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. **Recognizing Facts and Details** What factors cost the queen support?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** Do you think the attacks on the queen contributed to the Revolution? Explain.
3. **Making Judgments** Would you say that the queen was a strong or a weak person? Explain.
The King finding himself seated in the carriage, where he could neither speak to me nor be spoken to without witness, kept a profound silence. . . .

The procession lasted almost two hours; the streets were lined with citizens, all armed, some with pikes and some with guns, and the carriage was surrounded by a body of troops, formed of the most desperate people of Paris. As another precaution, they had placed before the horses a number of drums, intended to drown any noise or murmur in favour of the King, but how could they be heard? Nobody appeared either at the doors or windows, and in the street nothing was to be seen, but armed citizens—citizens, all rushing toward the commission of a crime, which perhaps they detested in their hearts.

The carriage proceeded thus in silence to the Place de Louis XV and stopped in the middle of a large space that had been left round the scaffold: this space was surrounded with cannon, and beyond, an armed multitude extended as far as the eye could reach. As soon as the King perceived that the carriage stopped, he turned and whispered to me, 'We are arrived, if I mistake not.' My silence answered that we were. . . . As soon as the King had left the carriage, three guards surrounded him and would have taken off his clothes, but he repulsed them with haughtiness: he undressed himself, untied his neckcloth, opened his shirt, and arranged it himself. The guards, whom the determined countenance of the King had for a moment disconcerted, seemed to recover their audacity. They surrounded him again and would have seized his hands. 'What are you attempting?' said the King, drawing back his hands. 'To bind you,' answered the wretches. 'To bind me,' said the King, with an indignant air. 'No! I shall never consent to that: do what you have been ordered, but you shall never bind me.' . . .

The path leading to the scaffold was extremely rough and difficult to pass; the King was obliged to lean on my arm, and from the slowness with which he proceeded, I feared for a moment that his courage might fail; but what was my astonishment, when arrived at the last step, I felt that he suddenly let go my arm, and I saw him cross with a firm foot the breadth of the whole scaffold; silence, by his look alone, fifteen or twenty drums that were placed opposite to me; and in a voice so loud, that it must have been heard at the Pont Tournant, I heard him pronounce distinctly these memorable words: 'I die innocent of all the crimes laid to my charge; I pardon those who have occasioned my death; and I pray to God that the blood you are going to shed may never be visited on France.'

He was proceeding, when a man on horseback, in the national uniform, and with a ferocious cry, ordered the drums to beat. Many voices were at the same time heard encouraging the executioners. They seemed reanimated themselves, in seizing with violence the most virtuous of Kings, they dragged him under the axe of the guillotine, which with one stroke severed his head from his body. All this passed in a moment. The youngest of the guards, who seemed about eighteen, immediately seized the head, and showed it to the people as he walked round the scaffold; he accompanied this monstrosous ceremony with the most atrocious and indecent gestures. At first an awful silence prevailed; at length some cries of 'Vive la République!' were heard. By degrees the voices multiplied, and in less than ten minutes this cry, a thousand times repeated, became the universal shout of the multitude, and every hat was in the air.


Discussion Questions
Recognizing Facts and Details
1. How did Louis XVI respond as he faced execution?
2. How did the French citizens who witnessed the king's execution react?
3. Making Inferences Why do you think the soldier ordered the drums to beat as Louis XVI spoke from the scaffold?