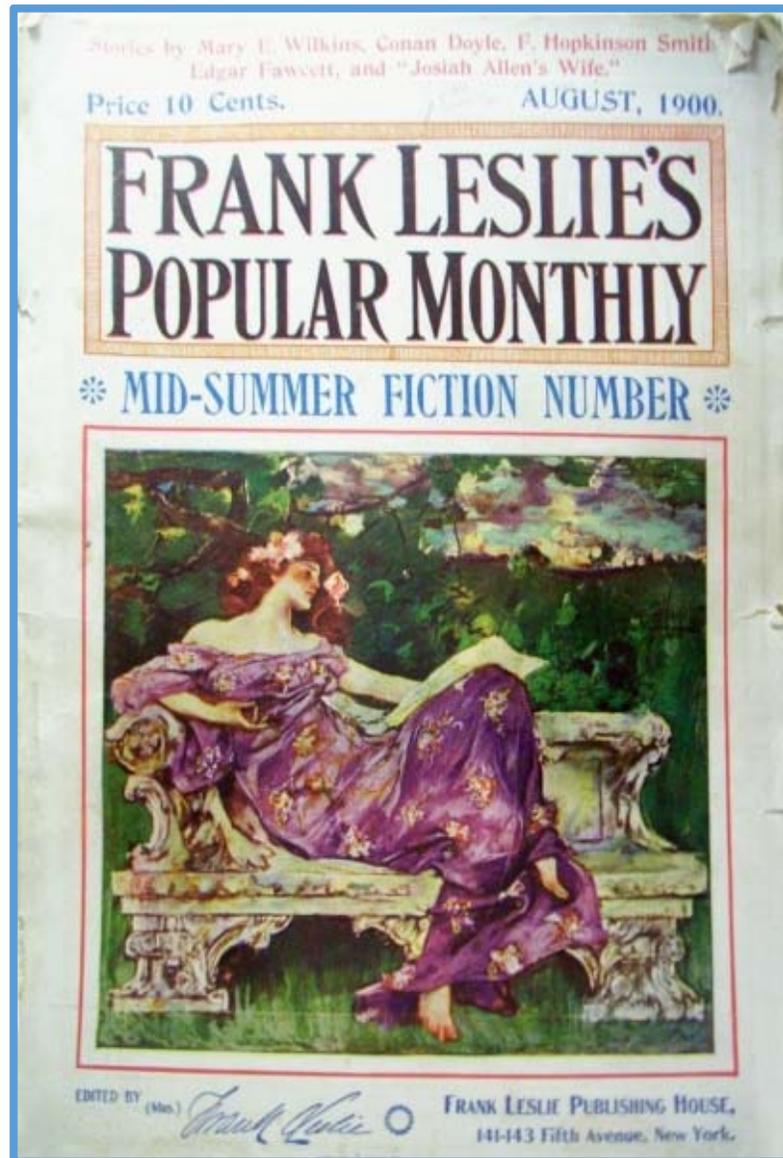


An Impression of the Regency

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

Published in Frank Leslie's Popular Magazine in August 1900.



AN IMPRESSION OF THE REGENCY

It was in those stormy days of the early century when England, in an age of heroes and buffoons, had turned in her intervals of prize-fighting and horse-racing, Almack balls and Carlton House scandals, to grasp the sceptre of the seas, and to push Napoleon's veterans out of the Peninsula.

The practical jokers of St. James Street and the gamblers of Watier's were of the same blood and class as the exquisites of Wellington or the Foleys and Balls whose foppishness aroused the anger of Nelson until their gallantry extorted his admiration.

A singular effeminacy and a desperate recklessness alternated in the same individual, and the languid loungeur of the evening was easily stirred into the fierce duellist of the morning. Amid this strange society of brutality and sentiment there moved the portly figure of George, the Prince and Regent, monstrous on account of his insignificance and interesting for the inhuman absence of any points of interest.

Weak and despicable, a liar and a coward, he still in some inexplicable way catches the attention of posterity as he did of his own contemporaries, and draws the eye away from better men.

George the King was in his second and more fatal period of madness while George the Prince waited for his heritage and filled his father's place. Twice a year the Regent should go to Windsor where the lunatic was kept, and satisfy himself as to his condition.

It was a formality, but in the strange lumbering British constitution formalities are the ultimate rulers of all things, with Kings, Lords and Commons groaning under their tyranny.

And so, sorely against his will, the weak foolish man abandoned his Brighton palace and drove northwards to fulfill his odious duty at the Castle.

But he did not go alone. He was no lover of solitude at any time, and least of all when his work might be done or lightened by others. Sir Charles Tregellis shared his coach—Tregellis the arbiter of fashions, the gentle duellist, the languid rake, the weary gambler, the masterful

loungeur whose drooping eyelids and supercilious eyes could dominate the most high-blooded buck in Watier's or in Brooks'. Lord Yarmouth was with them, the foxy-haired red-whiskered sportsman, and all day they drove through the weald of Sussex and over the uplands of Surrey until in the evening, ankle deep in playing cards, they saw the Thames wind through green meadows, and the huge dark bulk of the Windsor towers loom black against the gold and carmine of a September sunset.

Another coach and yet another were on the London road, for it had been given out the Regent had need of company and his friends were rallying to his call. Why should the Prince see his father? It was enough to have paid his formal visit and to have received the reports of Doctor John Willis and his son.

To the Regent an unpleasant duty meant a duty to be evaded. He had seen his father once, and he had never forgotten it. It came to him still, that memory, when he lay restless at night, and not all his little glasses of maraschino could banish it from his mind. The royal state had always seemed so fenced in from unpleasantness of every kind!

The whole world conspired to keep trouble away. But Nature would not join in the conspiracy. Nature was rough, brutal, unreasonable. This Prince had never heard one harsh or reproving word in all his life, save only from this stern old man, his father, and from the dreadful unutterable German woman whom he had married.

Once or twice when the Commons had been asked to pay his debts there had been unpleasant speeches, but then he did not hear them and they only reached his ears in the mildest and least irritating form. Sycophants and courtiers filtered everything from the outer world.

And now into this sheltered life, weakened and softened by indulgence, there came the brutal realities of disease. The King himself, the one man whose position was more august than his own, was struck into puling childish imbecility. George's craven heart quailed at the sight of the

foolish garrulous old man for ever pouring forth a ceaseless gabble of meaningless words.

It brought home to him there was a higher law against which all his prerogatives were vain. He shrank now from such an experience, and his quarters, with those of his friends, were placed at that wing of the Castle which was furthest from the chambers of the King.

There were twelve of them at supper that night, and they sat late over the wine. The Prince drank deeply to clear away the weight which lay upon his spirits.

This house of royal suffering cast its gloom upon him. And the others drank as much or more than he out of sympathy with their royal comrade, and because it was their good pleasure and the custom of the time.

Sheridan, of the inflamed face and the ready tongue; Hertford, the husband of the reigning favorite; Yarmouth, his son; Theodore Hook, the jester; Tregellis, whose pale cheek flushed into comeliness upon a fourth bottle; Mountford, with the lewd eyes and the perfect cravat; Mackinnon, of the Guards; Banbury, who shot Sir Charles Williams behind Chalk Farm—these were the men who, out of all the virtue and wisdom of England, had in his fiftieth year gathered as intimates round the English Prince.

He lay back in his chair, as the decanters circulated, his eyes glazed and his face flushed. His waistcoat was partly undone and his ruffled shirt came bursting through the gaps. Laziness and liquors had made him very fat, but he carried himself in his official duties with a dignified solemnity.

Now in his hour of relaxation the dignity was gone and he lolled, a coarse, swollen man, at the head of his table. At supper he had been amusing. He had two genuine gifts, the one for telling a story and the other for singing a song, and, had he been a commoner, he had still been a good companion.

But his brain had softened and he was at a disadvantage with the seasoned men around him. A little wine would make him excited, a little more, maudlin, and then it was but a short step to irresponsibility.

Already he had lost all sense of decency and restraint. He raged between his glasses at his

brothers, at his wife, at the Princess Charlotte, his daughter, at the Whigs, the cursed Whigs, who would not come to heel, at the Commons who would not vote him the money for which his duns were clamoring—at everything and every-body as far as they had ever stood in the way of his ever-varying whims. The baser of the company urged him onwards by their ready sympathy) others looked downwards at their glasses, or raised their critical eyebrows they glanced across at each other.

And then, in yet another stage of his exaltation, he lied with palpably absurd vainglorious lies which sprang from that same family taint which had laid his father low. Always behind the pampered, foolish Sybarite there loomed the shadow of madness.

"Yes, he has done well enough," said he, for the talk had turned upon victories of Wellington in the Peninsula. "He has done well, but he is lucky in who serve him. Now, at Salamanca—"

They all glanced furtively at each other, for the delusion was well known to them.

"At Salamanca," he continued pompously, "where would he have been if the heavies had not charged? And why did the heavies charge?"

"Because your Highness gave the order," said some sycophant.

"Ah ha, the thing has become public, then?" said he exultantly. "York tried to hush it up and so did Wellington, d—d jealous of me, both of them—but truth will come out.

"'Le Marchant,' said I, 'if the heavies don't charge, the game is up.'

"'We cannot charge unshaken infantry,' said he.

"'Then by God, sir, I can and I will,' said I. I rammed my spurs into my charger—a big black he was, with stockings—and we went right into them. You can vouch for the story, Tregellis."

"I can vouch for the story," said Sir Charles, with an emphasis upon the last word, which caused a titter.

"Sir Charles expresses himself cautiously," said Mountford, eager to pose as champion of the Prince. "He will, no doubt, vouch for the fact as well."

"I had not the honor to be there," said Sir Charles wearily. "It is strange, Lord Mountford,

you should ask for a voucher for anything which the Prince has cited as a fact."

Mountford's point had been turned against his own breast so adroitly the befuddled Prince had not perceived it. He frowned darkly at his champion, and shook his head.

"Have you any doubts of the truth of what I have said, Lord Mountford? Eh, sir? What?"

"Not in the least, sir."

"Then I must ask you, sir, to be more guarded in your language," he pouted like a child, and Mountford flushed from his curling hair to his speckless, many-wreathed cravat.

"Do you return early to town, Sir Charles?" he asked quickly, when the hum of conversation had been resumed.

"I shall still be here at seven," said Sir Charles, smiling gently.

"I shall walk in the Eton meadows," said Mountford bowing.

It was the last walk he ever made without a stick. But the company cared nothing for a quarrel so discreetly conducted. The Prince was telling a story. He missed the point, but they guffawed with outrageous merriment. Hook capped it with another which was all point but met with a languid murmur of approval.

The talk turned upon racing, why Sam Chifney had been warned off the turf and why the Regent had abandoned Newmarket. There were drunken tears in his dull eyes as he told how scandalously he had been treated. And then it passed on to prize-fighting. Yarmouth was a patron of the ring, and told of Gregson, the North Country giant whom he had seen in Ward's ordinary in St. Martin's Lane.

His father bet a hundred guineas against him in the coming fight, and the family wager was booked amidst shoutings and laughter. Then talk came back to the never failing topic of women, and it was seen how a coarse and material age could debase the minds of men, and soil the daintiest of subjects. Disgust passed over the pale face of Tregellis as he listened to the hiccoughed reminiscences of the maudlin Regent.

"By-the-way, sir," said he, adroitly changing the subject, "has your Highness heard of the vogue which Captain Mackinnon has obtained? No function is à la mode without his exploit. Even

Lady Lieven swears the next ball at Ahnack's is be complete unless he goes round the room upon the chairs and instruments of the musicians."

The jaded appetite of the Regent needed eternal novelties to stimulate it. Hook had risen from the depths to the surface on account of his originality—already losing its freshness. Everyone who had any talent or peculiarity, however grotesque, was brought to Brighton. Mackinnon had never before been in the presence, and his fresh young soldier face was suffused with blushes at the words of Tregellis. The Regent looked at him with his glazed eyes.

"Let me see, I heard of you, sir, but I am d—d if I can call to mind what you can do. Didn't you kill a cat with your teeth at the Cockpit? No, that was Ingleston. Or are you the man who imitates a coach horn? No, by George, I've got it! you're the furniture man."

"Yes, sir."

"Go round any room in London on the furniture—never been beaten—haw! haw! Well, it's close enough here, and any child could do it."

"Yes," said Mackinnon. "It would be easy."

"They tried to beat him at Lady Cunningham's," cried Banbury. "They had but four chairs and a settee, but he climbed up the window and scrambled round the picture rod. He takes some pounding, I tell you."

The Regent glanced round at the furniture, and staggering to his feet, he pulled off his plum-colored silken coat.

"Coats off, gentlemen!" said he, and in an instant, young and old, they were all in their white cambric shirt sleeves.

"We'll all do it," said he. "Every man Jack of us. By gad, Captain Mackinnon, we'll play you at your own game. 'Pon my life, a little exercise will harm none of us. Now, sir, give us a lead! You next, Banbury! You, Yarmouth! You, Hertford! Then myself! And so, as we sit! And the man who is pounded shall drink a claret glass of maraschino for a punishment."

It was an idiotic spectacle, and yet one which was characteristic of an age when, in the highest circles, any form of ludicrous eccentricity was a more sure pass to popularity and success than wisdom or brilliancy. If wise and brilliant men—a Fox, or a Sheridan—did

succeed in such circles, it was by reason of their vices rather than of their virtues. A Wordsworth or a Coleridge would have been powerless before a rival who crowed like a cock or had a boundless invention for practical jokes. So it was Mackinnon, with his absurd accomplishment, had taken London society by storm and shot over the heads of his superior officers into the select circle which shared the amusements and the vices of the repulsive George. Mackinnon, a little flurried at this strange game of follow-my-leader for which he was to be responsible, had risen from his chair.

He was a tall, thin, supple lad, with a wiry, active figure, which bore out his reputation for gymnastic skill. But there was nothing here to test his powers.

As the Prince had remarked, any one could, with a little address, have made the circuit of the room without touching the floor, for the furniture was massive and abundant. From a chair he stepped onto the long brown oaken sideboard, strewn with fruit and plate. Walking along it, he found himself some few feet from an armchair, onto which he sprang. The others followed with shouts and cheers—some as active and light as himself, some stout from good living and unsteady from wine, but all entering eagerly into the royal joke.

The courtly Banbury sprang with languid grace from the sideboard to the armchair, and, landing on the arm, rolled with it upon the ground, George, balanced among the dishes and wine-coolers upon the sideboard, laughed until he had to hold on to a picture to keep from falling.

When he, in his turn, sprang onto the chair his two feet went through the bottom, amid shrieks of delight from his companions.

"Hark forrard! Hark forrard!" cried Hook; and Mountford "yoicked" like a huntsman.

Onto the broken chair they bounded, one after another, until it was a bundle of splinters and upholstery. From there, with all the yapping and clamor of a hunt, they scrambled over a cabinet, and so along a chain of chairs that ended at the broad marble mantelpiece.

Here was indeed a perilous passage; nothing but a high pier glass upon one side, and a five-foot drop into an ornamental fender upon the

other. Mackinnon tripped over, and then Banbury, Yarmouth, Hertford and the Prince, the last pawing nervously at the glass with fat, moist hands which left their blurred marks across it.



He had shuffled his unwieldy bulk almost into safety, when suddenly the shoutings and the cheerings died away, and a strange silence fell upon the rioters. Another sound, which had grown louder upon their ears, hushed their foolish outcry.

It was a long, monotonous, bellowing call; a strangely animal uproar; one deep note repeated again and again, but rising in volume to a retching whoop.

For some minutes Tregellis and others had been conscious of the sinister clamor; but now it grew louder with every instant, as if some wandering heifer were lowing down the corridor and rapidly approaching the door of their dining room.

It was so overpoweringly loud it boomed through all their riot and reduced them to a startled silence. For it was an extraordinary

noise, animal in sound, but human in origin—a grim, mindless hooting which struck cold into their hearts.

They looked from one to the other, the grotesque line of coatless men, balanced upon the tables and the chairs. Who could it be who howled thus down the royal corridor? The question flashed from eye to eye, and it was the bloodless lips of George which found the answer. He had descended to a chair and stood there with frightened, staring eyes fixed upon the door.

Outside there rang one last terrific whoop, as the door was flung open, and the mad King stood mewling and gabbling in the opening. He was in a gray dressing gown, with red slippers protruding beneath.

His white hair was ruffled, a white beard fell over his chest, and his huge, protruding eyes rolled round him with the anxious eagerness of a purblind man. For a moment he stood thus, his hand upon the door, a piteous, venerable figure.

Then the white beard dropped, the mouth opened wide, and again that discordant, horrible, long-drawn cry boomed through the room. At the same instant the frightened roisterers saw moving figures in the corridor over his shoulder, the startled faces of hurrying doctors, and heard the patter and rustle of their feet.

Eager hands clutched at the old King, he was plucked backwards, and the door slammed behind his struggling, screaming form. There was a heavy thud within the dining room. Tregellis sprang for the brandy decanter.

"Loosen his shirt," said he; "hold up his head." And a little group of flushed, half-drunken men propped up the gross and senseless form of the heir-apparent.