



0. THE DIAMOND NECKLACE AFFAIR - Story Preface

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This illustration is cropped from a larger image, published in 1856, depicting Marie Antoinette wearing a necklace. It was originally published in *Le collier de la Reine* ("The Queen's Necklace") by Alexandre Dumas (author of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and other adventure novels).

The furor, against the Queen, was about a necklace. Not just any necklace. A 2,800-carat (647 brilliants) diamond necklace which the court's jewelers (Charles Boehmer and Paul Bassenge) had fashioned and hoped the queen would purchase. Marie Antoinette, however, did not want it.

Though she had previously spent a great deal of her own money on diamonds, she no longer desired to purchase extravagant jewelry. How could the queen spend money on baubles when people in the country did not have enough to eat? In fact, the queen had previously told Boehmer, the jeweler, that she did not want to buy anything more from him.

Thinking he could persuade the king to buy the necklace, Boehmer convinced one of Louis' assistants to show him the piece. Not realizing Antoinette had already rejected it, the king - who thought it would look wonderful on his wife - sent it to Antoinette.



Madame Campan tells us of the queen's reaction:

... she assured him she should much regret incurring so great an expense for such an article, that she had already very beautiful diamonds, that jewels of that description were now worn at Court not more than four or five times a year, that the necklace must be returned, and that the money would be much better employed in building a man-of-war [a type of ship.]

Facing bankruptcy if he did not sell his 1.6-million-livre creation, Boehmer waylaid the queen while she was with her daughter. Pleading, on his knees, he threatened to throw himself into the river if she would not buy the necklace. Marie Antoinette rebuked him:

Not only have I never ordered the article which causes your present despair, but whenever you have talked to me about fine collections of jewels I have told you that I should not add four diamonds to those which I already possessed. I told you myself that I declined taking the necklace; the King wished to give it to me, but I refused him also; never mention it to me again. Divide it and try to sell it piecemeal, and do not drown yourself. I am very angry with you for acting this scene of despair in my presence and before this child. Let me never see you behave thus again. Go.

The necklace actually was divided and sold piecemeal, but not by the jeweler. Hearing of the situation, and thinking she could make a profit for herself, a con-woman - Jeanne de Saint-Remy de Valois (also known as the Comtesse de la Motte), set in motion a plan to trick Boehmer, among others.

Knowing Cardinal de Rohan (a member of the clergy) longed to be part of the queen's inner circle, Jeanne told the Cardinal a bold-face lie: The queen wanted him to obtain the necklace on her behalf.

Falling for the plot, de Rohan got the necklace from the jeweler and delivered it to Jeanne - who promptly went to London to make a fortune as the diamonds showed up in other pieces of jewelry and objects like snuff boxes. The jewelers' bill for the necklace, of course, remained unpaid - which caused the whole situation to unravel.

With the jewelers demanding payment, the king learned de Rohan had obtained the necklace. He arrested the Cardinal for theft, sending him to the Bastille, to await trial before the Paris Parlement. When the trial finally took place, de Rohan was acquitted.

Jeanne de La Motte's role in the scam also surfaced. Later, in her memoirs, she said she confessed to the swindle for one purpose: to protect the queen.

It was easy for the public to believe de La Motte, since Antoinette's love of jewelry was common knowledge. And ... since the queen's reputation had already been greatly tarnished, people were convinced she had the necklace, refused to pay for it and blamed that lack of payment on others.

More than ever, the queen was held in derision. People accused her, and her friends, of spending recklessly while the country itself was swimming in debt. As Louis XVI demanded more taxes of his people, his wife was dubbed "Madame Deficit."

In place of her latest portrait, which should have been hung in the Royal Academy of Paris, was a blank frame. In it, someone had written: "Behold the deficit!"

Long pent-up anger and frustration, especially by over-taxed commoners, were about to break loose in a revolution.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-DIAMOND-NECKLACE-AFFAIR-Marie-Antoinette>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-DIAMOND-NECKLACE-AFFAIR-Marie-Antoinette>

Media Stream



The Queen's Necklace

Illustration from "Le collier de la Reine" ("The Queen's Necklace") by Alexandre Dumas (published in 1856).

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Diamond Necklace Affair - Marie Antoinette

Image of 18th-century engraving, online courtesy Olivier Coutau-Begarie.

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Jeanne de Saint-Remy de Valois - Comtesse de la Motte

This engraving, circa 1790, depicts Jeanne de Valois. John Goldar (1729-1795) created it. The original is maintained at the BNF in Paris.

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Bastille in 1789

The artist for this work is believed to be Jean Baptiste Lallemand. The original is maintained at the BNF in Paris (catalog number 7743696).

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Cardinal de Rohan

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