THE AFFAIR OF THE DIAMOND NECKLACE.*

IF Wilkie Collins had invented the story of the Diamond Necklace, it would have been accepted as one of the most interesting, but improbable, of his romances. Being, as it is, a very fully authenticated passage of veritable history, it furnishes one of the most striking illustrations which all literature affords of the fact that truth may be stranger than fiction. The fabulous magnificence of the ornament which was the center of the plot, the audacity of the plot itself, the eminence of some of the personages concerned, and the splendor of the courtly scenes amidst which it was enacted, combined to invest the affair with most of the qualities of a first-class sensation. It was the swindle of a century. It disclosed some unpleasant aspects of French life a hundred years ago in a lurid light. It had political roots, and bore political fruitage. Goethe saw in it an omen of the Revolution, and to Talleyrand it presaged the downfall of the French throne. It has inspired a literature of its own. Carlyle has expended on it some of his ruggedest sentences, and it is the foundation of a valuable collection of autograph manuscripts belonging to M. Feuillet de Conches. The National Archives of France abound with the materials of its history, and the recital has been given over and over again, partly in the autobiographies and annals of the times, and partly by means of direct narratives, of which the best is probably that in Louis Blanc's *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. In English, it is safe to say, the story has never been better told than by Mr. Henry Vizitelly; we doubt, indeed, if it has ever anywhere received a more painstaking, exhaustive, and satisfactory treatment. The first and second editions of the work, which was originally published in 1866, have been long out of print; this, the third, embodies the results of some additional research, and has been carefully revised. The reader may like to refresh his memory of the outlines of the affair.

The diamond necklace was ordered by Louis XV as a gift to his notorious favorite, Madame Du Barry. It was to consist of no less than 629 separate diamonds, the largest and finest which the markets of Europe could supply; and to be by far the costliest personal ornament then known. The crown jewelers, Böhmer and Bassenge, lost no time and spared no pains in the execution of so prodigal an order. When their own capital was exhausted in the purchase of the necessary stones, they got credit where they could, or bought with borrowed money. The order was from a king, and the price to be paid was two millions of livres — a sum equal to £80,000. It seemed a sure thing. One thing only, however, is sure in life, and that is death. The king died, and Böhmer and Bassenge were left with the necklace on their hands, and a host of clamorous creditors at their doors. What should be done with the bauble?

Meantime, Louis XVI had succeeded to the throne, with the ill-fated Marie Antoinette for his Queen. The necklace was, therefore, first offered to her; but she, for various reasons, declined to buy it. Then an attempt was made to find a purchaser among the

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other crowned heads of Europe; but with a similar result. Then the owners returned to Marie Antoinette, and plied her with new offers, and with more tempting terms than ever; but still in vain.

While these negotiations were going on, an unprincipled adventuress, the Countess de la Motte, whose sorest needs were virtue and money, had succeeded in so far attaching herself to the French Court as artfully to create the popular impression that she was in intimate and influential relations with the Queen; a counterfeited position which she designed to turn to her own financial account. Her first victim was the Cardinal de Rohan, who became a ready dupe to her wily schemes. The Cardinal had lost the royal favor, and was only too glad to get on good terms with one who seemed to stand so near the Queen as the Countess de la Motte. It was like gaining a step towards his old place. The Countess plied the Cardinal with forged letters, purporting to come from the Queen, and began to "bleed" his pockets profusely. Emboldened by success, this crafty woman next conceived the plan of effecting a *pseudo*-purchase of the now famous necklace in the Queen's name, and of turning it to her own profit. In this job the Cardinal was to serve as tool. The plan was elaborated with great ingenuity, and successfully carried out. One of the details was a preliminary interview between the Cardinal and a counterfeit queen, by night, in the park at Versailles. Everything worked smoothly. The jewelers were completely deceived, and willingly granted the credit which was asked for. On the 1st of February, 1785, the necklace was delivered to the Cardinal to be conveyed to the Queen; and in obedience to the directions of a forged note, he presented himself with the precious casket at the house of the Countess that same evening. "Do not leave," added the note, "until you hear from me." The Cardinal found the Countess at home alone. What followed is quoted by Mr. Vizitelly from the Cardinal's own words:

> Some time after, a man, who announced himself as a messenger from the queen, entered the apartment. The Cardinal withdrew cautiously into an alcove which was half open. The man delivered a note. Madame de la Motte sent him for a moment outside the room, then came towards the Cardinal and read to him the letter containing the order for delivering up the casket to the bearer. The man was then called in again, the casket was given into his hands, and he took his departure.

And that was the last of the diamond necklace! The pretended messenger of the Queen was an accomplice of the Countess. The necklace was speedily broken up, and its component gems were secretly sold in Paris and London. The jewelers supposed all was right, and suspicion was only presently awakened by the fact that the Queen did not wear the necklace on occasions of public appearance, when its use would have seemed appropriate. This led to inquiry. The fraud was detected. Its perpetrators were arrested and brought to justice. The trial of so celebrated a case attracted great attention. An attempt was made to entangle the Queen in the conspiracy, but the groundlessness of such a charge is amply established by Mr. Vizitelly. The whole of the story is given by him with great minuteness, and with careful attention to every detail. The early life of the Countess de la Motte, who had royal blood in her veins, the sadly stained figure of the Cardinal, the beauty and grace of the unfortunate Queen, the intrigues and scandals that characterized the French court, and the brilliant, but dangerous, life that went on at Little Trianon,— these and the other particulars which enter into the event are depicted with a graphic hand, and make up an uncommonly interesting chapter of history. A portrait of the Countess de la Motte and an engraving of the necklace help one's sense of its reality. The book is a fine example of painstaking literary labor, and few writers of historical monographs have had more entertaining subjects, or dealt with them in a manner more effective.