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CHAPTER I

THE ANCESTRY OF THE QUEEN—HOUSES OF BRUNSWICK, HANOVER, AND COBURG[1]

Queen Victoria, on her father's side, belonged to the House of Brunswick, which was undoubtedly one of the oldest, and claimed to be actually the oldest, of German princely families. At the time of her birth, it existed in two branches, of which the one ruled over what was called the Duchy of Brunswick, the other over the Electorate (since 1815 the Kingdom) of Hanover, and had since 1714 occupied the throne of England. As will be seen, there had been frequent intermarriages between the two branches. The Dukes of Brunswick were now, however, represented only by two young princes, who were the sons of the celebrated Duke who fell at Quatre Bras. Between them and the English Court there was little intercourse. The elder, Charles, had quarrelled with his uncle and guardian, George IV., and had in 1830 been expelled from his dominions. The obvious faults of his character made it impossible for the other German princes to insist on his being restored, and he had been succeeded

[1] The accompanying Tables are constructed to show the more important of the widespread family connections of Queen Victoria, and may enable the reader to identify the various royal and princely personages mentioned in the letters.

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by his younger brother William, who ruled till his death in 1884. Both died unmarried, and with them the Ducal family came to an end. One Princess of Brunswick had been the wife of George IV., and another, Augusta, was the first wife of Frederick I., King of Würtemberg, who, after her death, married a daughter of George III. The King of Würtemberg was also, by his descent from Frederick Prince of Wales, first cousin once removed of the Queen. We need only notice, in passing, the distant connection with the royal families of Prussia, the Netherlands, and Denmark. The Prince of Orange, who was one of the possible suitors for the young Queen's hand, was her third cousin once removed.

The House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, to which the Queen belonged on her mother's side, and with which she was to be even more intimately connected by her marriage, was one of the numerous branches into which the ancient and celebrated House of Wettin had broken up. Since the 11th century they had ruled over Meissen and the adjoining districts. To these had been added Upper Saxony and Thuringia. In the 15th century the whole possessions of the House had been divided between the two great branches which still exist. The Albertine branch retained Meissen and the Saxon possessions. They held the title of Elector, which in 1806 was exchanged for the title of King. Though the Saxon House had been the chief protectors of the Reformation, Frederick Augustus I. had, on being elected to the throne of Poland, become a Roman Catholic; and thereby the connection between the two branches of the House had to a great extent ceased. The second line, that of the Ernestines, ruled over Thuringia, but, according to the common German custom, had again broken up into numerous branches, among which the Duchies of Thuringia were parcelled out. At the time of the Queen's birth there were five of these, viz., Gotha-Altenburg, Coburg-Saalfeld, Weimar-Eisenach, Meiningen, and Hildburghausen. On the

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extinction of the Gotha line, in 1825, there was a rearrangement of the family property, by which the Duke of Hildburghausen received Altenburg, Gotha was given to the Duke of Coburg, and Saalfeld with Hildburghausen added to Meiningen. These four lines still exist.

The Ernestine princes had, by this constant division and sub-division, deprived themselves of the opportunity of exercising any predominant influence, or pursuing any independent policy in German affairs; and though they had the good fortune to emerge from the revolution with their possessions unimpaired, their real power was not increased. Like all the other princes, they had, however, at the Congress of Vienna, received the recognition of their full status as sovereign princes of the Germanic Confederation. Together they sent a single representative to the Diet of Frankfort, the total population of the five principalities being only about 300,000 inhabitants.

It was owing to this territorial sub-division and lack of cohesion that these princes could not attach to their independence the same political importance that fell to the share of the larger principalities, such as Hanover and Bavaria, and they were consequently more ready than the other German princes to welcome proposals which would lead to a unification of Germany.

It is notable that the line has produced many of the most enlightened of the German princes; and nowhere in the whole of Germany were the advantages of the division into numerous small States so clearly seen, and the disadvantages so little felt, as at Weimar, Meiningen, Gotha, and Coburg.

The House of Coburg had gained a highly conspicuous and influential position, owing, partly, to the high reputation for sagacity and character which the princes of that House had won, and partly to the marriage connections which were entered into about this time by members of the Coburg House with the leading Royal families of Europe. Within ten years,

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Princes of Coburg were established, one upon the throne of Belgium, and two others next to the throne in Portugal and England, as Consorts of their respective Queens.

By the first marriage of the Duchess of Kent, the Queen was also connected with a third class of German princes—the mediatised, as those were called who during the revolution had lost their sovereign power. Many of these were of as ancient lineage and had possessed as large estates as some of the regnant princes, who, though not always more deserving, had been fortunate enough to retain their privileges, and had emerged from the revolution ranking among the ruling Houses of Europe. The mediatised princes, though they had ceased to rule, still held important privileges, which were guaranteed at the Congress of Vienna. First, and most important, they were reckoned as "*ebenbürtig*," which means that they could contract equal marriages with the Royal Houses, and these marriages were recognised as valid for the transmission of rights of inheritance. Many of them had vast private estates, and though they were subjected to the sovereignty of the princes in whose dominions these lay, they enjoyed very important privileges, such as exemption from military service, and from many forms of taxation; they also could exercise minor forms of jurisdiction. They formed, therefore, an intermediate class. Since Germany, as a whole, afforded them no proper sphere of political activity, the more ambitious did not disdain to take service with Austria or Prussia, and, to a less extent, even with the smaller States. It was possible, therefore, for the Queen's mother, a Princess of Saxe-Coburg, to marry the Prince of Leiningen without losing caste. Her daughter, the Princess Feodore, the Queen's half-sister, married Ernest, Prince of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, and thus established an interesting connection with perhaps the most widely-spread and most distinguished of all these families. The House of Hohenlohe would probably still have been a reigning family, had not the

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Prince of Hohenlohe preferred to fight in the Prussian army against Napoleon, rather than receive gifts from him. His lands were consequently confiscated and passed to other princes who were less scrupulous. The family has given two Ministers President to Prussia, a General in chief command of the Prussian army, a Chancellor to the German Empire, and one of the most distinguished of modern military writers. They held, besides their extensive possessions in Würtemberg and Bavaria, the County of Gleichen in Saxe-Coburg.

It will be seen therefore that the Queen was intimately connected with all classes that are to be found among the ruling families of Germany, though naturally with the Catholic families, which looked to Austria and Bavaria for guidance, she had no close ties. But it must be borne in mind that her connection with Germany always remained a personal and family matter, and not a political one; this was the fortunate result of the predominance of the Coburg influence. Had that of the House of Hanover been supreme, it could hardly have been possible for the Queen not to have been drawn into the opposition to the unification of Germany by Prussia, in which the House of Hanover was bound to take a leading part, in virtue of its position, wealth, and dignity.

It will be as well here to mention the principal reigning families of Europe to which Queen Victoria was closely allied through her mother.

The Duchess of Kent's eldest brother, Ernest, Duke of Saxe-Coburg, was the father of Albert, Prince Consort. Her sister was the wife of Alexander, Duke of Würtemberg. The Duchess of Kent's nephew, Ferdinand (son of Ferdinand, the Duchess's brother), married Maria da Gloria, Queen of Portugal, and was father of Pedro V. and Luis, both subsequently Kings of Portugal.

The Duchess's third brother, Leopold (afterwards King of the Belgians), married first the Princess Charlotte, daughter of George IV., and afterwards

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the Princess Louise Marie, eldest daughter of King Louis Philippe. Prince Augustus (son of Ferdinand, the Duchess of Kent's brother) married another daughter of Louis Philippe, the Princess Clémentine, while Prince Augustus' sister, Victoria, married the Duc de Nemours, a son of Louis Philippe. Another nephew, Duke Friedrich Wilhelm Alexander, son of the Duchess of Würtemberg, married the Princess Marie, another daughter of Louis Philippe.

Thus Queen Victoria was closely allied with the royal families of France, Portugal, Belgium, Saxe-Coburg, and Würtemberg.

On turning to the immediate Royal Family of England, it will be seen that the male line at the time of the Queen's Accession was limited to the sons, both named George, of two of the younger brothers of George IV., the Dukes of Cumberland and Cambridge. The sons of George III. played their part in the national life, shared the strong interest in military matters, and showed the great personal courage which was a tradition of the family.

It must be borne in mind that abstention from active political life had been in no sense required, or even thought desirable, in members of the Royal House. George III. himself had waged a lifelong struggle with the Whig party, that powerful oligarchy that since the accession of the House of Hanover had virtually ruled the country; but he did not carry on the conflict so much by encouraging the opponents of the Whigs, as by placing himself at the head of a monarchical faction. He was in fact the leader of a third party in the State. George IV. was at first a strong Whig, and lived on terms of the greatest intimacy with Charles James Fox; but by the time that he was thirty, he had severed the connection with his former political friends, which had indeed originally arisen more out of his personal opposition to his father than from any political convictions. After this date he became, with intervals of vacillation, an advanced Tory of an illiberal type. William IV. had lived

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so much aloof from politics before his accession, that he had had then no very pronounced opinions, though he was believed to be in favour of the Reform Bill; during his reign his Tory sympathies became more pronounced, and the position of the Whig Ministry was almost an intolerable one. His other brothers were men of decided ability, and for the most part of high social gifts. They not only attended debates in the House of Peers, but spoke with emotion and vigour; they held political interviews with leading statesmen, and considered themselves entitled, not to over-rule political movements, but to take the part in them to which their strong convictions prompted them. They were particularly prominent in the debates on the Catholic question, and did not hesitate to express their views with an energy that was often embarrassing. The Duke of York and the Duke of Cumberland had used all their influence to encourage the King in his opposition to Catholic Emancipation, while the Duke of Cambridge had supported that policy, and the Duke of Sussex had spoken in the House of Lords in favour of it. The Duke of York, a kindly, generous man, had held important commands in the earlier part of the Revolutionary war; he had not shown tactical nor strategical ability, but he was for many years Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and did good administrative work in initiating and carrying out much-needed military reforms. He had married a Prussian princess, but left no issue, and his death, in 1827, left the succession open to his younger brother, the Duke of Clarence, afterwards King William IV., and after him to the Princess Victoria.

The Duke of Kent was, as we shall have occasion to show, a strong Whig with philanthropic views. But the ablest of the princes, though also the most unpopular, was the Duke of Cumberland, who, until the birth of the Queen's first child, was heir-presumptive to the Throne. He had been one of the most active members of the ultra-Tory party, who

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had opposed to the last the Emancipation of the Catholics and the Reform Bill. He had married a sister-in-law of the King of Prussia, and lived much in Berlin, where he was intimate with the leaders of the military party, who were the centre of reactionary influences in that country, chief among them being his brother-in-law, Prince Charles of Mecklenburg.

In private life the Duke was bluff and soldier-like, of rather a bullying turn, and extraordinarily indifferent to the feelings of others. "Ernest is not a bad fellow," his brother William IV. said of him, "but if anyone has a corn, he will be sure to tread on it." He was very unpopular in England.

On the death of William IV. he succeeded to the throne of Hanover, and from that time seldom visited England. His first act on reaching his kingdom was to declare invalid the Constitution which had been granted in 1833 by William IV. His justification for this was that his consent, as Heir Presumptive, which was necessary for its validity, had not at the time been asked. The act caused great odium to be attached to his name by all Liberals, both English and Continental, and it was disapproved of even by his old Tory associates. None the less he soon won great popularity in his own dominions by his zeal, good-humour, and energy, and in 1840 he came to terms with the Estates. A new Constitution was drawn up which preserved more of the Royal prerogatives than the instrument of 1833. Few German princes suffered so little in the revolution of 1848. The King died in 1851, at the age of eighty, and left one son, George, who had been blind from his boyhood. He was the last King of Hanover, being expelled by the Prussians in 1866. On the failure of the Ducal line of Brunswick, the grandson of Ernest Augustus became heir to their dominions, he and his sons being now the sole male representatives of all the branches of the House of Brunswick, which a few

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generations ago was one of the most numerous and widely-spread ruling Houses in Germany.[1]

The Duke of Sussex was in sympathy with many Liberal movements, and supported the removal of religious disabilities, the abolition of the Corn Laws, and Parliamentary Reform.

The Duke of Cambridge was a moderate Tory, and the most conciliatory of all the Princes. But for more than twenty years he took little part in English politics, as he was occupied with his duties as Regent of Hanover, where he did much by prudent reforms to retain the allegiance of the Hanoverians. On his return to England he resumed the position of a peacemaker, supporting philanthropic movements, and being a generous patron of art and letters. He was recognised as "emphatically the connecting link between the Crown and the people." Another member of the Royal Family was the Duke of Gloucester, nephew and son-in-law of George III.; he was more interested in philanthropic movements than in politics, but was a moderate Conservative, who favoured Catholic Emancipation, but was opposed to Parliamentary Reform.

Thus we have the spectacle of seven Royal princes, of whom two succeeded to the Throne, all or nearly all avowed politicians of decided convictions, throwing the weight of their influence and social position for the most part on the side of the Tory party, and believing it to be rather their duty to hold and express strong political opinions than to adopt the moderating and conciliatory attitude in matters of government that is now understood to be the true function of the Royal House.

The Queen, after her accession, always showed great respect and affection for her uncles, but they were not

[1] Of the daughters of George III., Princess Amelia had died in 1810, and the Queen of Würtemberg in 1828; two married daughters survived —Elizabeth, wife of the Landgrave of Hesse-Homburg, and Mary, who had married her cousin, the Duke of Gloucester, and lived in England. There were also two unmarried daughters, the Princesses Augusta and Sophia, living in England.

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able to exercise any influence over her character or opinions.

This was partly due to the fact that from an early age she had imbibed a respect for liberal views from her uncle Leopold, King of the Belgians, to whom she was devoted from her earliest childhood, and for whom she entertained feelings of the deepest admiration, affection, and confidence; but still more was it due to the fact that, from the very first, the Queen instinctively formed an independent judgment on any question that concerned her; and though she was undoubtedly influenced in her decisions by her affectionate reliance on her chosen advisers, yet those advisers were always deliberately and shrewdly selected, and their opinions were in no case allowed to do more than modify her own penetrating and clear-sighted judgment.

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