

# A ROD FOR HIS OWN BACK

*'That spirit of infatuation and error  
The fatal avant-courier of the fall of kings.'*

FROM RACINE'S *ATHALIE*

LOUIS XIV BESTRODE THE END of the seventeenth and the opening of the eighteenth centuries with a mixture of menace and panache. He was as dominating a figure then as Napoleon was to be a hundred years later. Like Bonaparte, Louis relied on military might to impose his will; at home and abroad, he cajoled the unwilling and crushed the openly hostile. However, whereas Napoleon's control was limited to less than twenty years, Louis's pungent brand of autocracy wafted through seven decades of European history.

France had twenty million inhabitants: three times the population of Spain, four times that of England, and nine times that of the Netherlands. Louis harnessed this numerical advantage, building a huge, efficient, army. In a ferocious quest for personal glory and national security, he unleashed it on France's neighbours one after another.

Louis was the insecure and poorly educated son of an unremarkable king. His inadequate childhood tutoring left him with an outlook that was underpinned by two intertwined prejudices: a passionate belief in the divine right of kings, and a violent abhorrence of Protestantism. His

historical knowledge, which might have lent context to his reign, was limited. He was proud to be a grandson of Henry IV, one of France's greatest rulers. He was also aware that his father had yielded much respect and power during a disappointing 23-year reign. He wanted to emulate his grandfather, and put right his father's failings. Louis's life's aim was to create a homogenous force in the centre of Europe, which he could lead with distinction.

The instinct for greatness was evident early in Louis's rule. In September 1651, the thirteen-year-old boy-king gamely announced to *Parlement* that he was assuming his place as active head of state. However, this was a case of premature posturing, for the real power still resided with Cardinal Mazarin, Louis's first minister. This Macchiavellian cleric remained the de facto ruler of France until his death in 1661. Only then did Louis wrest the power that his self-esteem so craved. Confident in his regal status, the king informed his politicians: 'You will assist me with your advice when I ask for it.' This was to be less often than they could possibly have envisaged.

It was the start of an autocratic reign that led Winston S. Churchill to accord Louis a unique place in historical infamy: 'No worse enemy of human freedom has ever appeared in the trappings of polite civilisation. Insatiable appetite, cold, calculating ruthlessness, monumental conceit, presented themselves armed with fire and sword.'<sup>1</sup> The year he assumed real power, the twenty-three-year-old king married Maria Theresa, a daughter of King Philip IV of Spain. The dynastic potential of this union between Bourbon and Habsburg, the two most powerful dynasties of Western Europe, was enormous, but he could not capitalise on the match straightaway. As he explained in his *Mémoires*, Louis's domestic problems came first: in his kingdom 'disorder reigned everywhere'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, at the time of the wedding, international pressure persuaded Louis to renounce any future rights to the Spanish throne. The concession was accepted – Louis had no alternative – on condition that France receive the compensation of a sizeable dowry. This was not paid.

To the rest of Europe, this was a mere detail – an unfortunate reflec-

tion of Spain's parlous finances, which had brought bread riots to her cities and creeping paralysis to her industry. However, to Louis, the non-payment constituted a clear breach of contract. It kept alive his hopes that, in the right circumstances, he could lop off various branches of the huge Spanish empire for French consumption.

His opportunity came in 1665 when Philip IV of Spain died, leaving the throne to four-year-old Carlos II, a sickly boy not expected to see adulthood. Better yet, Carlos had no obvious heir – although Philip had fathered more than thirty illegitimate children, neither of his two queens had been able to provide him with another son. Louis decided that the Spanish Netherlands (roughly equating to modern-day Belgium) would be fitting compensation for the unpaid dowry. The region had been the springboard for Spanish invasions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so its annexation would solve a long-standing strategic problem for France. Louis informed his mother-in-law, the Queen Regent of Spain, and negotiations began. They ended in 1667 when Louis ordered his army to attack.

Marshal Turenne, perhaps Louis's most able commander, led 50,000 French troops on campaign, accompanied by his king. Thirsting to be in at the kill, Louis travelled in characteristic style, accompanied by his queen and two of his mistresses. Turenne captured half-a-dozen towns before laying siege to the city of Lille. Vauban, the king's renowned siege expert, cracked the Spanish defences within a month. The keys of the city were presented to Louis in a ceremony that emphasised his role as all-conquering king.

Louis had expected support from the Dutch United Provinces, whose savage and protracted war of liberation from Spanish control had made them instinctive opponents of the Habsburgs. Only five years previously they had signed a treaty with France, guaranteeing mutual armed assistance in attack or defence for the next twenty-five years. However, the Dutch had since realised that Spanish power was fading. Their international trading network reported Spanish ships rotting at anchor, while the garrisons were unpaid, under-equipped and sometimes only partially clothed. The Dutch had signed the treaty with France without realising

the intensity of Louis's ambitions. Now, many men of influence in the United Provinces pointed to the unprecedented increase in the size of the French army. Instead of joining Louis in the invasion, the Dutch reneged on the treaty.

The United Provinces sought help from two fellow Protestant nations, England and Sweden. The union with the English was surprising, since the two nations had recently been at war – Dutch warships had stormed up the Thames to burn a British fleet at anchor. Nevertheless, this new confederacy, the 'Triple Alliance', informed Louis that it would take up arms against him unless he withdrew from the Spanish Netherlands forthwith.

Louis was outraged by this betrayal, but he had no choice but to cease hostilities. France emerged from the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in possession of a handful of towns and cities, including Tournai, Oudenarde and Lille. However, Louis was convinced that the perfidy of the Dutch had denied him the lordship of the whole of the Spanish Netherlands. He swore revenge.

Louis eschewed renewed armed conflict, instead plotting his vengeance through sinuous diplomacy. First, he exploited his ties with Charles II of England. The two kings were first cousins and Charles, albeit secretly, shared Louis's Catholic faith. Charles's sister Henrietta was married to Louis's brother, the Duke of Orléans, and she acted as the conduit between the two Courts, in negotiations that led to the secret Treaty of Dover in May 1670. England and France agreed 'their joint resolution to humble the pride of the States-General [the Dutch Parliament], and to destroy the power of a people which has ... shown ingratitude to those who have helped to create its republic.'<sup>3</sup> The alliance was cemented by massive bribery: Louis paid Charles a secret pension of £225,000 a year for the duration of the war. Charles's chief minister, the Earl of Sunderland, also pocketed vast sums. Louis insisted on a clause that committed Charles to re-establishing Catholicism in Britain – promising further payments and the provision of 6,000 French troops if it met with resistance. Charles II took the money, but shrank from challenging the staunch Protestantism of his people.

Sweden proved equally receptive to French gold. For years the Protestant champion of Europe, the Swedes were beginning to place territorial ambition over religious solidarity. Already in control of Finland, Estonia, Livonia and West Pomerania, Swedish ambitions now extended to Denmark and Poland. The Dutch could fend for themselves.

Having torn the wings off the triple alliance, Louis entrusted his most seasoned and dynamic marshals with the avenging invasion. In 1672 Turenne and Condé marched through the Bishopric of Liège with 120,000 troops, before advancing along the Rhine on separate banks. Facing just 25,000 Dutch soldiers, the French swarmed over the southern areas of the United Provinces. Louis ordered a war of dark aggression: ‘Go, my children,’ Marshal Luxembourg exhorted his men, ‘plunder, murder, destroy – and if it be possible to commit yet greater cruelties, be not negligent therein. Let me see that I am not deceived in my choice of the flower of the King’s troops.’<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch took desperate measures. In coastal Holland the dykes’ sluice gates were opened, flooding the low-lying land to form the defensive Water Line. With their fields and roads submerged, the peasants retreated out of reach of the invader, behind fortified town walls. This held the French back through the autumn, but in late December winter frosts turned the expanses of water into walkways of ice. Marshal Luxembourg issued skates to his foot soldiers, so they could speed across the frozen flats. French soldiers raped the women of Bodegraven and Zwammerdam before herding them into their homes with their families. They then set the buildings alight, razing both towns to the ground, and burning alive many of their inhabitants. Louvois, the leading French military administrator of the age, recorded with relish his part in such an atrocity: ‘We lit the town and grilled all the Hollanders in it.’<sup>5</sup>

Louis’s policy of deliberate terror won him Leiden, whose citizens forced their mayor to greet the invaders outside the walls, bearing the city’s keys in cowed surrender. But the atrocities were ultimately counter-productive, inspiring lasting hatred of France. Saint Simon recognised French savagery to be counter-productive, since it ‘caused such fear to all Europe that France never recovered from it.’<sup>6</sup> The de Witt brothers,

key Dutch apologists of Louis's before the war, had refused to heed warnings that invasion was imminent. They were seized by the mob, shot, and then torn into pieces: their ripped-out hearts were placed on public display. In the de Witts' place emerged William of Orange, the leading member of what had been the Dutch ruling family before the advent of the republic.

By blood a prince, William was now created *Stadholder*, the generalissimo of the republic's forces. In their desperation the States-General were prepared to proclaim this living vestige of their nation's royal past Captain- and Admiral-General for life; this despite William's being, in Voltaire's estimation, merely 'a young Prince in poor health, who had seen neither siege nor combat'.<sup>7</sup>

William was aware of his shortcomings. To compensate for his military inexperience, he appointed the redoubtable Count von Waldeck as his second-in-command. The contrast of the charismatic, if sickly, young prince and the ill-humoured, but able, Prussian general gave the Dutch focus and hope. Waldeck inspired the troops, while William's diplomatic skills brought allies to the aid of his people. Spain and the Holy Roman Empire joined the fight against France, forcing Louis to quit the United Provinces. After 1673 the Dutch War was mainly fought in the Spanish Netherlands.

The strong Dutch navy, under the brilliant admirals van Tromp and de Ruyter, stopped the English and French from landing invasion forces. By now William was being hailed as the 'Redeemer of the Fatherland': a young and dogged Protestant champion had emerged, who would stand against Louis for the remainder of the century.

William's life's work was a resolute refusal to bow to Louis's military strength. It is a tale of brave resistance that takes us from the ravaged Lowlands of the 1670s to the brink of the war that produced the Battle of Blenheim. The influence of William – as Holland's prince, England's king, and France's enemy – is a backdrop to our tale.

WILLIAM'S HATRED OF LOUIS PREDATED the rape of the United Provinces. His family inheritance included small, autonomous Orange,

‘which country and principality’, John Evelyn noted, ‘had no dependence on France these 500 years,’<sup>8</sup> despite being surrounded by French territory. To Louis, Orange’s independence was an accident that needed correction. The principality’s Protestantism was a further affront to Louis’s Catholic zeal. In 1660, Louis overran Orange, and made a triumphal entrance to establish his lordship of the new acquisition. His progress concluded at Orange’s fortifications, which he climbed. Reaching the top, he pulled a fragment of stone from the battlements, and tossed it over the walls to the ground below. The king’s retinue were quick to interpret this gesture, demolishing the fortress soon afterwards. Louis sent word to the ten-year-old William that he would oversee Orange as its protector, until the boy attained his majority. In the meantime, Louis explained, France would enjoy the principality’s revenues. William never forgave the confiscation of his patrimony.

The Dutch War ended in victory for Louis, recognised in a series of treaties from 1678–80. The Dutch had assembled a potent coalition to oppose him, but the combined forces of the United Provinces, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire and several German states failed to defeat France. Franche-Comté and a dozen key cities were ceded to France, shortly followed by Alsace and Lorraine. In France, Louis was referred to as *Louis le Grand*, a sobriquet that he wholeheartedly embraced.

To cover his territorial ambitions with a veneer of legality, Louis established offices, *Chambres de Réunion*. There his lawyers sifted through ancient treaties and agreements, in search of long-forgotten clauses which might justify French territorial claims abroad. The 1680s saw the relentless combination of Louis, his court lawyers and his soldiers continue to identify and then seize cities and lands to which often only tenuous pretensions could be made. In 1681 the *Chambres de Réunion* identified Louis’s claim to the county of Chiny, in Spanish-owned Luxembourg. Three years of strong resistance followed, leading to the brief but bloody War of the Reunions. In 1684, however, blockaded Luxembourg was plucked from Spain, to become a French possession. Weeks later, Strasbourg was similarly added to France’s dominions. The same year, Louis ordered the bombardment of Genoa without declaration of war, because

of the city's pro-Habsburg leanings. No longer was Louis's pretext simply to add francophone areas to his French dominions: German and Italian lands were also in his sights.

Louis emerged from the concluding Treaty of Ratisbon with his two major acquisitions, Strasbourg and Luxembourg, intact. Austria and Spain were obliged to recognise France's new frontiers for twenty years. From The Hague, William of Orange watched Louis's apparently unstoppable advance with despair: 'If God does not take upon himself the protection of this poor people and her neighbours, in a short time all will be over.' <sup>9</sup> Evelyn, in England, agreed, recognising that Louis was within reach of establishing a 'Fifth Universal Monarchy'. <sup>10</sup>

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1685, LOUIS developed an agonising and persistent toothache, and his doctors decided to extract the offending molar. However, they were ignorant of the importance of post-operative hygiene, and infection set in: the king's gums, jawbone and sinuses became dangerously inflamed. A committee of nervous physicians concluded that drastic measures were called for. Louis underwent a truly terrible ordeal: they removed all the teeth from the top layer of his mouth, then punctured his palate and broke his jaw. This was all completed without anaesthetic, the king being fully awake throughout the procedure. The most powerful man in Western Europe was helpless before the primitive medical knowledge of his time. At least the wounds were kept clean on this occasion – cauterised with red-hot coals.

The Sun King never fully regained his former dignity. He had to be careful when drinking, in case the contents of his goblet reappeared out of his nose. The English poet Matthew Prior was later to observe that: 'The monarch as to his health is lusty enough, his upper teeth are out ... and he picks and shows his under teeth [with] a good deal of affectation, being the vainest creature alive even as to the least things.' <sup>11</sup> Similar mismanagement of another chronic irritant led to more than mere embarrassment at the dinner table.

To Louis, the continued tolerance of France's Huguenots was a betrayal of his deepest beliefs, and triggered his most heart-felt preju-



dices. The nation's one million Protestants had been left relatively untroubled since the bloody religious and civil wars that preceded Louis's personal rule. This was a pragmatic recognition of the material benefits that the Huguenots brought to the economy. They were conspicuously prominent in specialist areas of trade, commerce, and manufacture. Their rights to freedom of worship had been enshrined in the Edict of Nantes.

Now, with some of his key advisers encouraging a policy of intolerance, Louis resolved to rid the country of what he viewed as heresy. Louis's bigotry, instilled during his scanty childhood education, was stoked by his mistress, Madame de Maintenon, herself a convert to Catholicism. She argued that the acceptance of divergent Christian views was untenable, and would stain her lover's soul.

Louis had given vent to his religious prejudices in 1679, withdrawing some of the Protestants' rights to worship. In 1680 he sent a regiment of dragoons to Poitou, ordering its soldiers to be billeted on the richer households. The expense of this was dire; but it was nothing compared with the deprivations meted out to the poorer Protestants in the region. They were raped and brutalised, whilst encouraged to end their torment by embracing Catholicism. Thirty thousand Poitevin conversions were recorded, convincing the king of his policy's effectiveness. The *dragonnades* became a valued weapon against the Huguenots.

In the autumn of 1685, the season of his gruesome encounter with his dentists, Louis revoked the Edict of Nantes. Protestant worship was deemed a criminal activity, with imprisonment – even death – the penalty for those who refused to turn to Catholicism. Unless they were protected by noble status, women who rejected the *religion du roi* were whipped, and their faces branded with the *fleur de lis*. Men were broken at the wheel: each bone in their body systematically smashed by the executioner. To ensure that there could be no escape, Louis declared it illegal to seek sanctuary from his religious tyranny abroad.

Despite this, over 200,000 Huguenots fled France, many leaving behind all their possessions rather than slow their flight. The fugitives were enthusiastically welcomed in the United Provinces, Denmark, and Prussia. Many came to England, too, although there they were toler-

ated rather than fêted. Nevertheless, the English listened to the refugees' tales of horror with deep concern. John Evelyn recorded with disgust: 'The French persecution ... raging with the utmost barbarity, exceeded even what the very heathens us'd ... on a sudden demolishing all their churches, banishing, imprisoning and sending to the galleys all the ministers; plundering the common people ... taking away their children; forcing people to the Mass, and then executing them as relapsers ...'.<sup>12</sup> Throughout Protestant Europe, such tales were received with horror. Since Louis was clearly intent on expanding France's frontiers, many wondered if they would be next to experience such brutality.

In 1686, the United Provinces joined Spain and Prussia to form the League of Augsburg: a defensive alliance against Louis. He remained deaf to the fear and exasperation evoked by the rasping tone of his kingship, thrusting himself into the affairs of Cologne, where the incumbent ruler, Archbishop-Elector von Wittelsbach, was seriously ill. Louis wanted to be certain that his successor would be a friend to France, as von Wittelsbach had been: for Cologne, situated between France, several Germanic states, and the United Provinces, controlled bridgeheads across the area's major rivers. The king informed Cologne that he had chosen its new archbishop-elect, who would take office when the current incumbent died. Louis's choice was Cardinal von Fürstenberg, the Bishop of Strasbourg, who had cravenly served France's interests for thirty years. However, Pope Innocent ignored Louis, installing Joseph Clement, brother to the Elector of Bavaria, instead.

Louis ordered his troops to invade, and they laid siege to Philippsburg. Hostilities quickly escalated: the French ravaged the Rhineland, provoking the Prussians, Saxons and Hanoverians into action. The Emperor sent a strong force under the Elector of Bavaria to assist them. War was inevitable, Louis knew that; but its form and scale was to surprise all of Europe.

Louis asserted rights over the Palatine from Strasbourg through to Mainz, in the name of his sister-in-law, Liselotte. Once more he anticipated speedy victory. The invading troops surpassed the litany of war crimes associated with the Dutch War of the 1670s, when Turenne had

pillaged the electorate. In 1688, the Second Devastation of the Palatinate saw the destruction of a dozen historic cities, including Heidelberg, Worms, Mannheim and Speyer. Hundreds of towns and villages shared treatment of unspeakable savagery: murder, rape, torture and looting.

The French atrocities recalled the worst excesses of the Thirty Years' War: and this in the so-called Age of Reason. Louis XIV's state-sanctioned terror ran contrary to every tenet of 'civilised' warfare. Across Europe it was generally accepted that civilian losses should be kept to a minimum and that private property should be respected.

WILLIAM OF ORANGE NOW SAW that it was not just his Dutchmen who looked to him for leadership, but also the majority of German princes. Emperor Leopold found common cause with the confederacy, bolstering the standing of the League of Augsburg by joining its ranks. He was uncomfortable about helping Protestant forces against a divinely anointed king, but political considerations overrode religious sensibilities. Besides, Leopold was comforted by the Pope's encouragement: Innocent was furious that Louis had dismissed the papal claim to infallibility, and denied the Pontiff's right to excommunicate princes. He, too, joined the anti-French coalition. So it was that by the end of 1688 only one power stood aloof from the forthcoming European war: England.