

CHAPTER ONE

Death and transfiguration

Early in the evening of 22 January 1901 Queen Victoria died at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, surrounded by more than twenty members of her close family. They included her eldest son Albert Edward the Prince of Wales, now to succeed her as King Edward VII, and her eldest grandson, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who knelt beside the dying Queen, supporting her with his arm until her last breath. Missing from those present was the Queen’s eldest daughter Victoria, the widowed Empress Frederick, sister of Edward VII and mother of the Kaiser. She was gravely ill and unable to leave her home, Schloss Friedrichshof, among the wooded hills of the Taunus in Germany. Hopes for better relations between Britain and Germany ran high at this moment – only to revert all too soon to bitter recriminations on both sides. ‘You have no idea, my dear William, how all of us in England appreciate the loyal friendship which you manifest towards us on every possible occasion. We hope always to look upon Germany as our best friend as long as you are at the helm’, Edward wrote to his imperial nephew in the spring of 1900.¹ Yet only a few years after his accession the new King was venting his feelings about the Kaiser in terms which, as the Foreign Secretary Lord Lansdowne commented, ‘make one’s flesh creep’.² He would continue to be as courteous as possible to Wilhelm, the King declared, but he would ‘*never*’ trust him. He was England’s ‘bitterest foe’.³ Wilhelm was scarcely less harsh in his criticism of Edward, who he said was plotting against him everywhere; it was well-nigh incredible ‘how much personal hatred this behaviour by his uncle revealed’, indeed it was beyond belief ‘what a Satan’ the King was.⁴ The Kaiser constantly repeated his deep-rooted conviction that Edward VII was the real instigator of the anti-German conspiracy of encirclement directed by the other World Powers against the German Reich. Even in late July 1914, with world war only hours away,

Wilhelm II and his closest advisers at the imperial court regarded the coming struggle against a hostile world as the very personal work of the King himself. Confused and fearful, the Kaiser exclaimed at this historic moment, ‘Edward VII is stronger after his death than I, who am still alive!’⁵ How did this fatal rift between the two closely related dynasties and peoples come about in so short a time? How justified was the King in concluding that his nephew’s conspicuous friendliness at Queen Victoria’s funeral, during his sister Vicky’s long illness and on countless other occasions, was nothing but hypocrisy, designed to hide his real aims, which were so fraught with danger for Britain and the rest of Europe? In order to appreciate more fully the ambiguity of Kaiser Wilhelm’s policy towards England at the turn of the century, it is worth taking a closer look at his behaviour within the close family circle, before investigating the political aims which he was in fact pursuing behind the smiling mask.

THE DEATH OF QUEEN VICTORIA

On the afternoon of 18 January 1901 Queen Victoria’s physician, Sir James Reid, without the knowledge of the royal family, sent a secret telegram to the Kaiser saying ‘Disquieting symptoms have developed which cause considerable anxiety.’⁶ Wilhelm decided there and then to travel to England. Some time before he had confided to his closest friend, Prince Philipp zu Eulenburg, ‘Of course the people have no inkling how much I love the Queen ... how intimately she is linked with all my memories of childhood and youth! That is why nobody understands my constant fear of suddenly hearing that she is hopelessly ill or has died, without my being able to see her again.’⁷ The numerous guests invited to Berlin for Wilhelm’s forty-second birthday on 27 January were told not to come.

At Osborne House the assembled members of the English royal family were far from pleased to hear that Wilhelm intended to join them. Like James Reid, they were afraid that the news of the Kaiser’s arrival might precipitate the Queen’s death.⁸ The Prince of Wales decided to intercept the unwelcome guest in London and ‘keep him at Buckingham Palace’.⁹ He met his imperial nephew on the evening of 20 January at Charing Cross station. On his arrival Wilhelm, suspecting nothing, telegraphed to the Reich Chancellor Count Bernhard von Bülow: ‘Very kindly received here by the Prince. Prince of Wales very warm, touched and full of gratitude that I have come. Freiherr von Eckardstein told me that when news reached London last night that I was coming, there was general pleasure and gratitude and, if I may say so, enthusiasm. Prince of Wales informed me Her Majesty’s condition

“unchanged, still serious”, it is a “degeneration of the brain” and the nervous system is affected, with great weakness; he had not been able to see his own mother yet, as immediate death feared if any agitation!”¹⁰

That same evening the Queen’s condition was so alarming that Reid telegraphed to the Prince telling him that he should after all return to the Isle of Wight next morning, and bring the Kaiser with him.¹¹ So both uncle and nephew, together with Arthur Duke of Connaught and the Duke of York, the future King George V, travelled from Buckingham Palace down to Osborne on 21 January 1901. The Kaiser was so ‘charmed by the Prince of Wales and his relations here’ that Count Paul von Wolff-Metternich, the diplomat accompanying him, feared he might indulge in anti-Russian indiscretions, which would certainly be reported to St Petersburg. It was a fear shared by Bülow. ‘At the first opportunity, when I am alone with H.M., I shall draw the All-Highest’s attention to the danger of indiscretions’, Metternich assured the Reich Chancellor.¹²

On the morning of 22 January Reid summoned all the members of the family to the Queen’s room. She was by now blind, and her daughters, Princesses Helena, Louise and Beatrice, gave her the names of all those present, but hid from her the fact that Wilhelm II was also at her bedside. Hurt, the Kaiser asked the royal physician: ‘Did you notice this morning that everyone’s name in the room was mentioned to her except mine?’, to which Reid replied: ‘Yes, and that is one reason why *I* specially wish to take you there.’ Reid recorded in his diary: ‘I took the Kaiser to see her, and sent all the maids out and took him up to the bedside, and said, “Your Majesty, your grandson the Emperor is here; he has come to see you as you are so ill”, and she smiled and understood. I went out and left him with her five minutes alone.’ Although the Queen was scarcely in a position to hold a meaningful conversation, she said to Reid afterwards ‘The Emperor is very kind.’¹³ At 4 p.m. the family gathered around the dying Queen once more. Most of them came and went at intervals; only the Kaiser and Alexandra, Princess of Wales, stayed in the room with Reid throughout. Sir Thomas Barlow, another of the Queen’s physicians, wrote admiringly: ‘The Emperor was the figure that to us was the most striking personality in the room next to the Queen. There he stood with his eyes immovably fixed on his grandmother, apparently with no thought but of her. When asked to speak he said he had come to tell her about the Empress Frederick, that she was a little better, she was taking drives again, that she sent her love and then quietly, he took his place of watching again – no self-consciousness or posing there but simple dignity and intense devotion. But in the earlier part of the day, when the family had been summoned he had showed himself so ready and deft in putting in a pillow here and there and

when some of the others said “more air” he was away to the window to lift it himself if I had not forestalled him.’¹⁴

‘There was much weeping as the end drew near, the German Emperor crying like the others’, wrote another witness, who found Wilhelm’s devotion ‘beautiful & touching’. For the last hour Sir James Reid and a nurse, at the Queen’s right, held her up in a half-sitting position, while Wilhelm knelt at the left side of the bed, supporting her with his right arm.¹⁵ She died at half past six in the evening. Behind the doctor sat the Prince of Wales, who at that moment became King of Great Britain and Ireland and Emperor of India.

On the whole, his English relatives were favourably impressed by Wilhelm II’s uncharacteristic restraint at Osborne. The Duchess of York, the future Queen Mary, commented that in the end the royal family was pleased that Wilhelm had come, and that ‘dear Gdmama knew him & spoke to him’.¹⁶ ‘Nothing can be kinder & more thoughtful than the G. Emperor is’, Edward reported a few hours before the Queen’s death. ‘He is only the grandson here & not the powerful Sovereign he is at home.’¹⁷ Writing to his seriously ill sister Vicky, the new King again praised the unaccustomed modesty of her son’s attitude during his stay in England. ‘William’s touching & simple demeanour up to the last will never be forgotten by me or anyone.’¹⁸

In the midst of the preparations for Queen Victoria’s funeral Kaiser Wilhelm II celebrated his birthday at Osborne. His aunt, Grand Duchess Luise of Baden, sent him her good wishes in a letter which evidently came from the heart. He had, she said, ‘played your part so wonderfully as grandson and son, accompanying that great life, whose passing we all mourn, to its end. I feel deeply affected; for me it brings to a close a wealth of precious memories of childhood and youth, beginning 50 years ago in 1851. What an uplifting time this must be for you, no doubt reminiscent of 1888. God bless you in all that you are living through over there, for it is of such great significance both now and for the future.’¹⁹

Sending his own good wishes, the Kaiser’s former tutor Dr Hinzpeter also recognised the emotional complexity of these sad hours for Wilhelm. ‘Not only the pain of losing so highly venerated a Grandmother, but also the heartening sense of bringing comfort and support to the grieving family; not only the pride with which, in your incomparable position at the head of the German ruling princes, you represented Germany as the most advanced of all monarchies, in the specifically monarchical homage which the European Sovereigns paid to their doyen, the most admirable of monarchs, but also the uplifting knowledge that you were personally creating a firm bond between two great peoples which certain interests and passions seek to drive

apart. The human soul that could feel all that at once must indeed have been elevated far above ordinary emotions.²⁰

To mark his birthday Wilhelm conferred the High Order of the Black Eagle on the Commander in Chief of the British army, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, and appointed the Duke of York, now the heir to the throne, à la suite of the German navy.²¹ In return, King Edward appointed his German nephew Field Marshal in the British army and gave him the Star of the Order of the Garter in brilliants (see Figure 1). The young Prusso-German Crown Prince was made a knight of the Order.²²

Wilhelm II was deeply moved, commenting to the Reich Chancellor that this was ‘the work of the Lord!’ ‘I was completely stunned! But he [the King] had tears in his eyes and he has never been warmer or more affectionate!’²³ Later he wrote to his uncle Arthur of Connaught of his deep emotion at being promoted to Field Marshal: ‘I shall allways [sic] be proud of this distinction to my dying days . . . The moment is & allways will be engraved in my memory & the spot – the fire place in the dear Osborne drawing room – will never be forgotten as well as that memorable morning.’²⁴ Wilhelm’s brother Prince Heinrich, whom Edward had appointed Vice Admiral in the Royal Navy, wrote mockingly: ‘This is the first alms that our A[ll] H[ighest] Lord and Master has received from the hands of the English King for all his efforts the other side of the Channel!’²⁵

As the Royal Navy’s cannon salutes rang out, the Queen’s coffin was conveyed by the royal yacht over to Portsmouth, and then taken to London by special train. From Victoria station the cortège processed on horseback and on foot to Paddington, and from there the journey to Windsor was completed by train. Solemn and stony-faced, the Kaiser, already wearing the uniform of a British Field Marshal, rode beside his two uncles, Edward VII and Arthur of Connaught, directly behind the gun-carriage carrying the coffin. On 4 February the Queen was finally laid to rest in the mausoleum at Frogmore, beside her husband, Prince Albert, the grandfather who had died when Wilhelm was only two years old.²⁶

The following day the King gave a magnificent banquet in Wilhelm’s honour at Marlborough House. As well as the German guests, it was attended by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Lansdowne, Lord Roberts and the British ambassador at Berlin, Sir Frank Lascelles. After Edward VII had expressed his thanks to the Kaiser for coming so swiftly and staying so long ‘at much personal inconvenience’, Wilhelm rose to speak. As the English press reported, he said that nothing had given him more pleasure ‘than to be present with his Uncles and Aunts during the last moments of the great and noble life of his beloved Grandmother, for whom from his earliest boyhood he had attended



Figure 1 Kaiser Wilhelm II in England after the funeral of his grandmother Queen Victoria, resplendent in his new uniform as a Field Marshal of the British army

the strongest feelings of love and veneration’. He thanked the King for conferring on him the rank of a Field Marshal in the British army and drew attention to the fact that ‘this honour enabled him to wear a uniform similar to that worn by the Duke of Wellington and Lord Roberts, and this compliment

would be highly appreciated by his Army. He heartily reciprocated His Majesty's feelings with regard to relations between the two Empires.²⁷

After the banquet the Kaiser and his suite left for home. As he boarded his ship he sent a telegram *en clair* to Eulenburg. 'I set out from here feeling deeply distressed', he declared, 'but grateful for all the wonderful and uplifting impressions I have received, and for all the proofs of affection and friendship shown me by both King and people. You are right: no one suspected how deeply devoted I was to this glorious grandmother, and only now have I learnt how much she loved me and how highly she thought of me. But at any rate an unshakeable foundation has now been laid, on which, with mutual understanding and regard, good and friendly relations between our peoples will be built, for the benefit of the world' – just as he had always hoped.²⁸ Eulenburg immediately forwarded the Kaiser's 'moving' telegram to Bülow and commented: 'His whole English nature, which was so rarely able to come into play precisely because of this beloved grandmother, gives vent to itself in these enthusiastic words – and gave vent to itself during the fortnight in England *because* the beloved grandmother lay in her coffin and could no longer say: "Dear Willy – it's time for you to leave now!" What a curious, childish, touching naivety there is in [these] words . . . Nonetheless, our beloved master's personal success has been so great that it has become a trump card in the political hand that you hold. The other great powers see it that way too.'²⁹

The gratitude felt towards the Kaiser in Britain, both at court and among the population, was indeed extraordinary, even if, as was soon to become only too evident, it did not bear the hoped-for political fruit. Hundreds of drawings and photographs in the illustrated papers – for instance showing the Kaiser alone in the chapel at Osborne, praying and kissing his grandmother's coffin³⁰ – had acknowledged Wilhelm's grief. The length of his stay was all the more keenly appreciated in Britain because it was known that a storm of indignation was brewing in Berlin, not least because he had conferred an order on Lord Roberts, the conqueror of the Boers. The King wrote affectionately to Wilhelm: 'Your recent visit here will never be forgotten by the Nation & I shall always remember with the deepest gratitude your having come over here at such an intensely sorrowful & important an occasion.'³¹

One would certainly not wish to question the sincerity and depth of Kaiser Wilhelm II's grief at the death of his grandmother during the two weeks which he spent in England in January and February 1901. Throughout this time he showed not only impressive imperial dignity but also a very human distress that gives the lie to any suspicion that he was merely play-acting. And yet it is plain that there was an element of political reckoning in his demonstrative participation in the funeral ceremonies. The Kaiser's brother-in-law, the

Hereditary Prince Bernhard of Saxe-Meiningen, summed up the dual purpose of the hasty journey to London thus: ‘The Kaiser’s departure for England in order to hurry to his grandmother’s bedside has not failed to make a good impression. In this decision human feeling and political calculation certainly played their part in equal measure. It was intended to work upon the public mood, and it has had the desired effect.’ But with his spectacular dash to England Wilhelm was seeking to influence not only public feeling but also high politics in Britain, according to the cynical Prince Bernhard, who rated Wilhelm’s chances of success in the latter arena much lower. ‘The death of the old Queen begins a new phase in history, for in spite of everything she was still our best friend on that side of the Channel, and would never have allowed matters to come to open conflict.’ He feared that under Edward VII British foreign policy would be given an anti-German slant. ‘The former Prince of Wales is after all generally considered to belong to the “Prussian-hating” sect in Europe’, the Hereditary Prince observed, ‘and to that can be added a certain antipathy towards the German Emperor, which of course he will not show openly just now. On the contrary, he will drip with fine words and overflow with friendship. But I do not trust this peace and I am curious to know how things will work out in the future.’⁵² Prince Bernhard’s words were to prove prophetic.

ILLNESS AND DEATH OF THE EMPRESS FREDERICK

Queen Victoria’s death was followed seven months later by that of her eldest daughter, Wilhelm’s mother Victoria, the Empress Frederick. It had been apparent for some years that she was suffering from cancer, but it was only in May 1899 that the world-famous specialist, Professor Rudolf Renvers, told her that her illness was incurable. The Kaiser was deeply shocked when Renvers gave him the tragic diagnosis on 21 May. To his sister Victoria (Moretta), living at Palais Schaumburg in Bonn, he wrote an impassioned letter in the English in which the family conversed, exclaiming bitterly at ‘this too terrible state of things . . . That old rhinoceros of Wegner who has been observing this affair since *then never* recognised its seriousness & allways [sic] said it was *nothing*! Even in England the same doctor – Dr. Williams – said within 7 months, first that it was *nothing*, & then that it was very *serious* & ought to be *operated at once*! I am simply furious about this! They all for years and years have lulled poor mother into a false quiet till the evil itself shows her by pain etc. what it really is! Now my dear Vicky the situation is very serious! . . . For the reason that the tumours on poor mothers side are so developed that there is danger of their breaking through her skin during the

next months. That would mean a terrible mess, a fearful smell & stench, bandages all over, no gowns, use of narcotics morphia etc. & a life of awful pain and so on. If she were operated these things would all be removed & a state of more or less rest would be restored. Two men are within your reach who are first rate operators & very nice men, who could be invited – en passant – for lunch or tea to see mother. The one is Doctor [Max] Schede (Bonn) whom you must know, & the other Prof. [Vinzzenz von] Czerny Heidelberg. Which you choose is the same to me, but one *must* see her, for Renvers – as I told you before – *not* being a *surgeon* can not be saddled with the *whole* responsibility for mothers life! It is for her own self & for her own rest & quiet that I implore you to do all [that] is possible in bringing one of these men to mother, for what is awaiting her, if she does not see him is too fearful to say! And Renvers is quite powerless to avert it without an operation! – It is too terrible I am quite ill about all this! And to have to keep all this terrible business to oneself, not to be able to help! O these confounded beasts of English Doctors! Why must our family be chosen to suffer from their idiotic stupidity or nastiness!’³³

This letter full of horror and anger is the only surviving source bearing witness to the Kaiser’s emotions on receiving the news of the inevitable, painful death his mother was facing. Did he, at that moment, feel any remorse for the appallingly bad relationship which they had had since his youth? Was he conscious of all she had suffered in the 1880s when he turned against his parents, personally and politically, and allowed himself to be used as a tool against them by Bismarck and Waldersee? One may have one’s doubts. The furious outburst against the English medical profession at the end of the letter harks back both to the injury he himself suffered at birth (for which no British doctor was to blame) and to the mishandling of his father’s cancer of the throat by Morell Mackenzie. But it gives little indication of any regret for his own behaviour at that difficult time. By pursuing an anti-British policy abroad while building up his Personal Monarchy at home, Wilhelm had sabotaged his parents’ liberal, anglophile life’s work, and in so doing he had perhaps even hastened the onset of illness in both. It was a reproach which his mother at any rate did not spare him when she wrote to him that ‘the sorrows & grief, the anxieties & trials I have had to endure are the cause of what has now come’.³⁴

Wilhelm proved only too right in fearing that the widowed Empress would resist any attempt to intervene. Her reply to her son’s anxious plea to allow herself to be examined by a German surgeon was tantamount to a refusal. ‘Pray do not worry on my account; or I shall regret so much having let you into my sad secret!’, she warned him, and added, with the same mixture of medical

naivety and tactical optimism that had characterised her attitude in 1887 and 1888, ‘I have full confidence in the persons I have consulted, & have my eyes quite open as to the course I am pursuing. My case is not a desperate nor a rapid one, & though I have a good deal of pain at times, at other times I am quite comfortable! . . . Though I cannot have *better surgical* advice & opinion than I have had, and mean to continue with, yet if it is in the slightest degree a satisfaction to you, I am quite ready to see the one at Bonn.’ She admitted that cancer was a serious illness, but ‘a heart disease, or spinal complaint or paralytic attacks, affected eyes or brain would be *far far worse*, & I am also very thankful it is my *left* & not my right side as I can write & paint without trouble. Please set your mind to rest on my account! I have plenty of courage left – & intend to do all I can to live on & get well if I can . . . Death has no fears for me, – & I am quite ready when the time comes to lie down by the side of dear Papa, Sigie & Waldie in my place in the mausoleum of the Friedenskirche. Goodbye dearest Child. Pray burn this Letter *at once*.’³⁵

Despite her suffering, in October 1899 the Empress travelled to Sarzana on the Gulf of La Spezia to spend several months at the Villa Marigola, which her marshal of the court, Hugo Freiherr von Reischach, had rented for her.³⁶ Wilhelm put his yacht *Loreley* at her disposal during her stay on the Italian Riviera.³⁷ He suggested considerably that she should not hasten her return to Germany, as the weather in the north was ‘beyond all description nasty & horrible’.³⁸ In these letters it is apparent that relations between mother and son were improving, which is further borne out by a lively correspondence on the internal layout of the Berlin palaces, and of the new buildings and gardens on the Museum Island and in the Academic quarter.³⁹

The Empress’s condition grew visibly worse, although she did not quite give up hope of recovering.⁴⁰ ‘The pain in my back makes my Life a misery’, she admitted in a letter to Wilhelm of November 1899. ‘My nights are such a torment as I cannot turn right or left!’⁴¹ ‘Sometimes I have to *call out*, so great is the pain . . . and [I] am *so* ashamed to be seen in this half crippled state . . . *Morphia* I have been offered very often but I *will not* take it, it *upsets* one so much.’⁴² The extent to which her own suffering was overshadowed by her dreadful experience during her husband’s illness was evident in particular from her efforts to keep the cause of her illness secret. She wrote to her daughter Sophie, the Greek Crown Princess: ‘You know how indiscreet people at Berlin are. I am not much loved, so I should not like to have people most likely *rejoicing* over my misfortune and speculating on my coming decease before it is necessary . . . Did we not see enough of that in 1888! *No*, I want to remain mistress of my actions and have no one interfere about my health or my private affairs.’⁴³ She emphatically rejected Sophie’s protests against this attitude.