

# Stefan Zweig's Remarkable Study of Marie Antoinette

*A Full-Bodied Biography Which Bids Fair to Be the Definitive Life of That Tragic Queen*

**MARIE ANTOINETTE: THE PORTRAIT OF AN AVERAGE WOMAN.** By Stefan Zweig. New York: The Viking Press. \$3.50.

By HERBERT GORMAN

**T**HERE is no better illustration of the situation making a personality than the career of Marie Antoinette, Archduchess of Austria and Queen of France. She was evolved by a monstrous period and steered in the fire of revolution. The scatter-brained and ordinary-minded young Archduchess who crossed the Rhine at Kehl in 1770 as the bride of the hobbled Dauphin of France was not the gray-haired, stony-faced woman who was so cruelly set down on paper by the dishonest David in 1793. In twenty-three years the situation had made her into another woman. She was not like Napoleon, who could make situations. It was the situation that had made her. In saying so much a problem is indicated, and in no biography of Marie Antoinette (and there have been many of her) has this problem been more brilliantly and convincingly attacked than in Stefan Zweig's "Marie Antoinette:

tions a word may be said about the excisions, for they are important and change in some minor details previous conceptions of the French Queen. Herr Zweig takes the voluminous mass of memoirs written by hangers-on at the French Court with a whole cart-load of salt. He refuses to take seriously nine-tenths of the memoirs published during the period when the Bourbons were restored to the French throne. He finds them "either crude sensationalism, or else lick-spittle productions of the most offensive kind." Therefore all those chambermaids, tailors, hair-dressers, governesses and ladies-in-waiting who remained so solemnly silent during the Revolution, the First Republic and the First Empire, but who so suddenly recalled their beloved Queen again after Louis XVIII was set upon the throne by the allied powers of Europe, are cast into the rubbish heap where they belong. Consequently the reader will find no "cute" stories in Herr Zweig's book about the lit-

acting of Le Petit Trianon, and so aroused the populace against her. is shown to be the result of her incomplete life with Louis XVI during the most formative period of her existence. This, of course, is using modern psychology, but Herr Zweig has documented his argument so well that it is entirely convincing from beginning to end. We see an average woman in a cruelly abnormal position and we see her seeking emotional release for herself in an extravagant world that was about to be swept away by les bonnets rouges. Another thing that is not exactly new but which has never been so dogmatically asserted before is Herr Zweig's insistence that Marie Antoinette and Count Axel Fersen were lovers in every sense of the word. Herr Zweig here had Alma Soderhjelm's painstaking examination of the bowdlerized Fersen letters and diaries at his disposal (he mentions Madame Soderhjelm but not her book, which, for those who are curious, is "Fersen et Marie Antoinette," Paris, 1930) and from them he draws a picture of a lasting and affecting love affair that lessens Marie Antoinette's stature not at all but rather brings her more affectingly before the readers of this biography. For years the espousers of Marie Antoinette's saintliness have sought to disprove the suspicion that she was the mistress of Fersen; Herr Zweig comes about as close as it is possible to come (without direct documentary confession on the part of one of the two principals) to unassailable proof that Marie Antoinette gave herself freely to Fersen. It is as it should be and it takes on an aspect of one of the great love stories of history.

With so much that is new, then, and with so frank an attitude toward his subject, Herr Zweig proceeds to give what must be regarded as the biography to end all biographies on Marie Antoinette. He is consistent in his approach and development, he makes his points clearly, the reader has no feeling that he is twisting or rearranging facts to prove a preconceived theory, and, best of all, he writes with a wide sweep of color and a happy completeness that infuses his great canvas with the characteristics of an enormous Delacroix painting. The background, from the extravagant and carefree life of Versailles to the days of the shouting mobs in the Paris streets and the bleakness of the Temple and the Conciergerie, is set forth with the color and command of a historical novelist. Certain episodes stand out as remarkable tours de force. There is the minor epic of the flight to Varennes, for instance. No one has better brought out the foolish over-preparation and tragic-comedy of the whole proceeding, the futility of it all—seeing that Louis XVI was what he was, a hesitating man without backbone or inspiration. And again there is the fine account of the affair of the diamond necklace. Herr Zweig differs widely in his exposition of this affair (which did so much in fashioning Marie Antoinette into a monster to the prejudiced populace) from that in Miss Katharine Anthony's rather purposeless life of the French Queen. Miss Anthony chose to believe that Rohan was the particular villain of the piece and that he engineered the whole business, but Herr Zweig shows quite clearly (and Funck-Brentano did the same before him) that Rohan was but a victim of his own desires. The last months that Marie Antoinette passed in the Temple, and, later, in the Conciergerie are vividly described by Herr Zweig, and, again, at the very end of this period that



Marie Antoinette in 1791. Before the Flight to Varennes.  
From an unfinished pastel by Alexandre Kucharski.

was but preliminary to the guillotine, he shows his frankness in candidly taking up the matter of the little Dauphin's monstrous charge against his mother. For the first time this problem (which has always been reticently indicated by previous biographers) is dragged out into the open and explained. This is as it should be.

Previous readers of Herr Zweig's psychological biographic studies must be well aware of his method, but they will be surprised and gratified to find him enlarging and improving that method in this biography of Marie Antoinette. He essayed a larger subject than he has hitherto essayed and he rose nobly to the opportunities that it afforded him. It is as though, being dared, he was kindled to vaster exertions by the dare. Constantly we find him deducing effects from causes and doing so with an intelligent clarity that makes it seem much more simple than it really is. This is the secret of the finest form of contemporary biography and in "Marie Antoinette" we have a prime example of what that type of biography should be. It is difficult to find flaws after one has accepted Herr Zweig's attitude. It is true that he seems to suggest that Fersen belonged wholly alone to Marie Antoinette and that he makes no mention of the Swedish Count's affair of long standing with Mme. Eleanora Sullivan, but, after all, that is a matter that does not touch closely upon Marie Antoinette's psychology of living and reactions to a painful existence. It is Fersen as the lover of the Queen alone that is of interest or value to this satisfying book.

Herr Zweig's book seems large only until the reader has started to peruse it. Then it diminishes from a formidable undertaking to hours of sheer joy, and it is an unimaginative fellow, indeed, who will put it

down without regret. It possesses all the qualities of the excellent biography—directness, frankness, full exposition, picturesqueness, characterization, color and delectable readability. As one follows the Queen through her early years as a wife in name only, through the effervescent excitements of Versailles, through the long love affair with Fersen, through the months and years of ribald attack from the mobs, through the opening period of the Revolution (those days that made a light-minded woman into a Queen at last), and through the final heart-breaking weeks of insult, imprisonment, mental torture and cruel death, one realizes that here is a full-length character drawn with a mastery that has missed nothing. It is the revelation of a woman and a period, of an average creature (one must insist on that, for Herr Zweig keeps it always in mind) fighting against a situation and somehow growing, maturing, achieving spirit as she struggles against that remorseless and invulnerable Juggernaut.

Marie Antoinette was, without a doubt, the last Queen (although others have borne and still bear that exalted title), and the reader feels it acutely while reading Herr Zweig's book. It is not the destruction of an individual that he sees here but the destruction of a theory. It was Marie Antoinette's good fortune to preserve her queenliness to the very last, to the moment when she was forced upon her knees and her head laid in the wooden semi-circle below the dull gleam of the guillotine blade, and this doggedness of demeanor added much to the tragedy of her fall. By preserving this aspect he lets the world know that it was a Queen who was dying and not an individual. She succumbed to the situation with an invisible crown upon her thin gray hairs.



Louis XVI.

The Portrait of an Average Woman."

Herr Zweig was well equipped for his task, for he possesses a dogged psychological curiosity, a brutal frankness, a supreme impartiality and had access to hitherto unused documentation. The result of this concentration of talents is a full-bodied and frank exposition of a woman who was always average in her intellect but who was swept against her will into a world cataclysm that dominated and destroyed her, although at the same time it brought out qualities that would never have been perceptible in the mirrored halls of Versailles. In her old theory of authority by divine right perished more vividly than in the case of her pedestrian husband, Louis XVI.

Naturally one looks immediately for what may be new or unusual in the biography of a woman who has been so beset by previous biographers. Herr Zweig's contributions to a resurrection of the life of Marie Antoinette take two forms. There are additions and there are excisions. Before noting the addi-

tion of Mozart proposing marriage to the child-archduchess or the condemned Queen murmuring "Pardon me" when she steps on Sanson's toe on the scaffold. It is good to find a biography cleared of all these "anecdotes." Herr Zweig, then, has been extremely careful in selecting and verifying his material, and has even leaned backward when material was doubtful, as was the case in many of the Marie Antoinette letters "edited" by that superb forger, Feuillet de Conches.

What, then, has Zweig added to make so full-bodied a book? For one thing, he has added what has always been suppressed before (or semi-suppressed), a full account of the abnormal marital relations that existed between Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette during the first seven years of their wedded life. This picture of a phlegmatic and physically incapable husband and a full-blooded normal woman plays a greater part than one might imagine in the later career of the Queen. The fact that she turned to febrile amusements, masked balls, the gambling table and all the play-