

CHAPTER
23

Section 1

HISTORYMAKERS Marie Antoinette
Tragic Queen

"Monsieur, I beg your pardon. I did not do it on purpose."— Marie Antoinette's last words, apologizing to her executioner for stepping on his foot, 1793

In 1781, Marie Antoinette, queen of France, gave birth to a son. The king, Louis XVI, now had a male heir. The French people celebrated, as the line of succession to the throne was now secure. A group of poor working women—called market-women—came to the palace to congratulate the queen.

Eight years later, another group of market-women came to the palace. But on this 1789 visit, the crowd was larger and angrier. Instead of celebrating joyful news, it woke the queen with such shouted threats as "We'll wring her neck!" and "We'll tear her heart out!"

Actually, the 1781 visit marked one of the few times that Queen Marie Antoinette enjoyed any popularity in France. Born in 1755, she was the fifteenth child of Francis I and Maria Theresa, rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. The French and the Austrians ended their long hostility by agreeing to a marriage that united the two royal families. Marie married Louis, heir to the French throne, in 1770. She was only 14 years old, and he only 15 years old. Just four years later, the young couple became king and queen of France.

It wasn't long before Marie Antoinette became the focus of nasty gossip and rumors. People saw her as a spendthrift who meddled in politics. Pamphlets portrayed a queen who lived a life of immorality and luxury.

At the same time, the queen was having difficulty adjusting to her new home. Although she and Louis grew to love each other, their early years included many strains. In addition, the queen found French customs confusing. The court had elaborate rules of etiquette for everything from dressing to eating. She had little patience for these formalities, which won her few friends at court.

Marie Antoinette's spending habits didn't earn her much admiration, either. She bought three or four new dresses every week. However, even when she did not spend, she was criticized. In a complicated plot, some members of the court pretended to buy a diamond necklace worth a fortune. When the scandal erupted, the queen—who was entirely innocent—was nevertheless blamed for it.

The people's anger at the queen boiled over during the French Revolution. The crowd often focused its rage on her. In 1789, when the market-women marched on the palace crying for bread, they were calm at first. The next morning, though, they stormed the queen's bedroom, shouting their bloody threats. Later that day Marie Antoinette faced the mob. She stood on a balcony before the crowd, with muskets aimed at her. She bravely remained still until the muskets were lowered. Then she entered the palace.

After the royal family was taken to Paris, the king and queen feared for their safety. Austria and Spain refused to do anything to help. Marie Antoinette urged that the family try to escape. On June 20, 1791, the family attempted to leave but were captured and returned to Paris. An eyewitness wrote that in the city, the queen "was greeted with violent expressions of disapproval."

The next year, the monarchy was formally overthrown and the king and queen were put in prison. A year later, Marie Antoinette's children were taken from her, and she was placed in a separate cell. She was moved again in September 1793 to a small room lit only by a lantern outside.

The queen was taken to trial the following month. She was accused of conspiring to aid her brother—now the Holy Roman Emperor—to defeat France. She was also accused of immorality. She gave a brief, forceful defense that won sympathy. But the officer presiding over the trial warned the crowd to be quiet and then quickly led the panel to declare her guilty. On October 16, 1793, Marie Antoinette was beheaded.

Questions

1. **Clarifying** What factors cost the queen support?
2. **Recognizing Effects** Do you think the attacks on the queen contributed to the Revolution? Explain.
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Would you say that the queen was a strong or a weak person? Explain.