

CHAPTER 1

Now that I come to reflect properly upon it, mayhap my attempt to smuggle Queen Caroline through the back door of Westminster Abbey so that she could attend the coronation of her odious husband was somewhat misguided. It had seemed a capital idea when I first suggested it to Henry Hood that night in the Castle Tavern in High Holborn. We were both attending a prime sporting dinner laid on by the noted pugilist, Tom Belcher, and were, I'll allow, by this time becoming pretty lushey. Viscount Hood, the queen's chamberlain and the son of Sam Hood whom Nelson was wont to declare the best sea officer that our country ever had, was a degenerate septuagenarian who had been known to have been one of the queen's many lovers for years. And now that she had left her current beau, the ludicrous 'King' Bergami, in Italy and returned to England to the delight of the mob, the old lecher was no doubt determined to pick up where he had left off.

"Why, Roger," says he, as we stepped out into the baying crowd that had assembled in the tavern yard to watch the famous 'Black Diamond', Tom Cribb himself, square up against the enormous figure of Bill Neate, the 'Bristol Butcher', in an impromptu exhibition match that had been made for one hundred guineas a side earlier that evening. "You cannot deny that the dear lady has been treated most shabbily since her return to these shores. In fact, I do believe that the king must surely consider her to be a greater enemy to him than Bonaparte ever was. I'faith, I cannot comprehend his reasoning in this respect for the queen is undoubtedly the most amiable, witty and handsome woman I have ever met."

I nodded politely in agreement for my attention was truly directed to the ring where Cribb, having landed a couple of solid facers on his opponent, was now forcing the Butcher to come on in pursuit of him as, in his usual style, he commenced to mill the man on retreat.

"What say you, Roger?" shouted Hood, now seemingly desperate to be heard over the rising clamour of the Fancy. "Was Her Majesty not fully vindicated in those most unseemly proceedings lately brought against her in the House, and that

despite all of the king's cruel attempts to discredit her through his cabal of foreign witnesses? How he got these wretched Italians to come over and perjure themselves, I simply don't know. The power of money, I suppose. But the fact remains that dear Caroline has come out of it all completely unsullied – an innocent woman callously victimized by the state, and ill-used and abandoned by her husband.”

Well, darling of the populace she may have been, but this was laying it on a bit thick. In my opinion, the fact that the ill-named Bill of Pains and Penalties that fat George had introduced to deprive his wife of her regal title and dissolve their marriage had actually been abandoned owing to what was considered insufficient support, was evidence enough that Parliament felt that Caroline was naught but a wanton baggage and as such a fit associate for our duddering rake of a sovereign. While the common folk obviously adored Caroline's open manners and her winning familiarity – you'll recall that when she landed at Dover following her self-imposed exile in Italy she was actually given a royal salute from the garrison and, cheering her to the echo, the men of the town set to pulling her carriage manually along the road to London like so many cart horses – it really was no secret that the lady herself had while abroad entertained a string of admirers whose number included that pompous little scrub, Sidney Smith, and George Vancouver's jumped up cabin boy, Tom Manby. Damme, the strumpet was even rumoured to have danced at a ball in Geneva stripped quite naked to the waist, and to have later become the mistress of no less a personage than the King of Naples, Boney's own brother-in-law.

“Innocent as a babe in arms, Henry old son,” I called back over my shoulder. “Crying shame it is, to be sure – have at ‘im, Cribb, y’damned rascal! Stop running and do ‘im!”

I had quite a few bob on the champion, you see, and I was most anxious to see a return on my investment. I need not have worried overmuch, however, for at the exact moment of my exhortation Cribb tipped Neate such a muzzler that it started the claret flowing down his chin and caused him to fall back upon the ropes. Then, closing upon him, Cribb snaked an arm about the Butcher's neck and set about him with a will.

“Lemme go, Tom!” cried Neate. “I can't stand no more. I'm gonna give in.”

Whereupon Cribb, the consummate sportsman, released his grip and made to turn back to his corner. But, no sooner had the champion exposed his unprotected side, than the perfidious Neate drove his right hand into the region of Cribb's ear, sending him almost headlong to the ground.

“All's fair in war, eh Tom?” sneered Neate, watching as the

stricken Broughtonian rose unsteadily to his feet.

“Aye, so it is, Billy,” snarled Cribb. “So you won’t mind this, I’m sure.”

And with that, the champion struck out with tremendous force, catching Neate full in the nutmegs so as to cause him to double up in pain. He then followed with a devastating chop to the back of the Butcher’s head, dropping him like a stone.

Cribb now being declared the winner, a great celebration ensued and the champion was carried shoulder high from the ring by his triumphant seconds while all about him proffered their congratulations and clapped him heartily upon his bare back. Somewhat concerned lest some disgruntled soul should think to call foul, I myself hastened to recover my winnings from ‘Facetious’ Jemmy Bland, who, evidently taking time off from the racecourse, had set up shop in the Long Room directly beneath the portrait of Trusty, Jem Belcher’s famous fighting dog, from which position he had had previously been pleased to offer me a generous three quid to one on Cribb.

Having safely trousered the gelt, I returned to the public dining room and the table I shared with Hood and a couple of his cronies. That jackass the alderman, Matthew Wood, was there of course, as was the urbane and eloquent Scotch attorney, Henry Brougham, who had been first among the numerous sons of prattlement who had defended the queen in the House of Lords. Hood was, as I expected, still in full flow regarding the execrable behaviour of our former prince of whales towards his wife.

“Ah, Roger, business all settled? I give you joy of your win,” said Hood when I brought my arse to anchor. “I was just saying, were you aware that the king has had the temerity to declare that the queen shall not be crowned, nor even admitted to the abbey to view the coronation?”

“Has he indeed?” I said, reaching for the Champagne and sloshing a generous measure into my glass. “Well, ‘tis no more than I would have expected of him, for sure – George was ever an ungracious, mean-spirited blackguard. And now he’s king at last I suppose he has even more licence to do as he pleases.”

“Licence?” brayed the alderman. “Licence, you say, Admiral Ellis? There can be no licence allowed for such behaviour, sir. It is an outrage!”

“Most certainly it is an unfortunate stain upon the annals of our country,” Brougham put in. “As our dear Lady Anne Hamilton said to me but this very morning, our English character has e’er been proverbial for morality, justice, and humanity; but it has surely suffered a little degradation by this shocking rebuff to our queen.”

All very high blown and gallant to be sure, but I knew that if His Gracious Majesty King George the Third didn't want his wife to come to his party then he would move Heaven and earth to stop her. I knew him of old, you see. Way back in '02 he had been sniffing around a certain lady of *le bon ton* with whom I myself had been carrying on a mild dalliance, and in order to queer my pitch he had me posted to the arse end of the county of Essex to assist the Revenue Service – me, an officer who had lately been promoted to post captain following a daring, if rather fortunate, brush with a heavyweight Spanish frigate in the Med! In the event, however, all had turned out well for, though in the course of that commission I had fallen foul of some thorough-paced villains and was very nearly murdered as a result, I had nevertheless been reunited with my darling Lizzie, the one true love of my life, who I'm happy to say eventually consented to becoming my wife. I was also reacquainted with young Freddie, the son I wasn't all that sure I had, but I'll gloss over that for the nonce, if you don't mind.

And neither did that episode affect my subsequent career overmuch. On the resumption of hostilities in May 1803 I was first given command of a brand new 36 gun frigate, *Ares*, and then rapidly moved on to the aging 64, HMS *Fortuna* – her captain had been knocked on the head in Calder's indecisive action off Cape Finisterre – so that I joined the Channel Fleet just in time for Trafalgar. Having survived that most wondrous, savage and heart breaking of engagements, and not to mention many another scrape besides (largely, I still maintain, thanks to a powerful amulet of Whitby Jet given to me by a wise and cunning woman in the Essex village of Canewdon where I was once, shall we say... Somewhat entangled in the folklore and ancient traditions that persisted in that remote and lonely place), I ended the war as Sam Osborn's flag captain in the *Saturn*.

With Boney out of the way and by dint of no other merit than seniority, I was subsequently promoted from the post captains' list to the rank of rear admiral. Sadly, this last advancement was neither to the white, red, nor blue squadrons which meant that I effectively became what was termed a 'yellow' admiral, with no real hope of further command. Not that I cared a jot, mark you, for I had the pay, the (quite splendid) uniform, and all the associated privileges of my exalted status, but none of the inconvenience or the risk to life and limb that usually came with it. And thus it was that I was able to maintain 'Summerland', my large house on the outskirts of the town of Southend where, when not in London, I lived in great style with Lizzie, Diana my beloved daughter, and more often than not, Freddie, who, regardless of his being able to lay just claim to being the divine child of the Goddess (aye, I kid

you not...), had in theory left home to become, of all things, a blasted curate.

But I digress; suffice to say that throughout that time I had the misfortune to encounter his royal pieness on several other occasions, and on each and every one of them found him to be a despicable, pathetic, profligate, skirt-chasing, opium eating, libertine. And damme if those were not his good points. In short, I hated the man with a passion. So, you'll forgive me I'm sure, when I tell you that, on hearing that he wanted to put the block on Caroline, I was delighted to be able to come up with an exceedingly fine stratagem designed to serve the bugger out.

"But surely the queen won't stand for it?" I said earnestly. "She's nothing if not game; I know that much of her, at least."

"She is doing her best to stand firm, certainly," replied Hood, leaning across the table in a conspiratorial manner. "I know that she has written to the Prime Minister, Lord Liverpool, declaring that she will most definitely be at the coronation, as it is one of her fundamental rights and privileges which she is resolved ever to maintain. But, alas, as yet she has received no reply."

"H'rumph!" I snorted derisively. "That milksop Bob Jenkinson was e'er the toad eater. The chances of him going against the wishes of the king are damnably slim. But listen, Henry, you say she has had no reply? Well then, she hasn't actually been expressly forbidden to attend, has she now? What say you that we four deliver Her Majesty to the abbey ourselves? She has enough friends among the officials to allow her to pass unhindered and when George hears of her appearance at the door he'll be sure to draw in his horns for fear of the effect any refusal of his might have on the rabble of Whigs and radicals who will undoubtedly be assembled outside."

"You mean for us to take matters into our own hands?" gasped Brougham, himself supposedly a Whig and a radical, I might add. "I'm none too sure that I can condone such action."

"I'm sorry, old son; I thought that, as the queen's attorney general, you especially would be with us. Did you not say yourself that the duty of an advocate is to save his client by all means and expedients necessary?"

"Yes, I did. But see here, that's different. I made that statement in the context of proceedings conducted in a court of law – what you are proposing is that we openly defy the lawful monarch. Why, it's tantamount to treason, dammit!"

"Not at all, sir, not at all!" chirruped Hood, happily. "I think it is a splendid notion, to be sure. And, lest no-one think it in

any way underhand, let us write directly to inform the Duke of Norfolk that the queen will be attending the ceremony and request of him that she be conducted to her seat.”

“Bravo to that. Here you! Boy!” I called to one of the number of chubby-faced cherubim who were engaged in waiting on the dozen or so tables that had been crammed into the dining room for this prestigious sporting occasion. “Bring us pen and paper and look sharp. And, while you’re about it, fetch us another bottle of this excellent Champagne, eh?”

Writing implements having been produced and the Champagne poured, Hood quickly dashed off his missive to the Earl Marshal, who was charged with the conduct of all non-ecclesiastical proceedings in the abbey, and signed it with a flourish. Tapping the pounce pot over the letter to dry the ink, Hood then offered the pen to Brougham.

“Will you sign, sir?” he asked.

“I cannot in all conscience,” said Brougham gravely. “My position, y’know..?”

“Alderman?” said Hood, now addressing Matthew Wood.

“Erm... I... I really do not think it would be wise for me to do so, my lord.”

“Well then, will you both at least agree to accompany us to the abbey?”

“I am sorry, my lord,” whined the alderman. “I cannot. The lord mayor has required my presence in his procession.”

“And I *shall* not, sir, for though I would seek to support the queen in all things, I am afraid that I disagree wholeheartedly with this extremely foolhardy course of action,” said Brougham candidly. “T’faith, Henry, it would be no more in my department than would be going to Astley’s.”

Hood looked thoroughly crestfallen at this and then, finally, turned to me.

“Roger,” he said. “As these two worthy gentlemen are not able to find it in their hearts to append their signatures to this letter I will not ask you to add yours alone. But I know that I may count on you, sir, as a military man of renown and the inspired architect of this scheme, to share the adventure with me. We shall gird our loins and ride to the abbey together, eh?”

“You may rely upon it,” I answered stoically, raising my glass in salute.

So, there it was. For better or worse, the queen would travel to the coronation accompanied by a lustful old buffer and a superannuated sailor. And wouldn’t that put the big man’s nose out of joint? Aye, wouldn’t it just. In truth though, I must

confess that I was more than a little relieved that Hood hadn't expected me to commit pen to paper and thus provide incontrovertible evidence of my complicity for all to see.

You would, therefore – had you been abroad at the ungodly hour of four of the clock on the morning of the 19th of July 1821 – have found me, gold laced bicorne in hand and smart as a carrot new scraped in my sumptuous blue and white, single breasted coat with its rows of gold crown and anchor buttons and gold epaulettes topped with the single star that denoted my rank, my gleaming white waistcoat, breeches and stockings, and my black shoes with their highly polished gold buckles (no pinchbeck for me these days, don't y'know?) off on my way to meet the queen. I was staying at Grenier's in Jermyn Street which I considered perfect, it being more fashionable than the Clarendon and close to the clubs. And, most likely because it had once been the grand resort of the French *émigrés* who had come to London after the revolution, the hotel was not averse to its residents entertaining a lady or two in the evening – though you may be certain that the only ladies I entertained were my dear wife and daughter. Well, mostly, at any rate...

The previous night, the queen and Lord and Lady Hood had slept at Cambridge House for the purpose of our little jaunt and, Grenier's not being too far distant from that grand residence, I was able to avoid the press of carriages that had already begun to block the thoroughfares – despite the appointed time for the coronation not being until ten – by taking a stroll along Jermyn Street, past White's in St James's Street, and onto Piccadilly to present myself there at a quarter before five. The house was one of those rum kens that had been built during the last century in the French *hôtel particulier* style, set back from the street and fronted by a private courtyard. Mounting the half-dozen steps to the four-columned portico, I rapped sharply on the huge brass door knocker. After what seemed an age, the door was opened by a couple of liveried flunkeys and I was ushered in through the hall to a well-appointed anteroom wherein the queen had apparently been awaiting my arrival.

"Ma'am," intoned one of the flunkeys. "Rear Admiral Ellis..."

The queen had been deep in conversation with Hood, his wife, and another lady whom I recognised as Lady Anne Hamilton, but now she turned to advance upon me with a beaming smile.

"Ah!" she cried, her voice high pitched and touched with just the slightest German accent. "It is our brave Odysseus! Welcome, Admiral, you shall ever have our grateful thanks for the courage you show today."

Obviously, I had seen the queen before, the first time being on her wedding day over twenty years ago, when I had observed her walking with her sot of a husband to be, in the grounds of St. James's Palace looking like the newest member of a corps of Cyprians in a gauzy, almost bare bosomed, silver dress and velvet robe. Older now, and a little heavier, she had nevertheless this day adopted a similar costume comprising a diamond *bandeau* tiara, a silver petticoat, and an extremely tight and revealing bodice. Bending low over the dairy to kiss the proffered royal fingers, I caught a brief whiff of Her Majesty's distinctly musty smell.

"Think nothing of it, ma'am," I said solemnly. "I am yours to command."

"'Tis right glad I am to see you, Roger," declared Hood reaching forward to pump my hand as I straightened up. "You know my wife, Jane, Lady Hood, I'm sure?"

"Indeed I do, Henry," I replied, nodding to the formidable looking dowager who stood at Hood's right hand.

"And, as you may see, Lady Anne is with us too."

"Admiral Ellis..." barked the queen's second lady in waiting, a six-foot strapper with dark red hair and a bowsprit to rival Old Nosey himself.

Both ladies in waiting were dressed in sky blue, low-waisted dresses with small, puffed sleeves and matching turbans. Over their arms they each carried a woollen shawl; Lady Anne's, being of a deep red (presumably to complement the colour of her hair) with a paisley patterned border, was in stark contrast to Lady Jane's choice of plain white. Hood himself wore a sober black coat with a slight puff at the sleeve, a crisp white shirt and cravat, and white stirrup pants. In all, the three were quite the fashion plate.

"Before we leave, we must inform you of what has passed these last two days, Admiral, for we fear it may have some bearing on the success of our venture," the queen said quietly. "We have lately received some response from Lord Liverpool in which that noble peer, realising the ill consequences that were likely to result from our being refused entry today, informed us that he had advised His Majesty to receive us."

"Quite so," put in Hood. "And, in making this happy circumstance known to us, the prime minister went so far as to provide his assurance that the king had consented to Her Majesty being admitted to the banquet; and even supplied a plan of the interior of the abbey on which were marked the seats where it was intended we should sit."

"Why, that is excellent news," I declared. "I must confess,

ma'am, I did think for a while that things would be somewhat touch and go."

"Ah, but sadly that is not the end of the matter, Admiral Ellis," the queen went on. "Whilst at first His Majesty consented, only but a short time afterwards it seems he retracted his promise."

"Oh... I see..."

"Yes, we are told that our dear husband became 'excessively exasperated' at our most reasonable of requests, causing him to put into place certain extraordinary measures to ensure that we will not get into either Westminster Abbey or Westminster Hall."

I didn't like this above half, I can tell you, and my uneasiness increased ten-fold when Hood provided a summary of George's 'extraordinary measures'.

"The Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, has instructed the doorkeepers at the hall to allow no one to pass without a valid ticket," Hood said gravely. "And 'Gentleman' John Jackson has been asked to supply a force of eighteen of the best milling coves in the country to stand in readiness at the various doors to the palace. There are even rumours that a boat will be waiting on the Thames to take Her Majesty to the Tower if she should have the effrontery to attempt entry."

"Christ on his cross!" I spluttered. "I mean... Er... I'm sorry, ma'am, forgive me. But, Henry, what of the letter to the Duke of Norfolk, has there been no reply to that?"

"There has. As a Catholic, the duke is barred from executing his duties personally, but I did receive a communication from Lord Howard, the Deputy Earl Marshal, wherein it was stated that it was not His Majesty's pleasure to comply with my application. To which I say – if I may ask you to excuse my forthright language, ladies – a pox on His Majesty's pleasure, we remain undaunted. Her Majesty has an undoubted title to be present at the coronation, and so shall she be!"

Clearly this was getting a mite out of hand. An altogether harmless, albeit spiteful, scrap that I had intended to be nothing much more than a jolly spree designed to present George's unwanted guest before him where she might cause the beard-splitting puffguts maximum embarrassment was fast turning into some manner of assault on one of the country's principal institutions. And damn me if the whole thing didn't now have the shadow of incarceration in the bloody Tower of London hanging over it.

"Certainly we have more right than the Marchioness of Conyngham, our husband's latest dirty little *Mätresse*," hissed

the queen. “Now come, enough talk, for as our American cousins say, we would be off to see the elephant. Millward is waiting outside with the mulberry for the ladies, and White has the landau for the gentlemen.”

The two carriages, both drawn by teams of four matching bays, were pulled up on the wide semi-circular drive. Hood and I clambered up into the leading vehicle whilst Millward, the queen’s coachman, resplendent in his full-dress scarlet coat embroidered in gold braid topped off with a coal-black peaked jockey cap, assisted the queen and her attendants into the second. Both equipages had their two folding hoods pulled back in order that, or so I supposed, the people might have full view of their rightful queen and her loyal supporters as we made our way to Westminster.

Once we were settled, Hood signalled for our coachman to move off.

“Git up,” called White, lightly touching his whip to the shoulder of the offside leader.

The carriage lurched as the horses took up the slack and moved forward at the walk, and as I was jerked gently back in my seat I instinctively clapped a hand to my hat lest it become dislodged. Turning right out of the drive our little cavalcade trundled slowly down Piccadilly and on to Constitution Hill, gathering a large army of well-wishers as we went. Hauling out my watch, I saw that it was still only a quarter past five but clearly this unearthly hour had no bearing on the mood of the people, for as we progressed it seemed as if all around us voices were joined in a constant cry of ‘the queen – the queen forever!’ coupled with the occasional raucous shout of ‘Gawd bless Your Majesty!’ and ‘stick up for yer rights, gel we’ll protect yer’. And when we passed through Storey’s Gate and round Dean’s Yard (where we were finally separated from the pack by the gates being closed behind us) the soldiers who were stationed everywhere along the roads snapped to attention and presented arms.

By this time, I was beginning to think that Sir Walter Scott had got it dead right when he said that he expected at any day to see Caroline’s fat bottom encased in a pair of buckskins at the head of an army. Why, people had already begun to think the unthinkable when a battalion of the Guards had mutinied during her trial and Wellington was forced to barricade the streets around Westminster for fear of the growing rabble of gallows birds and various women of the town who each day gathered chanting the slogan ‘no queen, no king’. Mine arse on a bandbox, surely my chuckle-headed scheme could not be providing the final catalyst for revolution – could it?

I confess that I was starting to feel a trifle crowsick in the

stomach when, after about forty minutes, we drove up to the platform leading from Westminster Hall to the abbey. The platform had been thrown open to public view and those people who had already taken their seats (having paid a cool five or ten guineas on the nail for the privilege, and more fool them, I might say) applauded loudly and fluttered their handkerchiefs. However, it was soon obvious to me that our warm welcome was to be short lived.

“Shut the gates! Shut the gates!” bellowed a large, red faced sergeant, whose uniform and facings identified him as being of the King’s Company, First Foot Guards, or as they had been known since the rout of Boney’s Imperial Guard at Waterloo, the Grenadiers.

Instantly, the troops that surrounded the platform, of whom there were many, shuffled into a double line to block our passage.

“Coachman,” shouted Hood, rising from his seat. “Wheel left; take us round to the west front of the abbey. We’ll find a way in there.”

“Do you not think it might be best to abandon our attempt, Henry?” I said, as we drove back down Abingdon Street. “It’s clear that the king is determined to stop us, and I would not like to think we were leading the ladies into any sort of danger, y’know?”

“Pshaw!” Hood huffed. “It’s too late for that. You haven’t got cold feet, have you, Roger?”

“No, certainly not. I just thought...”

“You know what thought did, eh? Lay in bed and beshat himself thinking he was up, that’s what. Well, we shan’t lie abed, oh no. Let us be up and at ‘em. Chin up, man, all will be well, you’ll see.”

I wasn’t too sure about that, but (and you may say it served me right) the fact was that I was stuck in a moving coach with a barmy old buffoon who was so nuts on his royal doxy that he was Hell bent on disrupting the biggest state occasion since the Roman *triumphus* just to please her – so what choice did I have?

We drew up at the great west door and Hood hopped down from the carriage, beckoning for me to follow as he walked back to the queen’s mulberry that had come up behind. Caroline was peering anxiously over the elbow line, with her ladies in waiting glowering at us menacingly from behind her back.

“If I may beg you to wait a moment, ma’am,” says Hood obsequiously. “The admiral and I will carry out a *reconnaissance* so that we may discover the best way in.”

“Very well, my lord,” replied the queen. “But, pray, do not be too long about it for our patience is rapidly wearing thin.”

And so, the great door itself being barred, we set to hunting around the environs of the abbey for some alternative means of ingress. Eventually we came across a gate to the rear of the Champion’s stable which appeared suitable and Hood hurried back to fetch the queen and her attendants while I loitered outside trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I did not have to wait long before the royal party hove in sight once more, whereupon Hood stepped smartly forward to knock upon the gate. In answer there came a rattling of keys and the scraping of bolts and the gate slowly swung open to reveal no less a person than Bill Neate, whom Hood and I had last seen nursing his tallywags in the yard behind the Castle Tavern. The boxer was got up in an outlandish ivory silk doublet and hose in accordance with the ‘Tudor romantic’ theme of the affair, the effect of which was to emphasise his huge bulk and knock knees.

“There’s no thoroughfare ‘ere, genn’lmen,” growled the pug.

“Stand aside, man,” Hood demanded haughtily. “Can you not see that it is your queen that desires entry?”

“I don’t know nuffin’ about that, cully. An’ I don’t care if it’s the Queen o’ Sheba come a’knockin’. My orders is that none shall pass through this ‘ere gate.”

“But, Bill, you cannot mean that?” I said. “You cannot deny our sovereign lady access to her husband’s coronation. It’s just not right. Let us in, Bill. We’ll see you right for your pains, you can depend on it.”

“Nah, not at any price, Cap’n, not through this gate, leastways.”

“Oh, confound it, fellow, stand back and let us pass,” barked Hood, who was actually now trying to push past the burly doorkeeper.

And in the face of this provocation Neate took a step back and raised his mauleys as if to strike the old man down, eliciting a chorus of gasps and other exclamations of shock from the ladies.

“Easy, Bill,” I said quickly. “You don’t want to be doing anything rash.”

“I’m sorry, Cap’n, but I can’t let no-one in, yer knows that. P’raps if you tries a bit further along the wall – I think there’s another passage along there which is open for persons with peer’s tickets.”

“Thank’ee, Bill, you have been most helpful. We shall do as you suggest. Please, be as you were. We will not try your patience again. Oh, and Bill... It’s ‘admiral’, by the way, not ‘captain’.”

“Bliged t’ye, *Admiral*. Now, if you an’ the other gen’leman... An’ ladies... Would be so kind as to move along, I can get this gate shut tight.”

On Bill’s advice we hurried along to the next passage, with Hood waving his little blue and black sliver of embossed pasteboard in front of him as we went. Before too long we were met by an immaculately turned out lieutenant of the Guards who had a number of stout fellows at his back, firelocks at the port and bayonets fixed.

“Halt!” snapped this little Rupert, half drawing his sword. “Who’s there?”

“The queen, sir!” responded Hood in a loud officious tone.

“Advance one of you to be recognised.”

“Dammit, I am Lord Hood, sir, and this is the queen’s party. I demand you let us pass. See here, I have my invitation. Put up your sword, sir, and pay proper respect to Her Majesty.”

“I... I’m sorry, my lord, I did not realise,” stammered the lieutenant, scraping his blade noisily back into its scabbard. “Advance and pass through.”

The young officer stepped back and the soldiers returned their arms to rest as we filed along the narrow alleyway and out into Old Palace Yard once more, but this time on the right side of the platform.

“This way,” called Hood, and our, by now quite sweaty and dishevelled, procession crossed the yard to the House of Lords to try to enter the hall.

On reaching the door Hood stepped up again (b’Gad, he was a game old bird, there was certainly no denying that) and hammered thunderously upon it. The heavy portal creaked open a fraction and I saw the worried face of a porter peering through the crack. At this point the queen had apparently decided that enough was enough and so undertook to receive matters into her own hands. With a deep breath that I’ll swear threatened to burst her stays, she let out a stentorian bellow.

“The queen – open! Get this bloody door open now you snivelling *arschgeige*. Let us pass, we are your queen, we are *die verdammten* Queen of England, you worthless *arsch mit ohren*.”

Choice words coming from the Queen of England, I must say, but I suppose she did manage to get her point across most

effectively. Nevertheless, her efforts were to be of no avail, for from within the hall there came a loud shout of ‘do your duty, shut the hall door’ and immediately the said article was slammed most brutally in her face.

“*Scheiße!*” screamed Caroline, stamping her foot angrily, her German accent broadening by the minute. “We shall take no more of this *Englisch blödsinn*. We will go back to the abbey and enter through, what is it called, the Poet’s Corner? And should our dear sweet George seek to rebuff us there too, well then he may *küss meinen arsch*.”

Despite the growing seriousness of the situation, I couldn’t help thinking mischievously that at this, as with many of the king’s entertainments, all arses must be produced at some point. But, in the event, I did not have much time to dwell on my little jest, for next I knew Caroline had herself seized me by the elbow and was propelling me towards the entrance to the south transept of the abbey wherein were interred many of Britain’s finest poets and playwrights – along with that nazy nab, Sheridan, who until quite recently might still have been seen keeping it up all around town and harassing poor old Henrietta Ponsonby, the Countess of Bessborough, to boot.

“Come, Admiral,” the queen said, as she fair pushed me along. “Since our own chamberlain has offered little resistance or remonstrance to the *schweinbunde* who insult us this day, we find that we needs must rely on our gallant Odysseus to champion our cause.”

On reaching the entrance I was delighted to find neither guard nor brawny pugilist in attendance, thus allowing us to pass unmolested into the cold Portland stone chamber with its myriad of noble statuary, black and white marble busts, and alabaster monuments set into niches around the walls. But, no sooner had we got inside than the ringing sound of boot heels rattling across the flagstone floor heralded the approach of Sir Robert Harry Inglis who was sprinting in our direction at a rate of knots. Skidding to an abrupt halt, Sir Robert raised both palms in a gesture clearly intended to stop us in our tracks.

“I am sorry, ladies and gentlemen,” he panted. “I am afraid that none but persons with a regular ticket can be admitted.”

I felt someone – it may have been Caroline or it might have been Lady Anne – shove me in the small of my back so that I found myself taking an involuntary pace forward to confront this new denier of the royal will.

“I say, old chum,” I blurted, as Sir Robert glared balefully at me in apparent disgust. “Are you aware that it is your queen who seeks admittance here, not any old Tom, Dick, or Harry?”

Spurning to answer me, this apparent *grand panjandrum*

addressed his next remark to the queen directly.

“Ma’am, it is my duty to inform Your Majesty that the king has decreed that there is no place for Your Majesty in the royal box, or with the royal family.”

“We are sorry for it...” Caroline sighed resignedly. “But know you, we are your queen! Sir Robert, we are your queen!”

“Aye, and so she is,” I snarled, for in truth the attitude of this jumped up fart catcher was beginning to irk me. “Look, stand aside, sir, and let us in. Let us have no more of this nonsense.”

And it was then that I heard a familiar petulant whine emanating from the far side of the transept.

“Dammit, Inglis, what the devil is the meaning of this commotion? Can we not trust you to deal with a rag-tag and bobtail assemblage of low born riff raff? Oh, stand down, you bumbling oaf. We can see that we have no option but to deal with this scandalous intrusion ourselves.”

My heart sank immediately. His Britannic Majesty George IV had suddenly appeared out of nowhere along with a full half dozen of his prizefighters, including Bill Richmond the ‘Black Terror’, my old friend Cribb, and Jackson himself. Christ on his cross, it certainly would not do to challenge these lads, no error – even if they were all dressed for a fancy ball. And none more so than the king himself, who had squeezed his fleshy frame into a cloth-of-silver-and-gold doublet and hose, a ruffed collar, and a curly brown wig worn beneath a ridiculous black hat that was stuck all over with ostrich and heron feathers.

“Your Majesty, how good it is to see you!” I cried, a forcibly broad grin spreading across my dial. “At last we can resolve this awful misunderstanding. Did you know, sir, that there are some fellows about who are trying to stop us getting in?”

Now, you might think that this was a fine way for me to speak to our Head of State but, you see, even though there was admittedly no love lost between us, the king and I had shared a certain familiarity in the past, and not least when once long ago I had witnessed the Hell-born royal babe lick Champagne from the lap of a naked girl.

“Of course we know, sir,” snapped the king angrily. “And it is at our express command. Remove yourself from our presence immediately, Admiral Ellis, and take your pack of pimps and harlots with you. Get ye gone, before we have Jackson and his men throw you out.”

“But, Your Majesty, surely you do not mean to treat your own dear wife in such a cruel and disdainful manner?”

“Our ‘dear wife’, y’say? By Heaven this woman is no wife of ours. This woman is nothing more than a lewd adulteress, sir, who has set Acteon’s horns upon our head more often than we care to remember.”

“Adulteress is it?” shouted Caroline in response to this beastly slur on her character. “As you well know, ‘*mein ehemann*’, if we have committed adultery then it was upon but one occasion, and that with the husband of Mrs Fitzherbert!”

“Your Majesties, do please be easy,” said I hastily, anxious to prevent a spiteful domestic quarrel from breaking out. “You do not want...”

“How dare you presume to know what we want?” bellowed the king, losing his temper completely and – doubtless emboldened by the bruisers at his back – putting his pudgy face close up into mine so that I could not avoid the sulphurous smell of his hot breath.

Recoiling from this mild assault upon my person, I was astonished to find the king shoving me in the chest in the manner of a bawdy house bully back seeking to initiate a tavern brawl. It seemed that it was the man’s plain intent to push me bodily out of the door.

“Get out!” he squealed, jostling me again – this time so hard that I felt myself losing my balance and beginning to topple backwards.

Instinctively, I grabbed at the king’s bulging doublet and, being unable to prevent myself from going down onto the hard stone floor, I pulled the old bastard right down on top of me. Everyone about us descended into a stunned silence as I tried desperately to extricate myself from under his royal vastness, finally rolling him off so that I could regain my feet and offer help to his henchmen in their efforts to lift him up and dust him off. I dare say that it will come as no surprise when I tell you that the king had by now become quite enraged and, though still sitting on the abbey floor, was making all sorts of vile threats against us.

“Get out! Get out!” he screeched again and again, waving his stubby little fingers in the air. “Get out, before we order our guards to fire upon you.”

And so we did. Myself, Lord and Lady Hood, Lady Anne Hamilton, and the bloody Queen of England, all hot footing it back out into the yard and round to where Millward and White waited with the carriages, with all the while the sound of the king’s temper tantrum loud in our ears.

When we drove off it was just gone a quarter to seven. The barriers being up across Parliament Street and King Street, the

crowd gathered in Whitehall had become immense and, although the coachmen had closed our vehicles' folding hoods, they soon caught a glimpse of Caroline, causing the whole to erupt into a cacophony of enthusiastic cheering. A great many folk followed us along Cockspur Street and Pall Mall, and on to Piccadilly, all hooting and cursing the king and huzzaing the queen in their turn. Even when we were once again safe within the grounds of Cambridge House the crowd remained outside for at least two or three hours, lobbing stones at the windows of the neighbouring houses and chanting their own version of *God Save the King*.

*God save Queen Caroline,
Britain's own heroine,
God save the queen!
Be thou her strength and stay,
In her adversity,
And from dark treachery
God save the queen!*

I confess though, that as I peered out of the window at the heaving mass of humanity that thronged the street below, mine own thoughts were directed less towards saving the queen and rather more towards saving mine own arse. My jolly frolic had gone disastrously wrong and, knowing the first gentleman of England as I did, I was certain that as soon as the coronation was over the splenetic little sod would be out for my blood. Well, let him try to find me if he could. First thing tomorrow I would be off back to Summerland to gather up my family, pack my traps, and pike off as fast as I could. Italy, dammit, that was the place! Everyone of note was off there in those days. A chance to visit the sites associated with the great classical authors and pick up a few antiquities and works of art along the way for naught but an old song – that was the ticket. And, what with the voyage to Leghorn taking up to three months and the inevitably protracted visits to Austria, Germany, and the Low Countries on the way home, I was likely to be away just long enough for George to forget all about me.

Extracted from *The Mirror of Diana*, John Pitman's fourth historical/paranormal novel.

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