

CHAPTER
21

Section 2

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Cat and the King*
by Louis Auchincloss

The Cat and the King is a work of historical fiction about Louis XIV. The novel's narrator—Louis de Rouvroy, the second duc de Saint-Simon—is based on a real-life French noble who observed life at the court of Louis XIV and recorded in his memoirs all that he saw and felt about the reign of the Sun King. The following excerpt, which is drawn from an incident that actually happened, takes place shortly after Saint-Simon has married Gabrielle. What impressions of Louis XIV and life at Versailles does this passage convey?

Gabrielle's first substantial contribution to my career at court was in the affair of the alms bag. It was the custom after mass for the young duchesse de Bourgogne, the king's grand-daughter-in-law, who, as we had lost both queen and dauphine, was the first lady of France, to ask a duchess to pass a velvet purse for contributions to the church. The "Lorrainers," members of the House of Guise, who should have ranked with us as peers, were always claiming a higher position as "foreign princes," based on silly titles bestowed on them by the Holy Roman Emperor because of scraps of land held along the border. I now learned the latest outrage: that their ladies were claiming exemption from the almsbag duty. There was nothing for me to do but organize the dukes to make a similar claim.

"But who will pass the alms bag?" Gabrielle asked me.

"How should I know? Perhaps some simple gentlewoman."

"But if the duchess asks me?"

"If she asks you, of course, you must. But she can't ask you if you're not there. What I'm saying is that the duchesses should abstain from mass."

"Won't it anger the king?"

"I can't help that, my dear. It's the Lorrainers he should be mad at. They've been an infernal nuisance ever since the days of the League. Why a monarch who's so sensitive to treason should put up with them, I can't conceive."

Gabrielle, I had to admit, was correct about the king's reaction. After the first day, when half the duchesses at court absented themselves from mass, the duc de Beauvillier sent for me, and Gabrielle and I went at once to his apartment in the north wing. The duke, who, as I have indicated, was the only peer in the king's council, was an old friend of my parents and had been my guide and mentor

ever since I first came to court. I admired him without reserve and had even once offered to marry any one of his eight daughters. Fortunately for me and Gabrielle, the oldest had wished to take holy orders, the second had been a cripple and the rest too young.

"I think you ought to know," Beauvillier told me, "that the king spoke of you this morning at the end of the council. He said that ever since you had resigned your commission, you have been obsessed with petty questions of rank and precedence."

"Oh, he remembered about my commission?"

I had left the army, two years before, to devote myself to the court.

"The king remembers everything."

"Then I wish he would remember the countless disloyalties of the Lorrainers!"

"If he doesn't appear to, you can be sure he has a reason. In any case, he wishes me to convey to you his desire that the duchesse de Saint-Simon should pass the alms bag on Monday."

I hesitated. "Is that an order, sir?"

"Is the king's desire not always an order?"

"Very well. But surely I need not be present. He will not require me to assist at my own humiliation?"

"That is up to you."

"Ah, but, my dear, may I make a suggestion?"

I turned to Gabrielle in mild surprise. It was not like her to intervene in my conversation with an older person. "Certainly."

"Request an audience with the king! Tell him you raised the issue of the alms bag only because you thought it was one in which he was not concerned. But now that you know he wants me to carry the bag, you are not only proud but honored!"

I looked into her anxious eyes with even greater surprise. Then I turned to the old duke.

"Do it, Saint-Simon!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "And be thankful for a smart little wife."

"And then ask the king for an apartment in the palace!" Gabrielle hurriedly added.

"Speak to him at his dinner," Beauvillier advised me. "Request an audience for tomorrow. I'll put in a word for you at the coucher [bed time]." He glanced at his watch. "It's almost one now. Hurry up if you want a spot near his table!"

The king liked to sup with members of his family, but he was inclined to dine alone, that is, alone at table. There was always a group of courtiers standing by the small table at which he was served, silently regarding him. He ate, as he did everything else, with remarkable solemnity, dignity and grace. He would rise a chicken bone to his lips, take an incisive, effective bite and then chew slowly, his dark, glazed eyes focused in an opaque stare. When he turned his head to survey the room or the watching crowd, this stare might be softened to encompass not an acknowledgment, certainly not a greeting, but simply a recognition. Somehow you always knew that he knew you. And he not only knew who was present; he knew who was not.

There was something hypnotic about the effect of one man exercising a natural function while his audience remained motionless. It was like watching a priest take communion. The huge, high-piled black perruque [wig] moved rhythmically with the royal mastications; the high, arched brows twitched; the great aquiline nose snorted after the thick lips had sipped wine. His most ordinary acts were majestic. . . .

It was permissible for those standing closest to the table to address the king when he was not actually swallowing or masticating. Waiting until his gaze took me in, I stepped forward and bowed.

"May I be permitted a word, sire, on the question of the alms bag?"

The dark eyes emitted a faint glitter. "There is no question, sir. The matter has been regulated."

"But, sire, I humbly suggest there has been a misapprehension of my attitude. I wish only to make explicit my utter loyalty and devotion."

"Very well, then. When you wish."

He turned to his goblet, and I stepped quickly back. So far, so good. After dinner Beauvillier told me exactly what to do next. I should stand in the front row of the courtiers waiting outside the council chamber the following morning and step immediately forward when the king came out. He would then appoint a time for an audience, perhaps immediately. It was all simple enough, but nonetheless I hardly closed my eyes that night, and Gabrielle made me drink two glasses of wine with breakfast.

At noon, outside the council chamber, I did as I had been told. The king paused to give me one of his glacial stares, a mixture of surprise and faint irritation. Then he must have recollected what Beauvillier had told him at the coucher, for, beckoning me to follow him, he stepped into the embrasure [opening in a thick wall] of a window, where he folded his arms and waited for me to speak.

I began with what I had intended to be the very briefest summary of the alms-bag controversy, but he interrupted me testily.

"I have no time, sir, for such nit-picking. You spend your life fussing over imagined slights. You had far better have stayed in the army, where you were of some use."

I saw at once that the situation was desperate. I even dared now to raise my voice.

"I had no intention, sire, of bringing up the issue of ducal rights. I only wish to tell you that, as a duke, my sole aim is to be of service to you. Had the duchesse de Saint-Simon and I known in the beginning that it was your desire that she should pass the alms bag, she would have passed it joyfully, and with my total blessing, among the humblest in the land, in the most fetid of hospitals, in the darkest of dungeons!"

The king's countenance at last relaxed. "Now that's talking," he said in a milder tone.

I went on, carried away by my excitement, to declaim on my loyalty and that of my ancestors; to tell him that we were second to none in our zeal for the royal service. The king let me continue in this way for what must have been several minutes before interrupting me at last by raising his hand.

The huge, high-piled black perruque [wig] moved rhythmically with the royal mastications; the high, arched brows twitched; the great aquiline nose snorted after the thick lips had sipped wine.

And then, to my astonishment, it was to answer me in a tone that was almost benign!

At first, I hardly took in what he was saying. His effect on me was hypnotic. I kept my gaze so firmly fixed upon his lips, not presuming to look him in the eye, that soon I began to feel a bit dizzy. His opening and closing orifice conjured up in my fantasy the mouth of a cave in the middle of a desert of infinite range and emptiness. It was as if no life could be contained in the parching dryness; that only in the darkness behind that agitated adit [entrance to a mine] could there exist sustenance and support. But how could one make the passage past those teeth with any hope of safety? I was hearing the king, a voice kept saying to me! I was actually hearing the king!

And then the purport of his words began again to come through to me. His tone was almost avuncular [like an uncle].

"I had not thought, sir, that you had a proper excuse for quitting the army. However, if you truly wish to be of service here at court, there will always be occasion. But let me give a piece of advice. You must watch that tongue of yours! It is too inclined to be free. If you take care of that, I shall take care of you. I do not forget that my father loved yours."

This reference to my beloved progenitor completely undid me. The tears, I am not ashamed to admit, started to my eyes, and I proceeded to pour forth my gratitude. I do not recall everything I said, but I know that I must have expressed with passion my desire to serve him in all matters. I ended by begging to be considered for any rooms in the chateau that might be available so that I should have more ample opportunity to pay my court. The reader, in another era, may smile, but he will not be able to imagine the effect of Louis XIV on his subjects when he chose to be gracious.

He spoke again. "I shall keep your request in mind." That measured tone always convinced the petitioner that his plea had been securely filed. "One never knows when a vacancy may occur."

And then, with that brief though definite, courteous though irrevocable nod, he moved on to the great gallery. I could feel in the very air of the chamber around me the soaring of my reputation.

Gabrielle met me in the antechamber with the round window known as the Oeil de Boeuf and took in at a glance the success of my audience. When she heard about the apartment, she clapped her hands.

"That means we're sure to get one!"

Indeed, she was right, for we were granted an apartment of three tiny rooms the very next day. They were hardly comfortable, yet they were more coveted than the greatest mansion. For only by living in Versailles could one fully appreciate the delights of the court. The palace at night had its peculiar pleasures and opportunities. The public was evicted, and the royal family retired behind closed doors, guarded by sleepy Swiss sentries. Something almost like informality prevailed.

It was a time for small, intimate suppers or conversations, for passionate post mortems of the day's events: who was in, who out, who had said what to Madame de Maintenon [Louis XIV's wife], who had been alone with the king. It was a time to call on the ministers and perhaps catch them, relaxed, in indiscretions. Oh, yes, an apartment was a great boon, and I was properly grateful to my wife.

"Now you've got everything you need!" she exclaimed proudly when we at last surveyed our redecorated reception chamber. I had even hung my father's portrait of the beloved Louis XIII over the little marble mantel.

"Need for what?"

"For whatever you want."

"And what do I want?"

"Ah, my dear, *you* must provide the answer to that!"

Discussion Questions

Clarifying

1. Who was involved in the so-called affair of the alms bag?
2. What was the outcome of Saint-Simon's audience with Louis XIV?
3. **Making Inferences** Based on your reading of this excerpt, how would you characterize the king's relationship with nobles such as Saint-Simon?