

The Diamond Necklace Jonathan Fallis

One of the most singular circumstances recorded in history, is the affair of the ‘Diamond Necklace,’ which occurred a short time previous to the breaking out of the great French Revolution. We take the following account of it from Abbot’s ‘Life of Maria Antoinette,’ recently published by the Harpers:

About this...[line missing]...though apparently trivial, involved consequences of the most momentous importance. It was merely the fraudulent purchase of a necklace, by a profligate woman, in the name of the queen. The circumstances were such as to throw all France into agitation, and Europe was full of the story.

“Mind that miserable affair of the necklace,” said Talleyrand; “I should be nowise surprised if it should overturn the French monarchy.”—To understand this mysterious occurrence, we must first allude to two very important characters implicated in the conspiracy.

“The Cardinal de Rohan, though one of the highest dignitaries of the church, and of the most illustrious rank, was a young man of vain and shallow mind, of great profligacy of character, and perfectly prodigal in squandering in ostentatious pomp, all the revenues within his reach.—He had been sent an ambassador to the Court of Vienna. Surrounding himself with a retinue of spendthrift gentlemen, he endeavored to dazzle the Austrian capital with more than regal magnificence. Expending six or seven hundred thousand dollars in the course of a few months, he soon became involved in inextricable embarrassments. In the extremity of his distress, he took advantage of his official station, and engaged in smuggling with so much effrontery, that he almost inundated the Austrian capital with French goods. Maria Theresa was extremely displeased; and, without reserve, expressed her strong disapproval of his conduct, both as a bishop and an ambassador. The Cardinal was consequently recalled; and disappointed and mortified, he hovered around the Court of Versailles, where he was treated with the utmost coldness. He was extremely anxious again to bask in the beams of royal favor. But the queen indignantly repelled all his advances. His proud spirit was nettled to the quick by his disgrace, and he was ripe for any desperate adventure to retrieve his ruined fortunes.

There was at the time, at Versailles, a very beautiful woman, the Countess Lamotte. She traced her lineage to the kings of France, and, by her vices, struggled to sustain a style of ostentatious gentility. She was consumed by an insatiable thirst for recognized rank and wealth, and she had no conscience to interfere, in the slightest degree, with any means which might lead to those results. Though somewhat notorious as a woman of pleasure, to the courtiers who flitted around the throne, the Queen had never seen her face, and had seldom heard even her name. Versailles was too much thronged with such characters, for any one to attract any special attention.

Maria Antoinette, in her earlier days, had been extremely fond of dress, and particularly of rich jewelry. She brought with her from Vienna a large number of pearls and diamonds. Upon her accession to the throne, she received, of course, all the crown jewels. Louis XV, had also presented her with the jewels belonging to his daughter, the dauphiness, who had lately died, and also with a very magnificent collar of pearls, of a single row, the smallest of which was as large

as a filbert. The king, her husband, had not long before presented her with a set of rubies and diamonds of a fine water, and with a pair of bracelets which cost forty thousand dollars. Bœhmer, the crown-jeweller, had collected, at a great expense, six bear-formed diamonds of prodigious size. They were perfectly matched, and of the finest water. They were arranged as ear-rings. He offered them to the Queen for eighty thousand dollars. The young and royal bride could not resist the desire of adding them, costly as they were, to her casket of gems. She, however, economically removed two of the diamonds which formed the tops of the clusters, and replaced them by two of her own. The jeweller consented to this arrangement, and received the reduced price of seventy-two thousand dollars, to be paid in equal instalments for five years, from the private purse of the Queen. Still the Queen felt rather uneasy in view of her unnecessary purchase.—Murmurs of her extravagance began to reach her ears. Satiated with gaiety, and wearied with jewels, as a child throws aside its playthings, Maria Antoinette lost all fondness for her costly treasures, and began to seek novelty in the utmost simplicity of attire, and in the most artless joys of rural life. Her gorgeous dresses hung neglected in their wardrobes. Her gems ‘of purest ray serene,’ slept in the darkness of the unopened casket. The Queen had become a mother, and all those warm and noble affections which had been diffused and wasted upon frivolities, were now concentrated with intense ardor upon her children. A new era had dawned upon Maria Antoinette. Her soul, by nature exalted, was beginning to find objects worthy of its energies. Rapidly she was groping her way from the gloom of the most wretched of all lives—a life of pleasure and self-indulgence to the true and ennobling happiness of benevolence and self-sacrifice.

Bœhmer, the jeweller, unaware of the great change which had taken place in the character of the Queen, resolved to form for her the most magnificent necklace which was ever seen in Europe. He busied himself for several years in collecting the most valuable diamonds circulating in commerce, and thus composing a necklace of several rows, whose attractions, he hoped, would be irresistible to the Queen. In the purchase of these gems, the jeweller had expended far more than his own fortune. For many of them he owed large sums, and his only hope of paying these debts was in affecting a sale to the Queen.

Bœhmer requested Madame Campan to inform the queen what a beautiful necklace he had arranged, hoping that she might express a desire to see it. This, however, Madame Campan declined doing, as she did not wish to tempt the queen to incur the expense of three hundred and twenty thousand dollars, the price of the glittering bauble. Bœhmer, after endeavoring for some time in vain to get the gems exposed to the eye of the queen, induced a courtier, high in rank, to show the superb necklace to his majesty. The king, now loving the queen most tenderly, wished to see her adorned with this unparalleled ornament, and sent the case to the queen for her inspection. Maria Antoinette replied that she had already as many beautiful diamonds as she desired; that jewels were now worn but seldom at court; that she could not think it right to encourage so great an expense for such ornaments; and that the money they would cost would be much better expended in building a man-o’-war. The king concurred in this prudent decision, and the diamonds were returned to the jeweller, from their majesties with this answer: “We have more need of ships than of diamonds.”

Bœhmer was in great trouble, and knew not what to do. He spent a year in visiting the other courts of Europe, hoping to induce some of the sovereigns to purchase his necklace, but in vain.

Almost in despair, he returned again to Versailles, and proposed the king should take it and pay for it partly in instalments and partly in life annuities. The king mentioned it again to the queen. She replied that, if his majesty wished to purchase the necklace, and keep it for their daughter, he might do so. But she declared that she herself should never be willing to wear it, for she could not expose herself to those censures for extravagance which she knew would be lavished upon her.

The jeweller complained loudly and bitterly of his misfortune. The necklace having been exhibited all over Europe, his troubles were a matter of general conversation. After several months of great perplexity and anxiety, Bœhmer succeeded in gaining an audience of the queen. Passionately throwing himself upon his knees before her, clasping his hands and bursting into tears, he exclaimed:

“Madame, I am disgraced and ruined, if you do not purchase my necklace. I cannot outlive my misfortunes. When I go hence I shall throw myself into the river.”

The queen, extremely displeased, said: “Rise, Bœhmer! I do not like these rhapsodies; honest men have no occasion to fall upon their knees to make known their requests. If you were to destroy yourself, I should regret you as a madman in whom I had taken an interest, but I should not be responsible for that misfortune. I not only 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 I already possessed. I told you myself that I declined taking the necklace. The king wished to give it to me; I refused him in the same manner. Then never mention it to me again. Divide it, and endeavor 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!”

Bœhmer, overwhelmed with confusion, retired; and the queen, oppressed with a multitude of gathering cares, for some months thought no more of him or his jewels. One day the queen was reposing listlessly upon her couch, with Madame Campan and other ladies of honor about her, when, suddenly addressing Madame Campan, she inquired:

“Have you ever heard what poor Bœhmer did with his unfortunate necklace?”

“I have heard nothing of it since he left you,” was the reply, “though I often meet him.”

“I should really like to know how the unfortunate man got extricated from his embarrassments,” rejoined the queen; “and, when you next see him, I wish you would inquire, as if from your own interest in the affair, without any allusion to me, how he disposed of the article.”

In a few days Madame Campan met Bœhmer; and, in reply to her interrogatories, he informed her that the sultan of Constantinople had purchased it for the favorite Sultana. The queen was highly gratified with the good fortune of the jeweller, and yet thought it very strange how the grand seignior had purchased his diamonds at Paris. Matters continued in this state for some

time, until the baptism of the Duke d'Angoleme, Maria Antoinette's infant son. The king made his idolized boy a baptismal present of a diamond epaulette and buckles, which he purchased of Bœhmer, and directed him to deliver to the queen. As the jeweller delivered them, he slipped into the queen's hand a letter, in the form of a petition, containing the following expression:

"I am happy to see your majesty in the possession of the finest diamonds in Europe; and I entreat your majesty not to forget me."

The queen read this strange note aloud, again and again, exclaiming: "What does the man mean? He must be insane!" She quietly lighted the note at a wax taper which was standing near her, and burned it, remarking that it was not worth keeping. Afterwards, as she reflected on the enigmatical nature of the communication, she deeply regretted that she had not preserved the note. She pondered the matter deeply and anxiously, and at last said to Madame Campan:

"The next time you see this man, I wish that you would tell him that I have lost all taste for diamonds; that I never shall buy another as long as I live; and that, if I had any money to spare, I should expend it in purchasing land to enlarge the grounds of St. Cloud."

A few days after this, Bœhmer called upon Madame Campan at her country house, extremely uneasy at not having received any answer from the queen, and anxiously inquired if Madame Campan had no commission to him from her majesty. Madame Campan faithfully repeated to him all that the queen had requested her to say.

"But," rejoined Bœhmer, "the answer to the letter I presented to her! To whom must I apply for that?"

"To no one," was the reply; "her majesty burned your memorial, without even comprehending its meaning."

"Ah, madame!" exclaimed the man, trembling with agitation, "that is impossible; the queen knows that she has money to pay me."

"Money, Mr. Bœhmer!" replied the lady; "your last accounts against the queen were discharged long ago!"

"Are you in the secret?" he replied. "The queen owes me three hundred thousand dollars, and I am ruined by her neglect to pay me."

"Three hundred thousand dollars!" exclaimed Madame Campan, in amazement; "man, you have lost your senses! For what does the queen owe you this enormous sum?"

"For the necklace, madame," replied the jeweller, now pale and trembling with the apprehension that he had been deceived.

"The necklace again!" said Madame Campan. "How long is the queen to be teased about that necklace? Did not you yourself tell me that you had sold it at Constantinople?"

“The queen,” added the jeweller, “requested me to make that reply to all who inquired upon the subject, for she was not willing to have it known that she had made the purchase. She, however, had determined to have the necklace, and sent the Cardinal de Rohan to me to take it in her name.”

“You are utterly deceived, Bœhmer,” Madame Campan replied; “the queen knows nothing about your necklace. She never speaks even to the Cardinal de Rohan, and there is no man at court more strongly disliked by her.”

“You may depend upon it, madame, that you are deceived yourself,” replied the jeweller. “She must hold private interviews with the Cardinal, for she gave to the Cardinal six thousand dollars, which he paid me on account, and which he assured me he saw her take from the little porcelain secretary next the fire-place in her boudoir.”

“Did the Cardinal himself assure you of this?” inquired Madame Campan.

“Yes, madame,” was the reply.

“What a detestable plot. There is not one word of truth in it; and you have been miserably deceived.”

“I confess,” Bœhmer rejoined, now trembling in every joint, “that I have felt very anxious about it for some time; for the Cardinal assured me that the queen would wear the necklace on Whitsunday. I was, however, alarmed in seeing that she did not wear it, and that induced me to write the letter to her majesty. But what *shall* I do?”

“Go immediately to Versailles, and lay the whole matter before the king. But you have been extremely culpable, as crown jeweller, in acting in a matter of such great importance without direct orders from the king or queen, or their accredited minister.”

“I have not acted,” the unhappy man replied, “without direct orders. I have now in my possession all the promissory notes, signed by the queen herself, and I have been obliged to show those notes to several bankers, my creditors, to induce them to extend the time of my payments.

Instead, however, of following Madame Campan’s judicious advice, Bœhmer, half-delirious with solicitude, went directly to the cardinal, and informed him of all that had transpired. The cardinal appeared very much embarrassed, asked a few questions, and said but little. He, however, wrote in his diary, the following memorandum:

“On this day, August 3, Bœhmer went to Madame Campan’s country-house, and she told him that the queen had never had his necklace, and that he had been cheated.”

Bœhmer was almost frantic with terror, for the loss of his necklace was his irremediable ruin. Finding no relief in his interview with the cardinal, he hastened to Little Trianon, and sent a

message to the queen that Madame Campan wished him to see her immediately. The queen, who knew nothing of the occurrence we have just related, exclaimed:

“That man is surely mad. I have nothing to say to him, and I will not see him.”

Madame Campan, however, immediately called upon the queen, for she was very much alarmed at what she had heard, and related to her the whole occurrence. The queen was exceedingly amazed and perplexed, and feared that it was some deep-laid plot to involve her in difficulties. She questioned Madame Campan very minutely in reference to every particular of the interview, and insisted upon her relating the conversation over and over again. They then went immediately to the king, and narrated to him the whole affair. He, aware of the many efforts that had been made to traduce the character of Maria Antoinette, and to expose her to public contumely, was at once convinced that it was a treacherous plot of the cardinal in revenge for his neglect at court.

The king instantly sent a command for the cardinal to meet him and the queen in the king’s closet. He was apparently anticipating the summons, for he, without delay, appeared before them in all the pomp of his pontifical robes, but was, nevertheless, so embarrassed that he could with difficulty, articulate a sentence.

“You have purchased diamonds of Bœhmer?” inquired the king.

“Yes, sir,” was the trembling reply.

“What have you done with them?” the king added.

“I thought,” said the cardinal, “that they had been delivered to the queen.”

“Who commissioned you to make this purchase?”

“The Countess Lamotte,” was the reply—“She handed me a letter from the queen, requesting me to obtain the necklace from her.—I truly thought that I was obeying her majesty’s wishes, and doing her a favor, by taking the business upon myself.”

“How could you imagine, sir,” indignantly interrupted the queen, “that I had selected *you* for such a purpose, when I have not even spoken to you for eight years? and how could you suppose that I should have acted through the mediation of such a character as the Countess Lamotte?”

The cardinal was in the most violent agitation; and apparently, hardly knowing what he said, replied:

“I see plainly that I have been duped. I will pay for the necklace myself. I suspected no trick in the affair, and am extremely sorry that I have had anything to do with it.”

He then took a letter from his pocket, directed to the Countess Lamotte, and signed with the queen’s name, requesting her to secure the purchase of the necklace. The king and queen looked

at the letter, and instantly pronounced it a forgery. The king then took from his own pocket a letter addressed to the jeweller, Bœhmer, and handing it to De Rohan, said:

“Are you the author of that letter?”

The cardinal turned pale; and, leaning upon his hand, appeared as though he would fall to the floor.

“I have no wish, cardinal,” the king kindly replied, “to find you guilty. Explain to me this enigma. Account for all these manœuvres with Bœhmer. Where did you obtain these securities, and these promissory notes, signed in the queen’s name, which have been given to Bœhmer?”

The cardinal, trembling in every nerve, faintly replied:

“Sire, I am too much agitated now to answer your majesty. Give me a little time to collect my thoughts.”

“Compose yourself, then, cardinal,” the king added. “Go into my cabinet. You will there find paper, pens, and ink. At your leisure, *write* what you have to say to me.”

In about half an hour the cardinal returned with a paper, covered with erasures, and alterations, and blottings, as confused and unsatisfactory as his verbal statements had been. An officer was then summoned into the royal presence, and commanded to take the cardinal into custody, and conduct him to the Bastille. He was, however permitted to visit his home. The cardinal contrived, by the way, to scribble a line upon a scrap of paper, and catching the eye of a trusty servant, he, unobserved, slipped it into his hand. It was a direction to the servant to hasten to the palace, with the utmost possible speed, and commit to the flames all of his private papers. The king had also sent officers to the cardinal’s place, to seize his papers and seal them for examination. By almost superhuman exertions, the cardinal’s servant first arrived at the place, which was at the distance of several miles. His horse dropped dead in the court yard. The important documents, which might perhaps, have shed light upon this mysterious affair were all consumed.

The Countess Lamotte was also arrested, and held in close confinement to await her trial. She had just commenced in a style of extraordinary splendor, and had vast sums at her disposal, acquired no one knew how. It is difficult to imagine the excitement which this story produced all over Europe. It was represented that the queen was found engaged in a swindling transaction with a profligate woman, to cheat the crown jeweller out of a gem of inestimable value; and that being detected, she was employing all the influence of the crown to shield her own reputation by consigning the innocent cardinal to infamy. The enemies of the queen, sustained by the ecclesiastics generally, rallied around the cardinal. The king and queen, feeling that his acquittal would be the virtual condemnation of Maria Antoinette, and firmly convinced of his guilt, extorted their utmost influence, in self-defense, to bring him to punishment. Rumors and counter-rumors floated through Versailles, Paris, and all the courts of the continent. The tale was rehearsed in saloon and cafe, with every conceivable addition and exaggeration, and the queen hardly knew which way to turn from the invectives which were so mercilessly showered upon her. Her lofty spirit, conscious of rectitude, sustained her in public, and there she nerved herself

to appeal with firmness and equanimity. But in the retirement of her boudoir, she was unable to repel the most melancholy imaginings, and often wept with almost the anguish of a bursting heart. The sunshine of her life had now disappeared. Each succeeding day grew darker and darker with enveloping glooms.

The trial of the cardinal continued, with various interruptions, for more than a year. Very powerful parties were formed for and against him. All France was agitated by the protracted contest. The cardinal appeared before his judges in mourning robes, but with all the pageantry of the most imposing ecclesiastical costume. He was conducted into the court with much ceremony, and treated with the greatest deference. In the trying moment, in which he first appeared before his judges, his courage seemed utterly to fail him. Pale and trembling with emotion, his knees bent under him, and he had to cling to a support to prevent him from falling to the floor. Five or six voices immediately addressed him in tones of sympathy, and the President said: "His eminence, the Cardinal, is at liberty to sit down, if he wishes it." The distinguished prisoner immediately took his seat with the members of the court. Having soon recovered in some degree his composure, he arose, and for half an hour addressed his judges with much feeling and dignity, repeating his protestations of entire innocence in the whole affair.

At the close of the protracted trial, the Cardinal was fully acquitted of all guilt by a majority of three voices. The king and queen were extremely chagrined at this result. During the trial, many insinuations were thrown out against the queen which could not easily be repelled. A friend who called upon her immediately after the decision, found her in her closet weeping bitterly. "Come," said Maria, "come and weep for your queen, insulted and sacrificed by cabal and injustice." The king came in at the same moment, and said, "you find the queen much afflicted; she has great reason to be so. They were determined throughout this affair to see only an ecclesiastical prince, a Prince de Rohan, while he is, in fact, a needy fellow; and all this was but a scheme to put money into his pockets. It is not necessary to be an Alexander to out this Gordian knot." The Cardinal subsequently emigrated to Germany, where he lived in comparative obscurity till 1803, when he died.

The Countess Lamotte was brought to trial, but with a painfully different result. Dressed in the richest and most costly robes, the dissolute Beauty appeared before her judges, and astonished them all by her imperturbable self-possession, her talents and her cool effrontery. It was clearly proved that she had received the necklace: that she had sold here and there the diamonds of which it was composed, and had thus come into possession of large sums of money.—She told all kinds of stories, contradicting herself in a thousand ways, accusing now one and again another as an accomplice, and unblushingly declaring that she had no intention of telling the truth, for that neither she nor the Cardinal had uttered one single word before the court which had not been false.

She was found guilty, and the following horrible sentence was pronounced against her; that she should be whipped upon the bare back in the court yard of the prison; that the letter V should be burned into the flesh on each shoulder with a hot iron; and that she should be imprisoned for life. The king and queen were as much displeased with the terrible barbarity of the punishment of the Countess as they were chagrined at the acquittal of the Cardinal. As the Countess was a

descendant of the royal family, they felt that the ignominious character of the punishment was intended as a stigma upon them.

As the Countess was sitting one morning in the spacious room provided for her in the prison, in a loose robe, conversing gaily with some friends, and surrounded by all the appliances of wealth, an attendant appeared to conduct her into the presence of the judges. Totally unprepared for the awful doom impending over her, she arose with careless alacrity and entered the court. The terrible sentence was pronounced. Immediately, terror, rage and despair seized upon her, and a scene of horror ensued which no pen can describe. Before the sentence was finished, she threw herself upon the floor, and uttered the most painful and piercing shrieks and screams. The tumult of agitation into which she was thrown, dreadful as it was, relaxed not the stern rigor of the law. The executioner immediately seized and dragged her, shrieking and struggling in a delirium of frenzy, into the court-yard of the prison.

As her eye fell upon the instruments of her ignominious and brutal punishment, she seized upon one of her executioners with her teeth, and tore a mouthful of flesh from his arm. She was thrown upon the ground; her garments with relentless violence, were stripped from her back, and the lash mercilessly cut its way into her quivering nerves, while her awful screams pierced the damp, chill air of the morning. The hot irons were brought and simmered upon her recoiling flesh. The unhappy creature was then carried, mangled and bleeding, and half dead with torture, and terror, and madness, to the prison hospital. After nine months of imprisonment, she was permitted to escape. She fled to England, and was found one morning dead upon the pavements of London, having been thrown from a third story window in a midnight carousal.

Such was the story of the diamond necklace. Though no one can now doubt that Maria Antoinette was perfectly innocent in the whole affair, it, at the same time, furnished her enemies with weapons against her, which they used with fatal efficiency. It was then represented that the Countess Lamotte was an accomplice of the queen in the fraudulent acquisition of the necklace, and that the Cardinal de Rohan was their deluded but innocent victim. The horrible punishment of Madame Lamotte, who boasted that royal blood circulated in her veins, was understood to be in contempt of royalty, and as the expression of venomous feeling toward the queen. Both Marie Antoinette and Louis felt it as such, and were equally aggrieved by the acquittal of the cardinal, and the barbarous punishment of the countess.

Whether the cardinal was a victim or an accomplice, is a question which has never been, and now never can be decided. The mystery in which the affair is involved must remain a mystery, until the secret of all hearts are revealed at the great day of judgment. If he was the guilty instigator, and the poor countess but his tool and victim, how much has he yet to be accountable for in the just retribution of eternity!

The supposition, however, which now is almost universally entertained, is, that the crafty woman Lamotte, by forgery, and by means of an accomplice who very much, in figure, resembled Maria Antoinette, completely duped the cardinal. His anxiety was such to be restored to the royal favor, that he eagerly caught at the bait which the wily countess presented to him. But, whoever may have been the guilty ones, no one now doubts that Maria Antoinette was entirely innocent. She,

however, experienced all the ignominy she could have encountered, had she been involved in the deepest guilt.

Xenia Torch-Light, Oct. 4 1849