

# THE AFFAIR OF THE QUEEN'S NECKLACE

By C. W. M. GELL

**D**R. G. P. GOOCH has recently published a scholarly essay on the relations between the greatest of the later Hapsburgs, the Empress Maria Theresa, her idealistic son and co-ruler, Joseph III of Austria, and her daughter, Marie Antoinette, who became Queen of France. Dr. Gooch comes down decisively on the side of those historians who have held that Marie Antoinette was a foolish and frivolous woman. The circumstances of her life, her courageous bearing before the Paris mob which had come to Versailles on the night of 5th October, 1789, to demand "*les bijoux de la Reine,*" and her dignity and fortitude at the guillotine four years later have given her a stature in history to which her personality did not entitle her—a stature perceptibly enhanced in popular affection by the stories of her beauty, her elegance, her extravagance and her lovers, some (if not most) of whom were certainly legendary.

She was married to the Dauphin on 7th May, 1770, during a brief *rapprochement* between the Houses of Bourbon and Hapsburg for which the French minister, Choiseul, was primarily responsible. She came as a gay and irresponsible child of fifteen to the etiquette-bound court of Louis XV—a mannered and cultured society which Louis XIV, Richelieu and Mazarin had deprived of political authority a century earlier and which was therefore much given to faction and intrigue of a personal nature—a society of courtiers without power. With her light-hearted disregard for established social conventions and something of her mother's prudery in her aversion to receiving notorious courtesans, Marie Antoinette soon made enemies at Versailles, whose gossip—for which her extravagance provided an excuse—was outrageously malicious, aiming to undermine her position by vicious denigration of her character.

Two factors increased her unpopularity among the aristocracy after her husband became King in 1774. First, her marriage, which had been frigid and formal, became one of spontaneous affection, as the result of an operation to the King.

Author's Note: This article is based on a paper which the author read to the Historical Society of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 1939 and again in 1940. The original paper discussed the evidence for and against the various alternative versions of the affair; but as this would make the present article too discursive, it has been confined to the version which the author considers most probable.

As M. Funck-Brentano has written: "Louis XVI loved his wife with a love which the last Bourbons accorded only to their mistresses." Thereby, the Queen took the place of the Pompadour and the duBarry as the centre of social and political intrigue and the target of the animosity of the disappointed and frustrated. Secondly, the traditional feud between Bourbon and Hapsburg began to revive, Maurepas reversed the policy of Choiseul and the growing French distrust of Austria was intensified by the Partition of Poland in 1772 and the war of the Bavarian Succession in 1777-79. So far as I know, there is no proof that Marie Antoinette ever tried to sacrifice French interests to Austrian, and a good deal of evidence that she refused to intervene on her brother's behalf. But it was inevitable that at a time of growing tension the Queen should attract to herself, as *l'Autrichienne*, much unprovoked and unjustified unpopularity, and indeed this spread beyond the court to the crowds which had earlier acclaimed her youth and beauty with true French gallantry.

It was in this atmosphere that a scandal broke which finally and irretrievably brought the monarchy into disrepute and directed the odium of both the nobility and the *sansculottes* against the person of the Queen. "The case of the necklace," said Mirabeau, "was the prelude of the Revolution." "Perhaps," added Napoleon, "the death of the Queen dated from that." And a recent French biographer of the Queen has written: "Starting from the affair of the necklace, France hastened towards the Revolution. Royalty had lost its last prestige. Marie Antoinette was by anticipation discrowned."

The affair of the necklace, like the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey in 1678 in England, is one of the great unsolved mysteries of history. There is much to be said for and against each of the several possible explanations and no conclusive evidence for any one. And it has been necessary to dwell a little on the character of the Queen, because the chief alternative version to the one here told presupposes that she was a calculating and unscrupulous woman—and this, whatever her own faults, does not seem probable. I am fully aware that in the following story I have many good historians more or less on my side and as many against me. But on one point all are agreed—that the *effect* of the scandal on the prestige of the monarchy and the personal reputation of the Queen was disastrously decisive.

As I see it, the principal in the affair of the necklace was a

woman, Jeanne de St. Remy, whose father claimed descent from an illegitimate branch of the old royal house of Valois. He was, however, a waster and debauchee and his two children were rescued from the gutter by a kindly Marchioness. Jeanne was a young lady of considerable charm and ambition, but little character. She ran away from her convent school and not long after had to marry a young *gendarme*, called laMotte, whose twins were born a month later but soon died. Introduced by the Marchioness to a number of society people, Jeanne assumed the fictitious title of the Countess de la Motte-Valois and settled down with her husband on the fringes of the court society, where they lived by their wits off those who wished to secure the *entrée* to the court and were persuaded that the la Mottes could provide it.

Among those to whom the Marchioness had introduced them was the Cardinal Louis de Rohan, premier ecclesiastic of France, Grand Almoner, Bishop of Strasbourg, Abbot of St. Waast, *provisieur* of the Sorbonne and the leading member of one of the country's oldest and wealthiest aristocratic families. This great man had been French ambassador in Vienna from 1772-74, but had let his wit outrun his discretion at the expense both of Maria Theresa and her daughter, who secured his recall soon after she became Queen of France. Thereafter, Marie Antoinette refused to receive him at court and the ambitious prelate knew that he had in the Queen's disfavour an insuperable obstacle to his further advancement in the royal service.

We cannot now be sure how de Rohan came to believe that Jeanne la Motte was an intimate friend of the Queen. And, indeed, his immense credulity, which this version of the affair supposes, can only be explained by ambition overreaching both his judgment and his common sense. The physical attractions of the "Countess", who may have been his mistress for a time, may have contributed to lulling his critical faculty and his exile from the court deprived him of the opportunity of verifying her assertions. Anyway, it seems clear that over a period of months she brought him to believe that she was a close companion of the Queen who, she said, was willing to forget the past. At a nocturnal meeting in the gardens of Versailles the cardinal was led to suppose that he had been allowed to kiss the Queen's hand and that he had heard her murmur that his restoration to favour was imminent. In fact, the hand belonged to a prostitute calling herself the Baroness d'Oliva, who sufficiently resembled the Queen to pass in the dark. The cardinal was now

ready to contribute handsomely through the "Countess" to some charities which the Queen was said to support, though of course the money actually went to maintain the la Mottes in their riotous living.

About this time, the end of 1784, Jeanne la Motte first heard of the colossal diamond necklace originally made for Madame du Barry by the court jewellers, Böhmer and Bassenge. Louis XV died before buying it for his last mistress and it had remained on the jewellers' hands ever since, for the few who could afford it did not care for its massive inelegance. Marie Antoinette, to whom it was offered when she became Queen, refused it with the famous retort: "We have more need of a ship of war than a set of jewels."

With much of their fortune committed to this fantastic white elephant which they had later hawked at the court of Spain in vain, the jewellers were most gratified on 29th December, 1784, to receive inquiries about the necklace from a Countess de la Motte-Valois on behalf of someone who, though not named, was clearly perceived to be the Queen. On a second visit a few weeks later the "Countess" announced that arrangements had been completed for its purchase for 1,600,000 livres and that the transaction would be accomplished by a great nobleman, who would act as security. Meanwhile she told de Rohan that the Queen required him to perform a small confidential service for her, after which he might expect to recover his position. Accordingly, on February 1st, 1785, the cardinal settled with the jewellers to pay the money in eight quarterly instalments and took possession of the necklace upon the further security of a letter of authorization signed "Marie Antoinette de France." It was impressed upon both him and the jewellers that the transaction must be kept completely secret as the Queen did not wish the King to hear of her extravagance—a reservation which seemed quite natural in the then state of the country's finances. In the presence of the "Countess", de Rohan then handed the necklace over to "a royal messenger"—actually Jeanne la Motte's secretary and lover, Rétaux de Villette in disguise.

As soon as the conspirators had the necklace in their hands, they broke it up. De Villette was arrested in Paris a fortnight later for selling diamonds at suspiciously low prices, but, as the police knew of no robbery, he was released. LaMotte was in London in April, offering diamonds cheaply to Bond Street dealers and attributing his affluence on his return to successful punting on the English turf. A large number of other dis-

reputable characters were involved in the dispersal of the jewels and were later given small sentences at the trial.

On July 1st, when the Queen was due to pay the first instalment, the "Countess" said the Queen considered the price exorbitant and demanded a reduction of 200,000 *livres*. Anxious to cut their losses, the jewellers at once agreed. While both the cardinal and the jewellers became increasingly suspicious, the "Countess" prevaricated a little longer, until on August 3rd she bluntly told Böhmer and Bassenge that the letter of authorization was a fake, and that the cardinal was a rich man and would pay. De Rohan later admitted that in these circumstances he would somehow have found the money in order to avoid the scandal and other dangerous consequences if the fraud was exposed.

Only the fact that she kept up her deceit a few days too long prevented Jeanne la Motte from getting away with her crime. For at the end of July, Böhmer, already worried by the procrastination of the "Countess" and the fact that the Queen had never yet worn the necklace, made some inquiries from a lady-in-waiting, who subsequently mentioned the matter to the Queen. On August 9th Marie Antoinette sent for Böhmer and the unhappy man had to confess what had occurred. The Queen's fury knew no bounds, being chiefly directed against de Rohan's monstrous effrontery in supposing that she would so use the services of a man whom she loathed and despised. So when the cardinal came to Versailles on August 15th, to celebrate mass on the Feast of the Assumption—the duty of his office as Grand Almoner and his one visit to the court each year—he was summoned before the King and forthwith arrested in his crimson robes. Next day he was sent to the Bastille, where he was joined two days later by Jeanne la Motte and most of the others involved, except la Motte who escaped to England.

The King offered de Rohan the alternatives of public trial by the Paris *parlement* or of leaving his punishment to the royal prerogative. De Rohan knowing that he was already condemned by the King, chose to risk the publicity. The result was fatal for the monarchy. For the *parlement* was largely composed of those *bourgeois* intellectuals who were the bitterest critics of the *ancien régime*. As one of its members, Fréteau de St. Just—himself executed a few months after the Queen—exclaimed: "Grand and joyful business! A cardinal in a swindle! The Queen implicated in a forgery! Filth on the crook and on the sceptre! What a triumph for the principles of liberty!"

It was the custom to publish the defence of the accused as pamphlets before the trial began, and in the seven months that followed the arrests the gutter press of Paris ran riot. Jeanne la Motte sought to divert attention from her own part in the affair by wild and salacious libels against everyone remotely involved and even some who were not—in particular, the Queen, de Rohan, and a flamboyant figure, widely known as the Divine Cagliostro. She alleged that this great sorcerer, who ranked with Casanova, Ximenes and Mesmer in an age given to occultism and magic, and who happened to have been staying with de Rohan just before the scandal broke, was an emissary of some masonic revolutionaries who had engineered the whole affair for the purpose of discrediting the Crown. But Cagliostro proved as formidable and fertile in invention as his traducer. Each of their pamphlets sold by the tens of thousands and inspired a spate of lampoons on the life of the court and the character and morality of the Queen. Opinion, which had been equally antipathetic to King and cardinal, swung around decisively against the Crown.

The vital issue of the trial, which began on May 22nd, 1786, was not the fraud for which the guilt of Jeanne la Motte was reasonably obvious, but the *lésé majesté* involved in the misuse of the Queen's name, its intended concealment from the King, and the impersonation of the Queen at the scene in the gardens of Versailles. The vindication of the Queen's honour and dignity required not merely the conviction of the criminals but the public condemnation of de Rohan's contumacy. His unqualified acquittal was, therefore, a most serious reverse for the royal cause and the measure of Louis's error of judgment in offering him the chance of a public trial. The other sentences—the acquittal of Cagliostro and the d'Oliva, various terms of imprisonment for the minor characters and the sentencing of Jeanne la Motte to be whipped by the public executioner, branded with a V for *voleuse* on her shoulder and confined to the Salpêtrière prison for life—were incidental to the main process.

This resounding public setback for the monarchy was aggravated by the testimony given by Jeanne la Motte and Cagliostro, both of whom fully exploited the histrionic possibilities of a public trial. Their verbal duel, which Jeanne concluded by throwing a candlestick at Cagliostro and biting her warder, abounded with trenchant abuse and sensational accusations. Jeanne changed her ground continually, as each tissue of lies was exposed, and in the mood of the hour much of

her mud stuck. Paris opinion, already strongly anti-royalist, seized on anything discreditable to the Crown regardless of proof or probability, until it was widely believed that the Queen had in fact bought the necklace for herself and then repudiated her agents when the affair came to light. Napoleon said at St. Helena: "The Queen was innocent, and to give greater publicity to her innocence she desired the *parlement* to judge the case. The result was that the Queen was thought guilty and that discredit was thrown upon the court."

After the trial it became fashionable to visit Jeanne la Motte in prison, where she maintained the role of injured innocence and read St. Thomas à Kempis. A year later she escaped, probably with the connivance of some of her warders, and fled to England.

From that asylum both she and Cagliostro, who had been banished from France by a *lettre du cachet*, directed and inspired a pamphlet campaign against the French monarchy which exceeded both in volume and venom even the outbursts during the trial itself. Unable to suppress the eruption of virulent and scurrilous satire, the French government tried to buy up whole editions before they reached the public; but this only encouraged the publishers to reprint as quickly as possible. *The French Messalina*, *The Nymphomania of Marie Antoinette*, *The National Brothel Under the Auspices of the Queen*—these and other titles even more explicitly obscene accurately reveal the quality and purpose of these sheets which accused Marie Antoinette of every form of natural and unnatural vice. Other pamphlets—Cagliostro's in particular—attacked the Bastille and the misuse of the royal prerogative, such as the banishing of an acquitted man. Within two years of Jeanne la Motte's escape the hatreds which this affair had stirred merged into the greater passions of the French Revolution of which they were a part.

Only two of the chief characters in this story survived the Revolution and died free men. De Rohan was exiled from Paris by a *lettre du cachet* and resigned all his high offices. Later the order of exile was rescinded and he attended the States General. In 1791 he was arrested for defending the privileges and property of the Church against the secularizing policy of the revolutionaries, but he was released a few years later and died in his own house on February 17th, 1803. He had tried to compensate Böhmer and Bassenge out of his personal estates, but most of these were confiscated by the revolutionary government and the jewellers died in financial distress.

La Motte, who had been sentenced in his absence to the

galleys, reappeared as a police agent under the restored Bourbons and is described in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. He made several attempts to blackmail the royal family by threatening to publish his memoirs and was described by an unsympathetic contemporary as "an old man as hardened to vice as he is to reverses." He died unlamented on November 6th, 1831.

On August 23rd, 1791, his wife had thrown herself out of an upper window in London and broken her neck, though some aver she was pushed by royalist agents. Cagliostro was arrested in Rome in 1791, convicted by the Inquisition of propagating the seditious and heretical tenets of freemasonry and committed to the castle of San Leo, where he died in solitary confinement. When French troops stormed the castle in 1797, intending to liberate him, they found only his grave, which they opened and filling his skull with wine drank a toast to the Revolution.

Louis XVI went to the guillotine on 21st January, 1793, and his wife on October 16th. Since the affair of the necklace the personal unpopularity of Marie Antoinette had been a consistent feature of the revolutionary movement and had obstructed all efforts to mediate between the Crown and the leaders of the National Convention. The affair was one, and not the least, of the factors which made the Queen the focus of public hatred and it haunted her until her dying day. For among the charges brought against her on the day before her execution was the allegation that she had made Jeanne la Motte the scapegoat for her own extravagance.

There are three incidents which form a postscript to the affair, as bizarre and legendary as some aspects of the original story. In 1825 a traveller in the Crimea brought back the story of a Madame Gachet who had recently died there. It was said that she was a former Queen of France who had stolen a necklace, and those who layed her out said that they had found a V branded on each of her shoulders. Seventy years later, in 1894, the legend still existed, except that it was now said that the woman had stolen a necklace from the Queen of France. In 1844 there was a minor sensation in the Parisian press when it was reported that a wealthy and charitable recluse, known to her few friends as the Countess Jeanne, had just died at her country residence. It was alleged, though no proof of the statement has come down to us, that her real name was Lamotte. These several "deaths" of Madame Lamotte-Collier provide a fitting eiptaph to *l'Affaire du Collier de la Reine*, about which speculation may never fall silent.