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CHAPTER I

The Year of Three Kings

On Friday 11 December 1936, the final vote on the Abdication Bill was passed in Parliament and Edward VIII ceased to be king. He had reigned for 326 days. His father's premonition that within twelve months of his death his son would 'ruin himself' had come true.

The newly created Duke of Windsor spent the afternoon packing and reading letters of support and sympathy at his country house, Fort Belvedere, in Windsor Great Park. A sham Gothic royal folly with battlements, rows of cannons, turrets and a tower, it had been built for William, Duke of Cumberland between 1746 and 1757, then embellished by the Regency architect Sir Jeffry Wyatville in the reign of George IV.

Prince Edward had taken over the grace and favour residence in 1929. He was later to write: 'The Fort had been more than a home; it had been a way of life for me. I had created the Fort just as my grandfather had created Sandringham; I loved it in the same way; it was there that I had passed the happiest days of my life.'[1]

Sir Giles Gilbert Scott had added a guest wing in 1936 and Edward had installed central heating, en-suite bathrooms, a tennis court, swimming pool, and in the basement, a Turkish bath. It

[1] The Duke of Windsor, *A King's Story* (Cassell, 1951), p. 412.

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was his private retreat where he had entertained most weekends and where his romance had played out with the woman for whom he had given up the throne. Now he was having to leave it and his staff to venture into an uncertain future.

At 4 p.m., Winston Churchill, who had joined him for lunch and to help polish his speech, left the Fort, his eyes filled with tears, muttering a couplet by Andrew Marvell about the beheading of Charles I:

> He nothing common did or mean
> Upon that memorable scene

Next there was a dinner to say goodbye to his family: his sister Mary and his mother, Queen Mary, widow of George V; his younger brothers, Henry, Duke of Gloucester; George, Duke of Kent; and Bertie, the new King George VI.

At 7 p.m., his faithful chauffeur, George Ladbroke, drove him the five miles to Royal Lodge, where the family had gathered. It was a strained atmosphere. Bertie was coming to terms with the responsibilities and challenges of his new role, whilst the rest of the Royal Family was still reeling from the events of the past few weeks, when David (as Edward was known in the family) had threatened to commit suicide if he could not marry the twice-divorced American, Wallis Simpson.

The new Duke of Windsor, on the other hand, felt liberated. His obsession with Wallis had given him an excuse to renounce the role of king, which he had increasingly not wanted. It had also allowed the government, concerned about his political views, especially towards Germany, and whether he had the qualities needed to be monarch, to force him to abdicate.

At 9.30 p.m., whilst the family was still at dinner, the lawyer Walter Monckton, Edward's trusted adviser and a friend since

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Oxford days, arrived to escort him to Windsor Castle, where the former king was due to broadcast to the nation. They drove in silence down the Long Walk – Wallis's cairn terrier, Slipper, on Windsor's lap – turned into the huge Quadrangle and stopped at the Sovereign's Entrance, where Sir John Reith, the Director-General of the BBC, was waiting. Windsor got out of the car holding a cigar in one hand and Slipper in the other and introduced Monckton to Reith.

The broadcast was to be in the king's former living quarters, a small suite in the Augusta Tower; given its size, most of the electrical equipment had to be set up in the corridor. Windsor greeted the technicians affably and went into the sitting room, where the microphones stood on a table with a chair facing them and an evening newspaper beside them. Reith handed him the paper and requested him to read a few lines aloud to test the voice levels – he chose a passage on lawn tennis. He then popped into the loo, returning with words, 'I expect that's the last time I'll use that place.'[2]

Just before 10 p.m., Reith sat down at the microphone, waiting for the red light to flash. As it did so, he began, 'This is Windsor Castle. His Royal Highness the Prince Edward.' As he slid out of the chair to the left, the former king slid in from the right.

'At long last, I am able to say a few words of my own.' He praised his brother Bertie and spoke generously of the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, continuing:

> I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility and to discharge my duties as King as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love . . . I now quit altogether public affairs, and I lay down my burden.

[2] J. Bryan III and C.J.V. Murphy, *The Windsor Story* (Granada, 1979), p. 285.

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> It may be sometime before I return to my native land, but I shall always follow the fortunes of the British race and Empire with profound interest, and if at any time in the future I can be found of service to His Majesty in a private station I shall not fail. And now we all have a new King. I wish him, and you, his people, happiness and prosperity with all my heart. God bless you all. God Save the King.

After the speech, the National Anthem was played. Monckton had been standing behind the former king throughout the broadcast. As he moved forward to collect the speech, Windsor laid his hand on his shoulder, saying, 'Walter, it's a far better thing that I go.'[3] At Chartwell, Winston Churchill, who had tried so hard to prevent the Abdication, was in tears as he listened.

Wallis Simpson listened to the broadcast in the sitting room at Villa Lou Vei, the home of her friends Herman and Katherine Rogers in Cannes, where she had taken refuge a few weeks earlier.

'I was lying on the sofa with my hands over my eyes, trying to hide my tears,' she later remembered. 'After he finished, the others quietly went away and left me alone. I lay there a long time before I could control myself enough to walk through the house and go upstairs to my room.'[4]

At 10.30 p.m., Windsor returned to Royal Lodge to say goodbye to his family. Dickie Mountbatten, for whom Windsor had been best man in 1922, had driven over from the Fort and remembered: 'Everybody was still in tears when David came in, but David

[3] Lord Birkenhead, *Walter Monckton* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), p. 152.

[4] The Duchess of Windsor, *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (Michael Joseph, 1956), p. 278. According to a maid interviewed by Wallis biographer Ralph Martin, a grim-faced Wallis muttered, 'The fool, the stupid fool.' Ralph Martin, *The Woman He Loved* (WH Allen, 1974), p. 295.

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was jubilant. He was like a schoolboy going off on holiday. "It's all over!" he kept saying. "It's finished, thank God!"'[5]

Queen Mary and the Princess Royal left first at 11.30 p.m. The politician and socialite Chips Channon, basing his diary entry on a conversation with Monckton a few days later, wrote that 'Queen Mary, ever magnificent, was mute and immoveable and very royal, and thoughtfully left off her mourning black for the evening so as not to cast more gloom.'[6] Half an hour later, Windsor said his final goodbyes and the four brothers walked to the door. The Duke of Kent, his eyes swollen from crying, sobbed, 'It isn't *possible*! It isn't *happening*!'[7]

George VI later remembered, 'We kissed, parted as Freemasons, and he bowed to me as his King.'[8] Windsor bent over the new king and declared, 'God bless you, sir! I hope you will be happier than your predecessor,' and disappeared into the night, leaving the Royal Family speechless.[9]

Accompanied by Chief Inspector David Storrier, his personal protection officer, Windsor was driven in heavy rain to Portsmouth by Ladbroke. Arriving at 1.30 a.m. at the Main, not Unicorn, Gate, they struggled to find the Royal Jetty. It seemed symbolic. A naval guard with rifles and fixed bayonets had been paraded for hours on the cold, dark and deserted quayside. Also waiting were members of his household: the Keeper of the Privy Purse, Ulick Alexander; his private secretary, Godfrey Thomas; and his equerry since 1919,

[5] Bryan and Murphy, p. 287.

[6] 21 December 1936, Robert Rhodes James (ed.), *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), p. 103.

[7] Windsor, *King's Story*, p. 414.

[8] Bryan and Murphy, p. 287. Windsor had joined the Household Brigade Lodge No. 2164 in 1919, Bertie the Navy Lodge No. 2612 in the same year.

[9] Rhodes James, *Channon*, p. 103.

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Piers Legh, who had volunteered to go with him, after discovering his former master would otherwise go into exile alone.

Windsor crossed the gangway onto HMS *Fury* – the original choice HMS *Enchantress* was not deemed appropriate – with Slipper under his arm. 'I knew now that I was irretrievably on my own,' he later wrote. 'The drawbridges were going up behind me.'[10]

[10] Windsor, *King's Story*, pp. 413–15. According to a rating, 'the ex-King was so drunk he was carried onboard', email to the author from the rating's cousin, David Mason, 24 January 2022.

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