CONYNGHAM

p 279. The reigning favourite was Lady Conyngham who was to keep the King by his side for the rest of his life. In 1820 she was a plump handsome woman of about 54 who was married to Conyngham an Irish peer c. 1794. The King was in love with her in his rather

[illegible] fashion > but it was misusing language to call her, as most people did, his 'mistress'. They probably never went beyond a little elderly dalliance. As one rude popular versifier put it:

> 'Tis pleasant at seasons to see how they sit,
> First cracking their nuts, and then cracking their wit:
> Then quaffing their claret – then mingling their lips,
> Or tickling the *fat* about each other's hips.

Society women thought her rather vulgar and not very intelligent, unlike the King, who in a kind of boyish infatuation, considered her 'wittier than any male or female of his acquaintance.' She was apparently religious, had no political ideas or opinions (a good thing), but, creating a fashion followed by the blondes of our era, had 'a strong leaning to diamonds and money'. It was said later that during George IV's last illness, she carted away sufficient jewellery, plate, etc., to fill two wagons. She was careful to preserve appearances and never stayed under the same roof as the King without being accompanied by her husband, who, incidentally, did very well out of his wife's influence, being advanced to several well-paid offices and posts.

That she had not always been so respectable is proved by a passage in the autobiography of de Quincey. When, years before this, he and a fellow schoolboy were going over to Ireland they had found, sitting in her travelling coach on deck, a beautiful lady of rank and fashion, who was amused by their admiring glances and invited them into her coach for some talk. That night, trying to sleep on deck, not far away, they discovered that a certain colonel, who had been hiding below during the day, crept into her coach late at night – an arrangement 'not entirely a secret even amongst the lady's servants'. And this, of course, was Lady Conyngham. The secret of her long hold over the King was probably – as we find in the Grantley-Berkeley Reminiscences – that 'invariably the lady kept him in good humour with the world', making it clear that 'in her conviction he was a compound of Sardanapalus and Louis XIV, Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar, Alcibiades and the Admirable Crichton'. Stronger-minded men than George IV have found it hard to resist such flattery; and Lady Conyngham was not only a very handsome woman but also possessed, we are told, 'a sweetly musical voice, low and tender'.

Even that voice, daily delivering butter and honey, could not have induced the King, as 1820 went shuffling out, to forget all his troubles. The Bill had failed; that dreadful woman Caroline, as popular as he was unpopular, was still around; and no matter how great a nuisance the Queen and her cheering mobs might be, 1821 would have to be the year – the truly magnificent year too – of his Coronation.

from the PRINCE of PLEASURE & his REGENCY 1811-20
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1821

King of Pleasure

There have been four coronations in my lifetime: those of Edward VII, George V, George VI, Elizabeth II; and I was never near any of them. If I could work a time-trick and hop into the past, the only coronation I would choose to attend would be this one in 1821. George IV might have been vague and dilatory about state affairs, but he made sure that when at last the day had come he would have a slap-up coronation. We might be said to be on our way there now, but we can risk a few brief halts along the road.

At the end of January, in his speech at the Opening of Parliament the King announced that 'notwithstanding the agitation produced by temporary circumstances, and amidst the distress which still presses upon a large portion of my subjects, the firmest reliance may be placed on that affection and loyal attachment to my person . . . and which, while it is most grateful to the strongest feelings of my heart, I shall ever consider as the best and surest safeguard of my throne . . .' All of which, when we remember the various measures to suppress popular feeling, seems nothing short of sheer impudence. Yet oddly enough, though Queen Caroline was still bouncing around to act as a living reproach to him, though Lady Conyngham was very much in evidence as the triumphant favourite, there were signs now that popular disfavour was being left behind.

On 7 February the King went in state to Drury Lane and was warmly applauded for two or three minutes. He went the next night to Covent Garden and was enthusiastically greeted, even though a voice from the gallery cried, 'Where's your wife, Georgie?' The crowds outside both theatres did more cheering than hooting. Chaucer's 'stormy peple unsad and ever untrewe' were now veering towards him, which meant that at last the King and his advisers could begin planning the Coronation.

In this same month, February, John Keats, who was with his friend Severn in Rome, was slowly dying, being bitterly disappointed, morning after morning, to find himself still alive, in a world to which he had already said goodbye. In the evening of 23 February he died. He had asked that on his gravestone there should be nothing but *Here lies one whose name was writ in water.* It has been suggested that what put this into his mind was the