and, of course, all his state papers are intact. Thus, the very bulk of his correspondence, the care with which he annotated the registers of court and government expenditure are enough to dispel, once and for all, the myth of the king's laziness. We know, too, just how well the economy did during his reign, how stable the currency remained. Finally, museums all over the world proudly exhibit the glorious objects made for Louis XV, while his rooms at Versailles remain today almost exactly as he saw them himself. The concerned observer can, therefore, find out just what happened from 1715 to 1774 and even, to a considerable extent, just how the king himself felt about the persons and events of his reign.

A good biographer must, of course, remain unbiased, but it is possible to be fair and yet react to the personality which emerges from the words of contemporary witnesses and documents. When we discover a gifted, honorable, and compassionate man who, after a long struggle with his feelings of inferiority, became one of the greatest statesmen of the ancien régime, then it is only natural to feel affection and respect. Historical truth must be unearthed if we want to understand our own day; to see a good man maligned calls for redress. It is the purpose of this book to show that monarch, at last, for the man he really was.



1

A VERY YOUNG KING

At eight-twenty, on the morning of September 1, 1715, a very old king lay dying in his red and gold bedroom at the heart of the great palace of Versailles. Not far away, in one of the wings, a five-year-old orphan, richly dressed in black velvet, stood alone, his governess far behind him. Within minutes, he heard a great noise coming closer. The doors burst open; before him, bowing deeply, stood his great-uncle, the duc d'Orléans, followed by the princes of the Blood Royal and the rest of the court. "As soon as the child heard himself called 'Sire' and 'Your Majesty,' he burst into tears and sobs even though no one had told him that [Louis XIV] was dead." The reign of Louis XV had begun.

It is no great wonder that the child reacted so quickly and strongly to the death of his infinitely remote great-grandfather. Death was already horribly familiar: Only three years earlier, he had lost his father, his mother, and his brother. Now he was alone. He scarcely knew the great-uncle who led the little troupe of princes; only his governess, the duchesse de Ventadour, was close to him: She was the only familiar figure. In that huge palace, before that enormous crowd of courtiers who surged behind the princes and tried to catch the new king's attention, the weight of the world had passed onto that sobbing boy; and young though he was, he knew it full well.

That dreadful shock was no surprise. For a month already, Louis XIV had been declining visibly. In London, they were placing bets on the exact date of his death. All through Europe, the statesmen were feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety: relief because they would soon be rid of the man who had determined the course of Continental politics for so long, anxiety because he left a sickly five-year-old as his successor. If the little boy died, the complex settlement reached at Utrecht only two years before might well become obsolete, and no one wanted the European war to start all over again.

It all depended now on the life of that child, the sole survivor of a once numerous family. In a mere three years, Louis XIV had lost his only son; his eldest grandson, the duc de Bourgogne; his youngest grandson, the duc de Berry; as well as his eldest great-grandson and the granddaughter by marriage, the duchesse de Bourgogne, who had brightened his old age. The succession that, in 1712, had seemed utterly secure now, in



late August 1715, had become a terrifying riddle. That the old king would soon be dead, everyone, including himself, could see. That the little boy would live long enough to succeed seemed extremely probable, but then, child mortality was appallingly high, the dauphin himself terribly fragile. When he followed his great-grandfather to the tomb, as everyone assumed he must, two men would have conflicting claims to the throne. One was Philip V, king of Spain and the Indies, the second of Louis XIV's grandsons. Upon leaving France, he had formally renounced all claims to the succession, but it was known that he repented having done so. The other claimant was the duc d'Orléans, Louis XIV's nephew, the son of his brother and the grandson of Louis XIII. If the eldest branch of the Bourbon family, as represented by Louis XIV's descendants, failed, then the younger branch, issued from Louis XIV's younger brother, was next in line. One thing was, at any rate, certain: For the moment, by right of birth, the duc d'Orléans must soon be regent of France. It was an easy and widely shared assumption that he would clear his way to the throne by arranging the little boy's demise.

Still, nothing was changed at Versailles. The monarch who took pride in the fact that anyone, anywhere in Europe, could look at his clock and know just what the king of France was doing kept all the rigors of the etiquette in force. For the last week of his life, he no longer left his bedroom, but the successive waves of courtiers came in according to the same rules as ever; the King's Music still played during his meals (except for the last three days, when he could bear it no longer); and the splendid autocrat went about taking leave of his court in the same masterful yet enormously polite manner he had perfected during his seventy-two-year reign. No one, except his helpless doctors, realized that he was in constant agonizing pain as gangrene, inch by inch, crept up his leg.

Some of the adieus were said not in private - the whole court was watching - but, at any rate, inaudibly to anyone except the person so favored. One after the other, the king spoke to his bastard, but now legitimized, children, to the princes of the Blood Royal, to the duc d'Orléans; and then he called for the dauphin.

"At noon [on August 26]," wrote that most devoted of courtiers,

the marquis de Dangeau, "His Majesty had the little Dauphin brought in to his room and, after having kissed him, he said: 'Sweet child, you are about to be a great king, but your whole happiness will depend on your submitting to God, and on the care you have to relieve your people of their burden. In order to do this you must, whenever you can, avoid making war: It is the ruin of the people. Do not follow the bad example I have given you on this point. Often, I have started wars without sufficient cause and continued them to satisfy my pride. Do not imitate me, be a peaceful ruler, and let your main object be to look after your subjects. Take advantage of the education Madame la duchesse de Ventadour [the Dauphin's governess] is giving you, obey her and follow the advice of Father Le Tellier when it comes to serving God: I give him to you as your confessor.

"As for you, Madame [he said to Madame de Ventadour], I owe you much gratitude for the care with which you are bringing up this child and for the tenderness you show him. I ask that you continue in the same fashion, and I urge him to give you every proof possible of his gratitude.' After this, he still kissed the Dauphin twice and gave him his blessing." It was a moving scene and made a lasting impression on the child, but even then there was another farewell to be said. The king called his courtiers to him after the dauphin had been taken from the room. Crowding around the bed, they listened in complete silence to the king who had ruled them so firmly and so long. "Messieurs," he said, "I am pleased with your services; you have served me faithfully and with the desire to please. I am sorry I could not reward you better; these last years have not allowed me to do so. Serve the Dauphin with the same affection you have shown me; he is only a five-year-old child who may have many setbacks, for I remember having had many myself when I was young. I am going, but the State will remain. Be faithful to it and let your example inspire all my other subjects. Always remain united and in accord - that is the strength of a state - and always obey the orders my nephew [the duc d'Orléans] will give you: He will govern the kingdom. I hope that you will do your duty and also that you will remember me sometimes." At that, according to Dangeau, "we all burst into tears and nothing could begin to describe the sobs, sorrow and despair of all those present."