CHAPTER LII

CONROY'S REVENGE

THE story of what has come to be known as the Bedchamber Crisis is not quite so simple as critics of Queen Victoria have supposed. There were reasons, strong reasons why, in this matter, great care should have been taken not to challenge the susceptibilities of a girl who was responsible for the good name of the Court. It has been the custom to read the second chapter of the narrative without taking into consideration the fact that there was a first chapter also.

November 29, 1848: . . . She [the Queen] had been bullied by the Duchess of Kent and Conroy, and not without affection for her mother, she feared them both.

But Sir John Conroy was still permitted, even by so shrewd a man of the world as the Duke of Wellington, to overshadow the young sovereign.

On June 16, 1838, Greville quotes Melbourne as saying "that they were very anxious to get rid of Conroy, who was always haunting the Palace, but that he would not go abroad, and they regretted now they had not made it a part of the bargain when they gave him his pension, that he should do so." In due course, Conroy aroused against himself "the unanimous opposition" of "the Coburg Family."

August 15, 1839: . . . All the Duchess's brothers, her son, her daughter and son-in-law, all joined with the Queen and against Conroy, and on one occasion the Duke [of Wellington] was obliged to interfere in his and her defence. They had a common sitting-room at the Palace in the Duchess's apartments, and they complained that Conroy used insolently to come and sit there, and they asked the Duke whether it was not fit that he should be formally warned off, but the Duke said that this could not be, the Duchess was a great Princess, independent, and having an undoubted right to select her own servants and attendants, with

whom nobody could with decency interfere, and to prohibit her officer from entering her apartments would be an outrage to her.

For the retention of Conroy, it was the Queen who had to pay the price. And it is clear that she was wholly without blame. If Conroy had been ostracized, as she desired that he should be, a most painful scandal would never have occurred.

In what might be described as "the autobiography of a slander," which here follows, people "consulted or appealed to" the Duke of Wellington, "to whose wisdom and integrity all have recourse in time of difficulty." Indeed, says Greville, "it is to take the Duke *par son faible*, for he likes being consulted and mixed up in messes, but upon this occasion, besides the excitement of the *tracasserie*, he is actuated by higher and graver considerations, and he sees and deplores all the evils which result from this miserable affair and its disgraceful publicity." "In desperate cases, he is always the Doctor they rely on."

The Duke then was "cognizant of everything that had occurred." And of what he said, there was "the certainty that every syllable was strictly true." In one alone of many interviews, Greville spent "over two hours [with the Duke] in the course of which he entered into all the details of this affair and of the part he had been called upon to act in it." And Greville enjoyed "his quaint natural and lively style of narrative."

According to Wellington, Conroy persisted in "familiar habits in the Duchess's apartments." The Duchess of Kent had a lady in waiting, called Lady Flora Hastings. And about her, "certain jokes" were "current." It happened "that she and Conroy had travelled up from Scotland in a post chaise"—"circumstances which if not sufficient to justify the suspicions that were raised, at least were to render them very natural. But they never were intended to assume the shape of a serious charge," so declared the Duke, "and in the first instance were rather matter of joke and loose talk."

At this period, said Wellington "not only did Lady Flora's shape exhibit all the appearance of pregnancy, both as to its size and its gradual increase, but there was the constitutional change usually attending that state," all of which circumstances "created very easily the unfortunate impression that had prevailed."

The Court Physician was Sir James Clarke. He "pronounced" that Lady Flora Hastings "had the appearance" of "being with child." Indeed, "the details of Lady Flora's ailments and the opinion of the doctor were all committed to paper," and "the first intimation [of the suspicions] to Lady Flora," so we read, "was from the doctor who told her (that) the ladies (in waiting) of the Palace said she was secretly married, or at all events, if she was not, that she ought to be."

Among the ladies in waiting was the Marchioness of Tavistock, whose Whig husband as eldest son of the Duke of Bedford was nephew of Lord John Russell, a Minister in Lord Melbourne's Cabinet. At the moment, Lady Tavistock was "not in waiting"—that is, not on duty—but "the Queen had written to her when she came to town, to beg her . . . to come up and go with her to the play where she was going in state, which Lady Tavistock did." "When she got to the Palace, she found the ladies all in a hubbub." "Through some one of them whom Lady Tavistock will not give up," they "reported" the matter to her "and begged her to take some steps to protect their purity from this contamination. Lady Tavistock accordingly sent for Melbourne, and confided the matter to him, thinking he was the fittest person, and would know best how to deal with the case."

The other informant of Lord Melbourne was Lady Portman. And according to the Duke, Lady Portman and Lady Tavistock "had done exactly what they ought, their duty, neither more nor less. And that this was his opinion might be told to everybody."

"The thing got wind," therefore, and, continues Greville, "excites greater interest than any matter of a public and political character." "It was at first whispered about, and at last swelled into report, and finally into a charge." Also, "the Queen appears to have been apprized of the rumour, and so far to have entered into it as to sanction an intimation to the lady that she must not appear at Court till she could clear herself of the imputation."

March 2, 1839: . . . It is certain that the Court is plunged in shame and mortification at the exposure, that the palace is full of bickerings and heart-burnings, while the whole proceeding is looked upon by society at large as to the last degree dis-

gusting and disgraceful. It is really an exemplification of the saying, that "*les Rois et les Valets*" are made of the refuse clay of creation, for though such things sometimes happen in the servants' hall, and housekeepers charge still-room and kitchen maids with frailty and pregnancy, they are unprecedented and unheard of in good society, and among people in high or even in respectable stations. It is inconceivable how Melbourne can have permitted this disgraceful and mischievous scandal, which cannot fail to lower the character of the Court in the eyes of the world. There may be objections to Melbourne's extraordinary domiciliation in the Palace; but the compensation ought to be found in his good sense and experience preventing the possibility of such transactions and *tracasseries* as these.

"Medical evidence," therefore, "was either demanded by her [Lady Flora] or submitted to, and the result was satisfactory to the virtue of the accused damsel." Not only was the original diagnosis of Sir James Clarke wholly at fault, but Lady Flora was, in fact, "very ill." She was affected by "dropsy in the womb which also accounts for her appearance of pregnancy."

By the action of Queen Victoria, therefore, who at a Council "seemed very grave," the character of Lady Flora Hastings was thus cleared of all imputations. And, writes Greville, "it appears that in the first instance, the affair would have blown over, and that Lady Flora was well disposed to be satisfied, and even thanked Lady Portman cordially for her conduct." "At the Palace," so we read on April 7, 1839, "all is harmony." The only question was whether Sir James Clarke should be dismissed. On this point, the Duke of Wellington was consulted:

August 15, 1839: . . . His advice was to hush the matter up, on every account to prevent the story going out of the four walls of the Palace: "It is now between these four walls; if they were to tumble down, it would be forever buried in the ruins—so let it be." He thinks it would have been hushed up, and that all the mischief would have been avoided, if after the explanations and reconciliations more pains had been taken to conciliate the Duchess of Kent, but that the omissions in this respect, and the importunities of Conroy, and his influence over the Duchess and Lady Flora kept bad feelings alive, and led to the original letter to Mrs. Hamilton Fitzgerald, which the Duke says was the

primary cause of the subsequent exposure. Against the removal of the doctor, the Duke always protested, because he could not be dismissed *as a punishment*, without a previous inquiry, and this inquiry would have been attended with the most painful results to all parties.

Greville adds a footnote:

"I insert this passage on a painful transaction which had better be consigned to oblivion, because it contains nothing which is not to be found in the most ordinary books of reference; but I shall not enter further on this matter."

While then the Court, seen by Greville, "all looked busy and *affairés*," there would have been no open scandal "if it had not been for Conroy, who was the grand mover of all the subsequent hubbub." Between this man, who had overshadowed Queen Victoria's girlhood, tainted the good name of her mother and in vengeance wished to wreck her reign, on the one hand, and the Duke of Wellington on the other, there now developed a duel of wits. The Duke insisted "that care should be taken to say nothing which might implicate the Queen or excite any fresh prejudice against *her*, that being the most essential evil to guard against." He was thus for "judicious management and greater efforts at conciliation." For instance:

April 21, 1839: . . . Lord Portman went to him, and entreated him to interfere to set matters straight, and he at once said that he would do anything, he would see Melbourne, or the Queen, or the Duchess of Kent, and do anything in his power to suppress the scandal. . . . Lord Portman went to Melbourne yesterday, and entreated him to see the Duke. "Why, damn it," said Melbourne, "I can't see him now, I am shaving, and then I am going to a Cabinet."

However, Lord Portman insisted, and while Melbourne finished *questa barba maledetta*, he went and fetched the Duke.

Of Conroy, on the other hand, Greville writes:

April 21, 1839: It was he who incited the Duchess and Lady Flora to *jeter feu et flamme*, and the young lady is said to have acted with great duplicity, for while she was affecting amicable feelings at the Palace, and to have made it up with everybody, she was writing to her uncle those statements which he after-

ward published, and preparing for the explosion which eventually took place.

With Conroy stirring the cauldron, the Duchess of Kent "first sent for him [the Duke], told him her story, and showed him all the papers." In reply the Duke "wrote a capital letter to the Duchess of Kent, advising conciliation and quiet."

With the Queen estranged from her mother, the Government and Parliament were drawn in:

August 15, 1839: One of the people with whom the Duke had most communication was the speaker [Abercromby] who was much mixed up in it, and consulted by the Duchess, and he was so struck with the sentiments expressed by the Duke in conversation with him, that he entreated him to write the substance of what he had said to the Duchess. He did so, and his letter together with another to the same effect, and for the same end, was communicated (by the Duke's desire) to the Queen, and by the Queen to the Cabinet. The Queen then wrote a very kind letter to the Duchess in which she said that if she had made any sacrifice out of regard to her, she thanked her most warmly for what she had done. This letter the Duke told the Duchess ought to satisfy her; but she said it was not in the Queen's own handwriting, though the Duke says it certainly was. I remember hearing of this letter, and that the idea it was not written by herself was much commented on.

The family of Lady Flora Hastings were bitterly incensed. "Lord Hastings," we read, "wrote a furious letter to Melbourne insisting upon knowing who had set about the story, and Melbourne gave up Lady Tavistock as his informant. On this Hastings wrote to Tavistock and insisted that Lady Tavistock should give up her informant (that is, Lady Portman), but this she declined doing. After a great deal of violence and much angry correspondence, they [Hastings and his advisers] thought they had found out that Lady Tavistock's original informant was the Baroness [Lehzen]"—Conroy's critic—"and they resolved to publish some letter or letters in which this would have been insinuated, but in point of fact it was not the Baroness, and when they found they were on a wrong scent, they seem to have thought it best to draw off." One statement pub-

lished by Lord Hastings was described by Greville as "a very monstrous proceeding, and done in a most disgraceful manner, with a purely vindictive motive," which did "not signify," being "a complete failure." "Most people think he has pushed matters much too far."

Correspondence with Melbourne was published:

April 21, 1839: The letters are very bad productions on both sides, the lady's ill written, intemperate, and rhapsodical, the Minister's rude and unbecoming. The whole affair has done incredible harm, and has played the devil with the Queen's popularity, and cast dreadful odium and discredit on the Court, especially in the country, where a thousand exaggerated reports are rife. It is next to impossible to repair the mischief, because so much mystery is still thrown over the transaction and its origin. The public takes it up (as it took up Queen Caroline) on the principle of favouring an injured person, and one who appears to have obtained no reparation for the injuries inflicted on her.

In due course, Greville himself saw a number of letters:

August 30, 1839: . . . An examination of the correspondence only confirms my impression that the *Palatians* behaved monstrously ill in the first instance. There seems to have been a continued series of blunders, and of sins against delicacy, justice, propriety and good taste. Then came the Hastings party all fury and malice, and resolved to be revenged, since they could get neither explanation nor satisfaction. It has been a horrible, disgraceful, and mischievous mess.

"Violent and libellous articles" on the case then appeared in the *Morning Post,* showing "unappeased wrath," and a desire for "explanations and apologies."

June 24, 1839, Ludford: Brougham mixed himself up in it as the adviser of Hastings with whom he has struck up a mighty friendship, and he has been wonderfully zealous and active in the business.

As for the unfortunate girl herself, she "suffered dreadfully in mind and body, the latter from the exertions she was compelled to make in going about, and the former from being such an object of attention and curiosity and still more, because every

sort of excitement was kept up in and around her, by the faction who made an instrument of her." Indeed, the Court was "in a great fright lest Lady Flora should die." For "the public will certainly hold an inquest on her body, and bring in a verdict of wilful murder against Buckingham Palace."

It was what happened:

July 7, 1839: The libels in the *Morning Post*, so far from being stopped, have only been more venomous since her death, and this *soi-disant* Conservative paper daily writes against the Queen with the most revolting virulence and indecency. There is no doubt that an effect very prejudicial to her Majesty has been produced, and the public, the women particularly, have taken up the cause of Lady Flora with a vehemence which is not the less active because it is so senseless.

The Duke of Beaufort "was to have asked Melbourne, if Government would not prosecute these libels, and thus was to have given the Duke of Wellington an opportunity of defending the ladies [Tavistock and Portman], but both the Duke and Melbourne objected, so the project fell to the ground." Indeed, on another occasion, "the Duke engaged to answer any questions [in Parliament] if they were put, but none were put. I fancy they were afraid of letting anybody get up to speak for fear of bringing forth Brougham." Still:

August 15, 1839: For a long time past Tavistock has been worried to death by the attacks on his wife in the *Morning Post* about her share in the affair of Lady Flora Hastings, and has over and over again attempted to get some sort of explanation made on her behalf in Parliament or elsewhere, but for one reason or another, nothing was ever said or done.

When consulted, the Duke of Wellington advised "that in whatever Tavistock might think it necessary to say, he should confine himself to generalities and avoid all details." And, adds Greville, who was the intermediary, "in all this I concurred."

After this experience, there could be no further question of permitting Sir John Conroy to remain near the throne. And the wishes of Queen Victoria were at last obeyed:

June 10, 1839: They have got rid of Conroy. He has resigned his place about the Duchess of Kent, and is going abroad. There

is, of course, a *dessous des cartes*, but the story told is, that he has voluntarily resigned. He went to Duncannon, and told him he had done so, and then went to the Duke, and told him, and the Duke approves. . . .

June 15, 1839: The Duke of Wellington was mainly instrumental to Conroy's removal. He did not move in it at first, but Conroy, of his own accord, resolved to resign, because he found all the Duchess's family (the Coburgs, etc., who are here) so strongly opposed to him, that he saw he could obtain no support and countenance in any quarter. Then the Duchess of Kent sent for the Duke, and he did all he could to nail the matter. After it was settled, Conroy repented, and wanted to stay, and then the Duke was sent for again. He spoke very strongly, and at last it was all settled, but none of the Ministers knew anything of it at the time.

It was the Duke, and he alone, who got Conroy to resign and leave the country, and this he did by cajoling and flattering Conroy himself and representing to him that his conduct in retiring would not only be gratifying to the Duchess's family but be honourable to himself and appreciated by the public, and by honeyed words like these, he prevailed on him at last to go.