

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





**Episode #559**  
**The Affair of the Poisons**  
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## **Transcript**

[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about The Affair Of The Poisons.

[00:00:28] It's an almost unbelievable story involving the king of France, [black magic](#)<sup>1</sup>, [deceit](#)<sup>2</sup>, [gossip](#)<sup>3</sup>, the Parisian underworld, murder, [torture](#)<sup>4</sup>, affairs and, of course, plenty of poison.

[00:00:43] So, let's not waste a minute, and get right into it.

[00:00:49] There are many phrases in English that we use to convey the idea that the person at the top of an organisation, whether that's a family, a company, or even a country, that this person should set an example for how to behave.

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<sup>1</sup> evil powers or spells to hurt or control people

<sup>2</sup> lying or tricking

<sup>3</sup> talking about other people's secrets or private lives

<sup>4</sup> hurting someone badly to punish or get information

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:01:06] You can say “set an example”, or “lead by example”, or “set the tone”, and no doubt there are plenty of similar phrases in your language.

[00:01:17] It is a universal truth; whatever the person at the top does, that [tends<sup>5</sup>](#) to be the example that is followed by those within their [orbit<sup>6</sup>](#).

[00:01:29] In 17th-century France, and to be more precise, in the 17th-century French court, that person was King Louis XIV.

[00:01:40] He was the centre of everything.

[00:01:43] Just as the planets [revolve around<sup>7</sup>](#) the sun, so too did the entire [French court revolve around<sup>8</sup>](#) Louis. He wasn't simply a [monarch<sup>9</sup>](#). He was France; the state, the culture, the fashion, the morality, even the [gossip](#), it all [radiated<sup>10</sup>](#) outward from him.

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<sup>5</sup> usually happens or acts in this way

<sup>6</sup> area of influence

<sup>7</sup> go in a circle around

<sup>8</sup> the royal place and people always focused on him

<sup>9</sup> a king

<sup>10</sup> was given off by or spread from him

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:02:04] He called himself le Roi Soleil — the Sun King — and was a [firm](#)<sup>11</sup> believer that he had been chosen by God to rule France, according to the so-called “Divine Right of Kings”.

[00:02:19] And of course, this god-given right was absolute; nothing else, not the church, not the [nobility](#)<sup>12</sup>, even came close to the power that should be [wielded](#)<sup>13</sup> by the king.

[00:02:33] One of the ways he did this was by bringing the [nobility](#) to him.

[00:02:39] No longer would powerful [nobles](#)<sup>14</sup> rule distant corners of the country; they would all live at court, with the king, or at least they would if they wanted to have any kind of influence or power.

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<sup>11</sup> strong and steady

<sup>12</sup> rich and important people with titles

<sup>13</sup> used or controlled

<sup>14</sup> people from rich and powerful families

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:02:53] And the centre of this power and influence would be the Palace at Versailles, which Louis turned from a respectable [chateau](#)<sup>15</sup> into a [vast](#)<sup>16</sup> royal residence, and a [glittering](#)<sup>17</sup> stage from which to project his power and [splendour](#)<sup>18</sup>.

[00:03:11] And the French [aristocracy](#)<sup>19</sup>, desperate to remain close to him, played their roles accordingly.

[00:03:20] Life at court was a performance.

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<sup>15</sup> a big and fancy house in the countryside (especially in France)

<sup>16</sup> very big

<sup>17</sup> shining and bright

<sup>18</sup> great beauty and richness

<sup>19</sup> the highest class of rich and powerful people

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:03:23] Every look, every [gesture](#)<sup>20</sup>, every word had meaning. But behind the [dazzling](#)<sup>21</sup> [chandeliers](#)<sup>22</sup> and golden mirrors, it was also a world of extreme [excess](#)<sup>23</sup> and [moral decay](#)<sup>24</sup>.

[00:03:38] Louis had dozens of mistresses, with eight listed on his Wikipedia page as “among the better known”.

[00:03:47] Strangely enough, if you switch over to his French-language Wikipedia page, you’ll find 14 mistresses, instead of eight.

[00:03:55] No doubt there’s a joke in there somewhere...

[00:03:58] Anyway, some of these mistresses were official, some unofficial, [merely](#)<sup>25</sup> [whispered about](#)<sup>26</sup> in the shadows, and no doubt there were more who were unknown altogether.

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<sup>20</sup> a movement to show an idea or feeling

<sup>21</sup> very bright or amazing

<sup>22</sup> big lights that hanged from the ceiling, with many small lights

<sup>23</sup> lack of moderation, extravagance

<sup>24</sup> weakening of standards of right and wrong

<sup>25</sup> only, just

<sup>26</sup> talked about in quiet voices, often in secret

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:04:11] Of those official, or semi-official ones, each brought with her a [retinue](#)<sup>27</sup> of [hangers-on](#)<sup>28</sup> and followers.

[00:04:21] All of these mistresses [competed for](#)<sup>29</sup> the king's attention with jewels, [flattery](#)<sup>30</sup>, and favours.

[00:04:28] It was a kind of soft warfare, played out in [silk](#)<sup>31</sup> and perfume, in secret corridors and garden [pavilions](#)<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> a group of people who went with him and helped him

<sup>28</sup> people who stayed close to them for gain

<sup>29</sup> tried to win or get

<sup>30</sup> saying nice things that may not have been true to please him

<sup>31</sup> soft, smooth cloth made from silkworms

<sup>32</sup> light buildings or tents used for parties or shows



## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:04:37] At the same time, nobles were kept busy with endless court [rituals](#)<sup>33</sup>, [distracted](#)<sup>34</sup> with pleasures, and in a seemingly never-ending game of spending [one-upmanship](#)<sup>35</sup>, [ostentatious](#)<sup>36</sup> displays of wealth and excess.

[00:04:54] They [gambled away](#)<sup>37</sup> fortunes at the gaming tables, dressed in [costumes](#)<sup>38</sup> that cost more than a village, and whispered behind [fans](#)<sup>39</sup> as they [plotted](#)<sup>40</sup> ways to climb the social ladder or planned their [rivals](#)<sup>41</sup>, [downfalls](#)<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> actions done in a certain way

<sup>34</sup> led away or drawn away

<sup>35</sup> trying to be better than someone else all the time

<sup>36</sup> showy in a way that is too much or trying to impress

<sup>37</sup> lost money or things by betting

<sup>38</sup> clothes worn to look like someone or something else

<sup>39</sup> things people waved to cool themselves

<sup>40</sup> secretly planned

<sup>41</sup> competitors or opponents

<sup>42</sup> losses of power, money, or success

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:05:11] This was a world where appearances were everything, and survival depended on who you knew, how you [charmed<sup>43</sup>](#), and how far you were willing to go.

[00:05:21] And when [charm<sup>44</sup>](#) wasn't enough, some turned to darker methods.

[00:05:27] Love potions. Spells. Magical powders. [Rituals](#). And poisons.

[00:05:34] Because if power flowed from the king, and you couldn't reach him with [wit<sup>45</sup>](#) or beauty, perhaps there were other ways.

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<sup>43</sup> made someone like you a lot

<sup>44</sup> the power or quality of attracting or fascinating others

<sup>45</sup> being smart and funny at the same time

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:05:44] This was the [backdrop](#)<sup>46</sup> to The Affair of the Poisons, a [scandal](#)<sup>47</sup> that began in the shadows of Paris, but [crept](#)<sup>48</sup> ever closer to Versailles, threatening to [unravel](#)<sup>49</sup> the [illusion](#)<sup>50</sup> of divine order and perfection that Louis had spent decades [crafting](#)<sup>51</sup>.

[00:06:01] It all started in 1672, with the death of a [dashing](#)<sup>52</sup> young [cavalry](#)<sup>53</sup> officer named Godin de Sainte-Croix.

[00:06:11] Now, nothing appeared to be particularly strange about this man's death, but when his belongings were collected, a red [leather](#)<sup>54</sup> [trunk](#)<sup>55</sup> was found.

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<sup>46</sup> the background or setting

<sup>47</sup> a big and shameful event people talk about

<sup>48</sup> moved slowly and quietly

<sup>49</sup> undo or destroy

<sup>50</sup> something that looked real but was not

<sup>51</sup> creating carefully with skill

<sup>52</sup> attractive and brave

<sup>53</sup> soldiers who ride horses

<sup>54</sup> strong material made from animal skin

<sup>55</sup> a big box used to carry things

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:06:24] Inside were a series of love letters between him and an [aristocratic](#)<sup>56</sup> married woman named Marie de Brinvilliers.

[00:06:34] Now, this was 17th-century France; it would probably have been more unusual if he hadn't had a lover.

[00:06:41] But upon further inspection, the [trunk](#) contained something far more [incriminating](#)<sup>57</sup>.

[00:06:49] A collection of [vials](#)<sup>58</sup> containing strange substances: potions and poisons.

[00:06:57] The young [cavalry](#) officer had spent some time in prison, and there he had reportedly got to know an Italian master-poisoner, a man who knew how to prepare different natural ingredients, powders, and liquids to kill.

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<sup>56</sup> belonging to a rich and powerful family

<sup>57</sup> showing that someone had done something wrong

<sup>58</sup> small glass bottles

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:07:14] The letters exchanged between the two lovers revealed that the pair had spent several years [honing](#)<sup>59</sup> their [craft](#)<sup>60</sup>, scientifically testing different combinations, and doing practical experiments on [unwitting](#)<sup>61</sup> subjects.

[00:07:32] According to one report, Marie de Brinvilliers would choose one of her [concoctions](#)<sup>62</sup>, add it to a cake or biscuit mixture, and then turn up at the Hôtel-Dieu, a large public hospital on the bank of the Seine.

[00:07:48] As a member of the French [nobility](#), and without much else to do, she would be allowed to [stroll](#)<sup>63</sup> up and down the hospital [wards](#)<sup>64</sup>, visiting the sick and giving them [token](#)<sup>65</sup> gifts: biscuits, cakes, and so on.

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<sup>59</sup> improving or sharpening

<sup>60</sup> a special skill

<sup>61</sup> not knowing what was really happening

<sup>62</sup> strange or special mixtures

<sup>63</sup> walk in a slow, relaxed way

<sup>64</sup> sections of the hospital

<sup>65</sup> small and symbolic



## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:08:04] To someone recovering from illness in a cold and damp hospital bed, it must have been a welcome [diversion](#)<sup>66</sup> to have someone come and talk to you, bringing you delicious [treats](#)<sup>67</sup> that you might never have been able to afford yourself.

[00:08:19] But it was, of course, not particularly nice to find yourself dead a matter of hours afterwards.

[00:08:26] Now, it's not known how long this went on for, or how many innocent patients she murdered.

[00:08:33] It seems that nobody noticed, or at least nobody seemed to question why people didn't survive for long after tasting one of Marie de Brinvilliers' biscuits.

[00:08:44] These people were in hospital already, it wasn't so [improbable](#)<sup>68</sup> that they would die there, and besides, an [aristocratic](#) young woman would never have been considered capable of doing such a thing.

[00:08:56] It was simply not in the female character, especially of a lady of such noble birth.

[00:09:03] Or so people thought...

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<sup>66</sup> something that took attention away

<sup>67</sup> small things that bring joy or are fun to eat

<sup>68</sup> not likely to happen

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:09:07] And if this wasn't bad enough, there were more letters in the [trunk](#), letters that revealed that [sickly](#)<sup>69</sup> strangers hadn't been the only victims of Marie de Brinvilliers' poisonous [concoctions](#).

[00:09:21] The letter revealed that she had also murdered her father and her two brothers, not out of [spite](#)<sup>70</sup> or hatred, but for financial gain; she wanted the family fortune for herself and her children.

[00:09:37] When her lover was found dead, probably by accidentally poisoning himself, she must have realised that their secret would be revealed.

[00:09:47] She fled, hiding in England for four years, before being arrested in Belgium.

[00:09:52] During all of this time, she had been keeping a sort of journal with her various confessions, and in it she detailed how she had also tried to poison her sister-in-law and her husband.

[00:10:07] The game was up.

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<sup>69</sup> often sick or weak

<sup>70</sup> wanting to hurt them

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:10:09] She was [condemned](#)<sup>71</sup> to death, but she was first to be [subjected](#)<sup>72</sup> to something called “the water cure”, which was a kind of horrible [torture](#) where she was forced to drink 13 and a half litres of water, [stretching](#)<sup>73</sup> her stomach to the point of [agony](#)<sup>74</sup>.

[00:10:26] Then, she was taken to a public square–Place de Grève–her hair shaved, her head chopped off, and her remains burned.

[00:10:37] And this might have seemed like an isolated case–a murderous couple who thought they would never be caught–but it turned out to be the start of something much bigger.

[00:10:49] According to one report, before she was [condemned](#) to death, she said, “Out of so many guilty people, must I be the only one to be put to death? ... Half the people in town are involved in this sort of thing, and I could [ruin](#)<sup>75</sup> them all if I were to talk.”

[00:11:06] End quote.

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<sup>71</sup> sentenced or convicted

<sup>72</sup> made to go through it

<sup>73</sup> expanding or extending

<sup>74</sup> great pain

<sup>75</sup> cause great damage, destroy

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:11:08] Half the people in town, meaning half the people in Paris, would have meant around 300,000 people poisoning family members and murdering unsuspecting hospital patients.

[00:11:19] Clearly, this was something of an exaggeration, but it turned out that it wasn't so far off.

[00:11:28] According to one French historian, there were 400 witches and [warlocks](#)<sup>76</sup> active in the capital at this time.

[00:11:37] Now, these weren't cartoon-type witches; women in dark [robes](#)<sup>77</sup> with pointed hats and black cats.

[00:11:45] But they did have [cauldrons](#)<sup>78</sup>, or at least, one of their core specialities was the preparation of mysterious potions to [heal](#)<sup>79</sup>, to make you more attractive, to force someone to fall in love with you, or indeed, to kill.

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<sup>76</sup> male witches or men who used magic

<sup>77</sup> long, loose clothing

<sup>78</sup> big metal pots used for cooking

<sup>79</sup> make someone healthy again

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:12:02] The true extent of this [seedy](#)<sup>80</sup> underworld started to be [unravelled](#)<sup>81</sup> after another woman, Magdelaine de La Grange, was arrested on the charge of poisoning her lover, and she said pretty much the same thing as Marie de Brinvilliers, to [paraphrase](#)<sup>82</sup>: “everyone’s doing it”.

[00:12:23] Word reached Louis XIV, and he ordered his chief of police, Gabriel Nicolas de La Reynie, to launch a full investigation.

[00:12:34] Now, de La Reynie had made a name for himself as a man who had “cleaned up” Paris; he reformed the police force, made sure the city was properly lit, and [restored](#)<sup>83</sup> some [semblance](#)<sup>84</sup> of law and order to the city.

[00:12:50] But there was still this underworld that he didn’t fully understand, and he was given the task of getting to the bottom of it.

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<sup>80</sup> dirty, bad, or not safe

<sup>81</sup> revealed or figured out

<sup>82</sup> say it in different words

<sup>83</sup> brought back

<sup>84</sup> a small or weak appearance



## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:13:01] To deal with the fallout of this investigation, Louis XIV created a secretive

[tribunal](#)<sup>85</sup> called the Chambre Ardente, or “Burning Chamber,” so-named for the

[torch](#)<sup>86</sup>-lit basement where its judges met.

[00:13:17] Over the next three years, this would be the centre of the investigation, an

investigation that uncovered the true extent of 17th-century France’s obsession with the supernatural.

[00:13:30] And what de La Reynie and this [tribunal](#) found was shocking.

[00:13:36] Fortune tellers, [alchemists](#)<sup>87</sup>, all sorts of [fraudsters](#)<sup>88</sup> and [charlatans](#)<sup>89</sup>, and a

[bustling](#)<sup>90</sup> industry in the heart of Paris.

[00:13:46] But there was an even more [sinister](#)<sup>91</sup> side.

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<sup>85</sup> a special court that judged people

<sup>86</sup> a burning stick of wood

<sup>87</sup> people who tried to turn metals into gold

<sup>88</sup> people who lied to get money or trick others

<sup>89</sup> people who pretended to know things to fool others

<sup>90</sup> full of busy people and activity

<sup>91</sup> scary, evil, or bad-looking

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:13:50] Alongside the people selling fake cures for headaches or lovesickness, there were others preparing deadly poisons, performing [backroom<sup>92</sup>](#) [abortions<sup>93</sup>](#), and even conducting so-called “black masses”.

[00:14:05] What really happened at these “black masses” is something of a mystery, but it’s thought that they would involve an [altar<sup>94</sup>](#) set up in a bedroom, a naked woman [stretched<sup>95</sup>](#) across it, a [chalice<sup>96</sup>](#) placed on her body, and, in some cases, the blood of a sacrificed infant used to [invoke<sup>97</sup>](#) dark powers.

[00:14:30] And one of the women at the centre of this, Paris’s most famous [alchemist<sup>98</sup>](#), poisoner, [abortionist<sup>99</sup>](#) and conductor of black masses, was a woman named Catherine Monvoisin, or simply “La Voisin”, the neighbour, in English.

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<sup>92</sup> a small, hidden room

<sup>93</sup> ending a pregnancy before birth

<sup>94</sup> a table used for religious actions

<sup>95</sup> laid down or extended

<sup>96</sup> a fancy cup used in religion

<sup>97</sup> call on or pray to

<sup>98</sup> a person who did old-style science and magic

<sup>99</sup> a person who performed abortions

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:14:47] Men and women of Parisian [high society](#)<sup>100</sup> would go to La Voisin for anything: fortune telling, love potions, medical treatments, [abortions](#), black masses; there was practically no procedure that was beyond her [stated](#)<sup>101</sup> abilities.

[00:15:04] Now, there are certainly plenty of question marks as to whether her [incantations](#)<sup>102</sup>, love potions or medical treatments had any effect whatsoever.

[00:15:14] Unfortunately, there is little debate when it comes to things like [abortions](#) or the preparation of poison: she is estimated to have been responsible for the deaths of anywhere between 1,000 and 2,500 individuals.

[00:15:30] She must have thought herself to be [invincible](#)<sup>103</sup>; after all, she had grown fabulously wealthy, she was providing a service to those at the very top of French society, and had people queuing [around the block](#)<sup>104</sup>.

[00:15:45] But, on the 12th of March 1679, fresh out of mass, she was arrested on the church's steps.

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<sup>100</sup> the richest and most powerful people

<sup>101</sup> said clearly, specified

<sup>102</sup> magic words said during a spell

<sup>103</sup> too strong to be beaten

<sup>104</sup> on the streets, next to her location

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:15:54] In the months that followed, she was [interrogated](#)<sup>105</sup>.

[00:15:58] Interestingly enough, La Voisin wasn't subjected to [torture](#) for most of her imprisonment, perhaps because the authorities feared what she might [reveal](#)<sup>106</sup>, potentially information that might [incriminate](#)<sup>107</sup> high-ranking members of the French [aristocracy](#), perhaps even members of King Louis's inner circle.

[00:16:18] But during her final interrogation, in February 1680, she was put to the boot [torture](#): a brutal method designed to [crush](#)<sup>108</sup> the legs and force confessions.

[00:16:31] Even then, she refused to name specific clients, only admitting that, and I'm quoting directly, " a great number of persons of every sort of [rank](#)<sup>109</sup> and condition addressed themselves to her to [seek](#)<sup>110</sup> the death of or to find the means to kill many people".

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<sup>105</sup> questioned for a long time

<sup>106</sup> make something known or tell something hidden

<sup>107</sup> show they had done something bad

<sup>108</sup> break completely

<sup>109</sup> level or position

<sup>110</sup> go after or have as a goal

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:16:49] In other words, rich and poor, of noble birth and normal people, came to [seek](#) her poisonous services.

[00:16:58] Now, it's worth pausing for a moment to talk about why so many people, especially women, turned to poison.

[00:17:07] It wasn't that they were cold-hearted murderers, but rather, it was often a desperate act of rebellion.

[00:17:15] In 17th-century France, women had little legal or financial power, and were trapped [under the thumb](#)<sup>111</sup> of husbands or fathers.

[00:17:26] If they were cut out of wills, or abused by their fathers, brothers or husbands, there was [precious little](#)<sup>112</sup> they could do about it.

[00:17:36] Poison became a secret weapon to escape [abusive](#)<sup>113</sup> marriages, secure wealth, or [defy](#)<sup>114</sup> a system that left them powerless.

[00:17:46] And it worked very well.

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<sup>111</sup> controlled by

<sup>112</sup> extremely little

<sup>113</sup> involving bad or wrong treatment

<sup>114</sup> refuse to obey



## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:17:49] Poisons like [arsenic](#)<sup>115</sup> were nearly impossible to detect.

[00:17:53] They were tasteless, [odourless](#)<sup>116</sup>, and invisible in [autopsies](#)<sup>117</sup>, so people who were murdered by poison would typically be [written off](#)<sup>118</sup> as dying of ‘natural causes’.

[00:18:06] And La Voisin was one of the women who made it all possible, for a while at least.

[00:18:13] In February of 1680, nearly a year after her arrest, she too was led to Place de Grève—the same square where de Brinvilliers had been [beheaded](#)<sup>119</sup> four years earlier—and she was burned at the [stake](#)<sup>120</sup>.

[00:18:28] She had taken the names of her trusted clients to the [grave](#)<sup>121</sup> with her, but just a few months later, the identity of one would be revealed.

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<sup>115</sup> a deadly poison

<sup>116</sup> having no smell

<sup>117</sup> exams of a dead body to find the cause of death

<sup>118</sup> said to be unimportant or not a problem

<sup>119</sup> had the head cut off

<sup>120</sup> a wooden stick used to kill or burn someone

<sup>121</sup> a burying place in the ground

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:18:39] La Voisin's daughter confessed the name of one of her mother's most secretive clients: Madame de Montespan, who just so happened to be one of Louis XIV's favourite mistresses, and the mother of seven of his illegitimate children.

[00:18:56] According to witnesses, she had first sought out La Voisin in 1667 to conduct a series of "black masses", with the objective of winning the king's love.

[00:19:08] She also asked La Voisin to prepare a series of [aphrodisiacs](#)<sup>122</sup>—magic potions—which she arranged to be [slipped into](#)<sup>123</sup> his drink and food.

[00:19:20] Sure enough, a year later, she was added to his long list of mistresses.

[00:19:26] Now, the fact that she was prepared to go to the length of organising these pseudo-religious dark rituals and [procuring](#)<sup>124</sup> [aphrodisiacs](#) probably gives you an idea of her determination to [seduce](#)<sup>125</sup> the King, and his [extensive](#)<sup>126</sup> list of mistresses suggests that it might not have been the toughest job in the world.

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<sup>122</sup> magic potions to make people feel romantic

<sup>123</sup> secretly put into

<sup>124</sup> getting (in a tricky or secret way)

<sup>125</sup> make him fall in love or want romance

<sup>126</sup> large or long

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:19:46] But she clearly thought her success with the King was due to La Voisin's magic powers.

[00:19:53] And after the pair had become lovers, her relationship with La Voisin became even more important.

[00:20:01] Whenever there was any kind of issue between her and the king, between her and a [rival](#)<sup>127</sup> for the king's [affections](#)<sup>128</sup>, or an issue with anyone else at court, she would turn to her trusted back-street witch, La Voisin.

[00:20:16] There are even reports that she turned to her to poison the king.

[00:20:21] Louis was clearly not a man who put a great [emphasis](#)<sup>129</sup> on loyalty and [monogamy](#)<sup>130</sup>, and only a few years after Madame de Montespan had become his lover, did his [eyes start to wander](#)<sup>131</sup>, and he started to lose interest.

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<sup>127</sup> a person she competed with

<sup>128</sup> feelings of love or care

<sup>129</sup> special attention or importance

<sup>130</sup> having only one partner

<sup>131</sup> start to look at other people with romantic interest

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:20:38] Together with La Voisin, de Montespan dreamed up a plan to poison one of her rivals, and it has even been [alleged](#)<sup>132</sup> that they had planned to poison the king himself.

[00:20:50] If he was going to [desert](#)<sup>133</sup> her, he must pay the price, so the theory goes.

[00:20:56] Fortunately for Louis, at least, La Voisin was arrested and executed before this could happen.

[00:21:04] And as for Madame de Montespan and her other poison-loving colleagues at court?

[00:21:09] If this information had got out, it would have been [scandalous](#)<sup>134</sup>.

[00:21:14] But it didn't.

[00:21:17] The investigation continued, but quietly. Arrests were made, but names were [omitted](#)<sup>135</sup> from the public record. Madame de Montespan was never formally charged, but soon after, she lost her influence at court.

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<sup>132</sup> said to be true, but not proven

<sup>133</sup> leave or abandon

<sup>134</sup> very shocking or bad in a way that would have made people talk

<sup>135</sup> left out, not included

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:21:33] And in 1682, the same year that the royal court officially moved to Versailles, the full investigation was closed.

[00:21:43] By then, the Chambre Ardente had charged 442 people.

[00:21:49] Thirty-six were executed. Dozens more were imprisoned for life or [exiled](#)<sup>136</sup>.

And countless others — especially among the [nobility](#) — simply [vanished](#)<sup>137</sup> from the record.

[00:22:02] The [scandal](#) was swept under the royal carpet.

[00:22:06] This all [coincided with](#)<sup>138</sup> the royal court's official move to Versailles, a carefully stage-managed shift to an image of [splendour](#), and perhaps an ideal moment to quietly bury the affair, along with any remaining embarrassing secrets.

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<sup>136</sup> forced to leave their country and live somewhere else

<sup>137</sup> disappeared suddenly

<sup>138</sup> happened at the same time as

## The Affair of the Poisons

[00:22:22] Not forgotten, exactly, but filed away. A stain<sup>139</sup> on the Sun King's legacy that no amount of gold or glitter<sup>140</sup> could fully erase<sup>141</sup>.

[00:22:32] And yet, the Affair of the Poisons is a reminder not just about Louis XIV and his court, but perhaps about human nature itself.

[00:22:41] That beneath the surface of the most refined<sup>142</sup> societies, behind the manners<sup>143</sup>, the titles, the rituals, there can lie a deep current of desperation — to be seen, to be loved, to hold on to power.

[00:22:56] And when the stakes<sup>144</sup> are high enough, people will often turn to the darkest of means.

[00:23:04] OK, then, that is it for today's episode on the Affair of the Poisons.

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<sup>139</sup> a dirty mark, something that made him look bad

<sup>140</sup> his attractive and exciting but shallow quality

<sup>141</sup> remove completely

<sup>142</sup> polite, well-mannered, and elegant

<sup>143</sup> polite ways of behaving

<sup>144</sup> the risks or rewards in a situation

**The Affair of the Poisons**

[00:23:09] If you enjoyed this story and you haven't had enough of mysteries at the French court, you might like to listen to episode number 479, about the Affair of the Diamond Necklace.

[00:23:20] There's less poison, but there are affairs, a king called Louis, criminals, and of course a very large diamond necklace.

[00:23:28] I'll put a link to that below, or you can just search for it on the website. It's Episode number 479 and it's called the Affair of the Diamond Necklace.

[00:23:38] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:23:43] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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## **Key vocabulary**

Word	Definition
Black magic	evil powers or spells to hurt or control people
Deceit	lying or tricking
Gossip	talking about other people's secrets or private lives
Torture	hurting someone badly to punish or get information
Tends	usually happens or acts in this way
Orbit	area of influence
Revolve around	go in a circle around
French court revolve around	the royal place and people always focused on him
Monarch	a king
Radiated	was given off by or spread from him
Firm	strong and steady
Nobility	rich and important people with titles



The Affair of the Poisons

<b>Wielded</b>	used or controlled
<b>Nobles</b>	people from rich and powerful families
<b>Chateau</b>	a big and fancy house in the countryside (especially in France)
<b>Vast</b>	very big
<b>Glittering</b>	shining and bright
<b>Splendour</b>	great beauty and richness
<b>Aristocracy</b>	the highest class of rich and powerful people
<b>Gesture</b>	a movement to show an idea or feeling
<b>Dazzling</b>	very bright or amazing
<b>Chandeliers</b>	big lights that hanged from the ceiling, with many small lights
<b>Excess</b>	lack of moderation, extravagance
<b>Moral decay</b>	weakening of standards of right and wrong
<b>Merely</b>	only, just
<b>Whispered about</b>	talked about in quiet voices, often in secret

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<b>Retinue</b>	a group of people who went with him and helped him
<b>Hangers-on</b>	people who stayed close to them for gain
<b>Competed for</b>	tried to win or get
<b>Flattery</b>	saying nice things that may not have been true to please him
<b>Silk</b>	soft, smooth cloth made from silkworms
<b>Pavilions</b>	light buildings or tents used for parties or shows
<b>Rituals</b>	actions done in a certain way
<b>Distracted</b>	led away or drawn away
<b>One-upmanship</b>	trying to be better than someone else all the time
<b>Ostentatious</b>	showy in a way that is too much or trying to impress
<b>Gambled away</b>	lost money or things by betting
<b>Costumes</b>	clothes worn to look like someone or something else
<b>Fans</b>	things people waved to cool themselves
<b>Plotted</b>	secretly planned

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<b>Rivals</b>	competitors or opponents
<b>Downfalls</b>	losses of power, money, or success
<b>Charmed</b>	made someone like you a lot
<b>Charm</b>	the power or quality of attracting or fascinating others
<b>Wit</b>	being smart and funny at the same time
<b>Backdrop</b>	the background or setting
<b>Scandal</b>	a big and shameful event people talk about
<b>Crept</b>	moved slowly and quietly
<b>Unravel</b>	undo or destroy
<b>Illusion</b>	something that looked real but was not
<b>Crafting</b>	creating carefully with skill
<b>Dashing</b>	attractive and brave
<b>Cavalry</b>	soldiers who ride horses
<b>Leather</b>	strong material made from animal skin

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<b>Trunk</b>	a big box used to carry things
<b>Aristocratic</b>	belonging to a rich and powerful family
<b>Incriminating</b>	showing that someone had done something wrong
<b>Vials</b>	small glass bottles
<b>Honing</b>	improving or sharpening
<b>Craft</b>	a special skill
<b>Unwitting</b>	not knowing what was really happening
<b>Concoctions</b>	strange or special mixtures
<b>Stroll</b>	walk in a slow, relaxed way
<b>Wards</b>	sections of the hospital
<b>Token</b>	small and symbolic
<b>Diversion</b>	something that took attention away
<b>Treats</b>	small things that bring joy or are fun to eat
<b>Improbable</b>	not likely to happen

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<b>Sickly</b>	often sick or weak
<b>Spite</b>	wanting to hurt them
<b>Condemned</b>	sentenced or convicted
<b>Subjected</b>	made to go through it
<b>Stretching</b>	expanding or extending
<b>Agony</b>	great pain
<b>Ruin</b>	cause great damage, destroy
<b>Warlocks</b>	male witches or men who used magic
<b>Robes</b>	long, loose clothing
<b>Cauldrons</b>	big metal pots used for cooking
<b>Heal</b>	make someone healthy again
<b>Seedy</b>	dirty, bad, or not safe
<b>Unravelled</b>	revealed or figured out
<b>Paraphrase</b>	say it in different words

**The Affair of the Poisons**

<b>Restored</b>	brought back
<b>Semblance</b>	a small or weak appearance
<b>Tribunal</b>	a special court that judged people
<b>Torch</b>	a burning stick of wood
<b>Alchemists</b>	people who tried to turn metals into gold
<b>Fraudsters</b>	people who lied to get money or trick others
<b>Charlatans</b>	people who pretended to know things to fool others
<b>Bustling</b>	full of busy people and activity
<b>Sinister</b>	scary, evil, or bad-looking
<b>Backroom</b>	a small, hidden room
<b>Abortions</b>	ending a pregnancy before birth
<b>Altar</b>	a table used for religious actions
<b>Stretched</b>	lain down or extended
<b>Chalice</b>	a fancy cup used in religion

**The Affair of the Poisons**

<b>Invoke</b>	call on or pray to
<b>Alchemist</b>	a person who did old-style science and magic
<b>Abortionist</b>	a person who performed abortions
<b>High society</b>	the richest and most powerful people
<b>Stated</b>	said clearly, specified
<b>Incantations</b>	magic words said during a spell
<b>Invincible</b>	too strong to be beaten
<b>Around the block</b>	on the streets, next to her location
<b>Interrogated</b>	questioned for a long time
<b>Reveal</b>	make something known or tell something hidden
<b>Incriminate</b>	show they had done something bad
<b>Crush</b>	break completely
<b>Rank</b>	level or position
<b>Seek</b>	go after or have as a goal

The Affair of the Poisons

<b>Under the thumb</b>	controlled by
<b>Precious little</b>	extremely little
<b>Abusive</b>	involving bad or wrong treatment
<b>Defy</b>	refuse to obey
<b>Arsenic</b>	a deadly poison
<b>Odourless</b>	having no smell
<b>Autopsies</b>	exams of a dead body to find the cause of death
<b>Written off</b>	said to be unimportant or not a problem
<b>Beheaded</b>	had the head cut off
<b>Stake</b>	a wooden stick used to kill or burn someone
<b>Grave</b>	a burying place in the ground
<b>Aphrodisiacs</b>	magic potions to make people feel romantic
<b>Slipped into</b>	secretly put into
<b>Procuring</b>	getting (in a tricky or secret way)



The Affair of the Poisons

<b>Seduce</b>	make him fall in love or want romance
<b>Extensive</b>	large or long
<b>Rival</b>	a person she competed with
<b>Affections</b>	feelings of love or care
<b>Emphasis</b>	special attention or importance
<b>Monogamy</b>	having only one partner
<b>Eyes start to wander</b>	start to look at other people with romantic interest
<b>Alleged</b>	said to be true, but not proven
<b>Desert</b>	leave or abandon
<b>Scandalous</b>	very shocking or bad in a way that would have made people talk
<b>Omitted</b>	left out, not included
<b>Exiled</b>	forced to leave their country and live somewhere else
<b>Vanished</b>	disappeared suddenly
<b>Coincided with</b>	happened at the same time as

**The Affair of the Poisons**

**Stain** a dirty mark, something that made him look bad

**Glitter** his attractive and exciting but shallow quality

**Erase** remove completely

**Refined** polite, well-mannered, and elegant

**Manners** polite ways of behaving

**Stakes** the risks or rewards in a situation

## **Language spotlight**

### **1. Revolve around (someone/something)**

- **Meaning:** To focus mainly on one person or thing; to be centred on something.
- **Synonyms:** focus on, centre on, depend on
- **Antonyms:** ignore, avoid, be independent of
- **Examples:**
  - In the 17th century, life at Versailles **revolved around** pleasing the king.
  - His whole life **revolves around** his career.

### **2. Whispered about**

- **Meaning:** To be secretly talked about, often because something is shocking, embarrassing, or dangerous.
- **Synonyms:** rumoured, gossiped about, discussed quietly
- **Antonyms:** spoken openly, announced, revealed
- **Examples:**
  - The scandal was **whispered about** in the halls of the palace.
  - The teacher's sudden departure was **whispered about** for weeks.

## The Affair of the Poisons

### 3. Under the thumb (of someone)

- **Meaning:** Completely controlled or dominated by someone.
- **Synonyms:** controlled, ruled, dominated
- **Antonyms:** independent, free, in charge
- **Examples:**
  - Many nobles were **under the thumb** of powerful advisers.
  - He's totally **under the thumb** of his manager and can't make decisions on his own.

### 4. Eyes start to wander

- **Meaning:** To become romantically or sexually interested in someone else (often while in a relationship).
- **Synonyms:** lose interest, look elsewhere, become unfaithful
- **Antonyms:** stay faithful, remain loyal, focus on one person
- **Examples:**
  - In the French court, when a lover became boring, people's **eyes started to wander**.
  - After years of marriage, his **eyes began to wander**, which caused problems.

## 5. One-upmanship

- **Meaning:** The act of trying to do better than someone else to show you are superior.
- **Synonyms:** competition, rivalry, showing off
- **Antonyms:** humility, cooperation, modesty
- **Examples:**
  - At Versailles, nobles played games of **one-upmanship**, always trying to outshine each other.
  - Their friendship was ruined by constant **one-upmanship**.

## **Quiz**

### **Listening Comprehension Multiple Choice Questions**

1. What was the French court at Versailles known for during the reign of Louis XIV?

- a) Peace and quiet
- b) Simplicity and poverty
- c) Excess and spectacle
- d) Military training

2. Who was Madame de Montespan?

- a) The queen of France
- b) A servant in the palace
- c) The king's chief military advisor
- d) The king's mistress

3. What did Madame de Montespan allegedly do to try to keep the king's love?

- a) Write him love letters every day
- b) Use love potions and black masses
- c) Pray at church for hours
- d) Send him expensive gifts from Italy

## The Affair of the Poisons

4. Why did nobles seek the help of fortune tellers and alchemists?

- a) To help them with farming
- b) To learn science
- c) To gain love, power, or revenge
- d) To become rich through business

5. What did the investigation into poisonings lead to?

- a) The exposure of a secret criminal network
- b) A public celebration
- c) The arrest of the king
- d) War with England

## True or False

6. Nobles at Versailles wore plain clothes to show their modesty. (True/False)

7. Gossip and scandal were common in the French court. (True/False)

8. Poison was sometimes used to kill love rivals or family members. (True/False)

9. Madame de Montespan was openly proud of her involvement in black magic.  
(True/False)

10. Some people involved in the Affair of the Poisons were executed. (True/False)

## The Affair of the Poisons

### Fill in the Blank

11. Of those official, or semi-official ones, each brought with her a retinue of \_\_\_\_\_-on and followers.
12. After all, she had grown fabulously wealthy, she was providing a service to those at the very top of French society, and had people queuing around the \_\_\_\_\_.
13. If they were cut out of wills, or abused by their fathers, brothers or husbands, there was precious \_\_\_\_\_ they could do about it.
14. This all coincided \_\_\_\_\_ the royal court's official move to Versailles, a carefully stage-managed shift to an image of splendour
15. She was first to be subjected to something called "the water cure", which was a kind of horrible \_\_\_\_\_ where she was forced to drink 13 and a half litres of water, stretching her stomach to the point of agony.

### Vocabulary Practice

16. What does "**black magic**" mean?

- a) A type of French fashion
- b) Magic used to do harm or evil
- c) A kind of candle
- d) A polite gesture



**The Affair of the Poisons**

17. What does "**gossip**" mean?

- a) A scientific report
- b) A loud argument
- c) Stories about other people, often untrue
- d) A kind of French food

18. What does "**ostentatious**" mean?

- a) Simple and modest
- b) Shy and quiet
- c) Loud but not colourful
- d) Showy, made to impress

19. What does "**rival**" mean?

- a) A loyal friend
- b) A family member
- c) A person who competes with you
- d) A soldier in the king's army

**The Affair of the Poisons**

20. What does "**unravel**" mean?

- a) To fall apart or become clear
- b) To sleep deeply
- c) To travel far away
- d) To become stronger

## **Answers**

1. c) Excess and spectacle
2. d) The king's mistress
3. b) Use love potions and black masses
4. c) To gain love, power, or revenge
5. a) The exposure of a secret criminal network
6. False
7. True
8. True
9. False
10. True
11. hangers
12. block
13. little
14. with
15. torture
16. b) Magic used to do harm or evil
17. c) Stories about other people, often untrue
18. d) Showy, made to impress
19. c) A person who competes with you
20. a) To fall apart or become clear