

## Erskine May, Chapter II, pp. 129-138

### The Affair of Queen Caroline

#### Accession of George IV

On his accession to the throne, he was dissatisfied with ministers, for resisting his demands for a larger civil list: but submitted to their judgment, and even, in his speech to Parliament, disclaimed any wish for an increased revenue. Soon afterwards his painful relations with the queen led to proceedings of which his ministers could not approve: but in which,—with the honourable exception of Mr. Canning,—they were induced to support him. The king's personal feelings and honour were concerned; and the embarrassing conduct of the queen herself, led them to accept the responsibility of measures to which the king already stood committed. No sooner had he succeeded to the throne than he desired to obtain a divorce; but his ministers, at that time, resisted his wishes, and explained their objections, in some able minutes of [130] the cabinet. He obtained from them, however, an assurance that, if her Majesty should return to England, they would no longer oppose him in his cherished object. They were little prepared for so embarrassing an event: but it was soon to be brought about by the offensive measures which the king had taken, and his ministers had sanctioned, against her.

#### Return of the Queen

The queen had already been irritated by two great insults. Our ambassadors, acting upon their instructions from home, had prevented her recognition as queen of England at foreign courts; and her name had been omitted, by command of the king, from the liturgy of the church. Even the legality of this latter act was much doubted.<sup>(1)</sup> It was at least so disputable as to be an unwise exercise of the prerogative. Such insults as these, naturally provoked the queen to insist upon her proper recognition. At the same time they aroused popular sympathy in her cause, which encouraged her to proceed to extremities. The ministers vainly attempted a compromise: but it was too late. The queen was already on her way to England, loudly asserting her rights. They endeavoured to prevent her approach, by submitting a proposal that she [131] should receive an annuity of £50,000 a year, on renouncing her title, and continuing to reside abroad; and threatening proceedings against her in Parliament, if she refused these conditions. She refused them, and hastened to England,—when preliminary proceedings were at once commenced. Even now there was still hope of a compromise, sought by the queen herself. The king was willing to drop all further proceedings against her, and to recognise her title, on condition of her residing abroad; but the queen demanded the restoration of her name in the liturgy, and her recognition in at least one foreign court,—which the king refused to concede.

And now the threat was carried out to the fullest extent, by the introduction of a bill into the House of Lords, to deprive her Majesty of her title, prerogatives, and rights, and to dissolve her marriage with the king. Ministers were fully sensible of the difficulties, and even of the danger, of yielding to the king's desire to prosecute this formidable measure. Lord Eldon, writing in June, 1820, said, 'I think no administration, who have any regard for him, will go the length he wishes, as an administration,—and if they will, they cannot take Parliament along with them: that body is afraid of disclosures,—not on one side only,—which may affect the monarchy itself.' But on the failure of all their attempts to effect an accommodation of the [132] royal differences, they yielded,—against their better judgment,—to the revengeful spirit

of the king.

## The Queen's Trial

The disgraceful incidents of the 'queen's trial' are too well known to need repetition, even if they ought otherwise to find a place in this history. But what were the constitutional aspects of the case? The king had resolved to execute an act of vengeance rather than of justice against the queen,—whose wrongs had aroused for her protection, the strongest popular feelings,—sympathy with a woman, and resentment of oppression. All the power of the crown was arrayed on one side, and the excited passions of the people on the other. The impending conflict was viewed with alarm by statesmen of all parties. Many sagacious observers dreaded a civil war. Ministers foresaw the dangers to which the country was exposed: they disapproved of proceedings which, without their acquiescence, could not have been attempted;—yet they lent themselves to gratify the anger and hatred of the king. They were saved from the consummation of their worst fears by the withdrawal of the Bill of pains and penalties, at its last stage in the House of Lords: but in proceeding so far, in opposition to their own judgment, they had sinned against their constitutional obligations, as responsible ministers. By consenting to act as instruments of the king's pleasure, they brought him into dangerous collision with his people. Had they refused to permit, what they could not justify to Parliament or the country, they would have spared the king his humiliation, and the state its perils.

[133] Not to have supported the king in a cause affecting his deepest feelings and his honour, might have exposed them to the reproach of deserting their royal master in his utmost need, and even of siding with his hated consort:(2) but a higher sense of their responsibilities, and greater firmness in asserting them, would have made them mediators between the king, on the one side, and the queen, the Parliament, and the people, on the other.(3)

The opposition had espoused the queen's cause,—some to protect her from oppression,—some to lead a popular cause against the against the ministers,—and others, like Cobbett, to gratify their bitter hatred of the government. The king's resentment against those who had opposed him in Parliament, equalled that of his father against Mr. Fox. Mr. Fremantle, writing on the 29th December, 1820, to the Marquess of Buckingham, said: 'His invective against Lord Grey was stronger and more violent than I can possibly repeat;' and again: 'what I am most anxious to observe to you, was his increased hostility and indignation [134] against the opposition, and more personally against Lord Grey.' Yet the same acute observer, who knew the king well, writing again on the 24th January 1821, said: 'Lord Grenville fancies a Whig government could not last six months, reasoning from the conduct of George III.: but in this I am persuaded he would find himself deceived, for the same decision and steadiness of mind does not belong to his successor. And should the change once take place, new attachments and habits would prevail, and obliterate all former anger.'

### Footnotes.

1. Dr. Phillimore, writing to the Marquess of Buckingham, 16th Jan. 1821, said: 'The general opinion of lawyers is, I think, unfavourable to the claim.'—*Court and Cabinets of George IV.*, i. 109.
2. Lord Brougham has attributed their conduct solely to an unworthy desire to retain their places (*Works*, iv. 33); but perhaps the suggestion in the text is nearer the truth.
3. Mr. Canning wrote to Mr. Huskisson, Oct. 2, 1820, that the ministers ought to have held this language to the king: " Sir.—divorce is impossible!" "What! if she comes, if she braves, if she insults?" "Yes, sir, in any case, divorce is impossible. Other things may be tried, other expedients may be resorted to; but divorce, we tell you again, is impossible. It can never be ;" . . . and see the fruits' (of their conduct),—' a government brought into contempt and detestation: a kingdom thrown into such ferment and

convulsion, as no other kingdom or government ever recovered from without a revolution; but I hope we shall.'—Stapleton's Life of Canning, 299.

## **Influence of George IV—Catholic Emancipation**

Meanwhile, the popularity of the king, which had suffered for a time from these proceedings, was speedily recovered. The monarchy had sustained no permanent injury: its influence was not in the least impaired. The personal character of the king was not such as to command the respect or attachment of the people: yet at no previous period had their loyalty been more devoted—never, perhaps, had the adulation of royalty been so extravagant and servile. There were discontent and turbulence among some classes of the people: but the crown and its ministers continued to rule supreme over Parliament, the press, the society and the public opinion of the country.

### **Brougham's Motion**

Though the influence of the crown was acknowledged as fully as in the late reign, it had not been brought under Parliamentary discussion for many years; when, in 1822, Mr. Brougham introduced a motion on the [135] subject. He proposed to declare that the influence of the crown was 'unnecessary for maintaining its constitutional prerogatives, destructive of the independence of Parliament, and inconsistent with the well-governing of the realm.' By comparing the present expenditure with that of 1780,—the number of places and commissions, the cost of collecting the revenue, and the host of persons looking up to government for patronage,—he pronounced the influence of the crown to have been greatly increased since Mr. Dunning's celebrated resolution. He admitted, however, that the number of placemen in the House had been diminished. In the time of Lord Carteret there had been two hundred, and at an antecedent period even three hundred: in 1780 there had been between eighty and ninety; and in 1822, eighty-seven,—many of whom, however, could not be said to be dependent on the crown. He drew an entertaining historical sketch of the manner in which every party, in turn, so long as it held office, had enjoyed the confidence of the House of Commons, but had lost that confidence immediately it was in opposition,—a coincidence to be attributed to the ascendancy of the crown, which alone enabled any ministry to command a majority. Lord Londonderry, in a judicious speech, pointed out that the authority of the crown had been controlled by the increasing freedom of the press, and by other causes; and after a debate of some interest, Mr. Brougham's motion was negatived by a large majority.(1) It was [136] not by paring down prerogative and patronage, but by enlarging the liberties of the people, that the influence of the crown was destined to be controlled.

### **The Catholic Question**

Early in his reign, the king was supposed to be in favour of a measure for the relief of the Roman Catholics; and its friends were even speculating upon his encouragement to carry it through Parliament.(2) But in 1824, he had become 'violently anti-Catholic;' and so paramount was his influence supposed to be over the deliberations of Parliament, that the friends of the cause believed it to be hopeless. Until the death of Lord Liverpool, the Catholic claims having small hope of success, the king was content to make known his opinions in conversation, and through common reports. But when Mr. Canning, the brilliant champion of the Roman Catholics, had become first minister, his Majesty thought it necessary to declare his sentiments, in a more authentic shape. And accordingly he sent for the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Bishop of London, and 'directed them to make known to their clergy that his sentiments on the coronation oath, and on the Catholic question, were those his revered father, George III., and lamented brother, the Duke of York, had maintained during their lives, and [137] which he himself had professed when Prince of Wales, and which nothing could shake; finally, assuring them that the recent ministerial arrangements were the result of

circumstances, to his Majesty equally unforeseen and unpleasant.'(3) And when political necessity had wrung from Sir Robert Peel and the Duke of Wellington, a conviction that a measure of relief could no longer be withheld, it was with extreme difficulty that they obtained his assent to its introduction. After he had given his consent, he retracted, and again yielded it:—attempted to deny, or explain it away to his anti-Catholic advisers:—complained of his ministers, and claimed the pity of his friends. 'If I do give my assent,' said he, 'I'll go to the baths abroad, and from thence to Hanover. I'll return no more to England. . . I'll return no more: let them get a Catholic king in Clarence.' Such had once been the threat of the stout old king, who, whatever his faults, at least had firmness and strength of will. But the king who now uttered these feeble lamentations, found solace in his trouble, by throwing his arms round the neck of the aged Eldon. And again, in imitation of his father,—having assented [138] to the passing of the Act, which he had deliberately authorised his ministers to carry,—he gratified his animosity against those who had supported it, particularly the peers and bishops, —by marked incivility at his levee; while he loaded with attentions those who had distinguished themselves by opposition to the government.

This concession to the Roman Catholics,—which the ablest statesmen of all parties concurred in supporting,—had already been delayed for thirty years, by the influence of the crown. Happily this influence had now fallen into weaker hands; or it might still have prevailed over wiser counsels, and the grave interests of the state.

#### **Footnotes.**

1. Ayes 216, Noes 101.—Hans. Deb., 2nd Ser., vii. 1266.
2. 'I hear he is for it,' said the Duke of Wellington to Mr. Fremantle. 'By the by,' he added, 'I hear Lady Conyngham supports it, which is a great thing.'—Court and Cabinets of George IV., i. 148; ib. 218.
3. Speech of the Bishop of London at a dinner of the clergy of his diocese, 8th May, 1827; Court and Cabinets of George IV., ii. 324; Gentleman's Magazine, xcvi. 457; Lord Colchester's Diary, iii. 486; Ibid. iii. 496. On the 21st May, in reply to a question of Lord Harewood, the Bishop of London stated in his place, that the newspaper account of his speech to the clergy was correct; and thus the King's name was introduced into debate, and his opinions stated in Parliament.—Ibid., iii. 508.

[Next](#)

[Contents](#)

[Previous](#)