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Young Elizabeth

Written by Kate Williams

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YOUNG ELIZABETH

The Making of Our Queen

Kate Williams

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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‘It almost frightens me that the people should love her so much. I suppose it is a good thing, and I hope that she will be worthy of it, poor little darling.’

The Duchess of York to Queen Mary, autumn 1928

‘Never mind, Margaret,’ said Elizabeth, while watching her parents and the Court wait to enter the throne room. ‘One day you and I will be down there sharing all the fun. And I shall have a perfectly *enormous* train, yards long.’

‘*History* is so thrilling.’

Princess Elizabeth

Prologue
Abdication Day



Princess Elizabeth in 1936

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 10 December 1936 the ten-year-old Princess Elizabeth of York was at home with her younger sister, Margaret, in the family home, 145 Piccadilly near Hyde Park. She became aware of people collecting outside her front door, cheering and shouting for her father. Mystified, the young Princess wondered if the crowds might dispel – but instead they only swelled. Over and over they were calling for the Duke. Others were shouting ‘God Save the King’.

Life had been unsettled for some months in 145 Piccadilly, the Yorks’ town house. Elizabeth and Margaret were used to spending time with their mother and father, giggling in their room in the morning, playing in the garden and throwing water over each other at bath time. Their governess despaired of ever instilling a sustained education, such was the family’s enjoyment of each other’s company. But their cosy life had been much changed since the death of their grandfather, King George V, at the beginning of the year, and since the autumn their father had been shut in his study, buried in his papers. He had had no time for horseplay with his daughters; instead, trains of dignitaries had arrived to see him, including the Prime Minister and bishops in their full regalia. When their father was free, he had been tired and

strained, and recently her mother had been terribly unwell, confined to bed with severe influenza. Their grandmother, Queen Mary, had sometimes looked cross and Elizabeth's beloved Uncle David, one of her favourite partners for tea-time games of Happy Families and Snap, had not visited for some time – and he had even forgotten a few engagements. But, she supposed, he was King now and perhaps too busy to play cards with his nieces. What exactly the problem was she had little idea. She and Margaret had been devoting themselves to their swimming lessons at the Bath Club. 'You look like an aeroplane about to conk out,' she had shouted at Margaret when she slowed down. The two girls splashed and jumped about under the tuition of the engaging Miss Daly. It was easy to forget the cares at home when there was so much fun to be had at the baths.

Finally, that December morning, Elizabeth decided to ask a footman the reason for the noise. He told her that the King had abdicated his throne and her father now ruled. She hurtled up the stairs to tell Margaret the news: 'Uncle David is going away, and isn't coming back, and Papa is to be King.'

'Does that mean that you will have to be the next Queen?' came the response.

'Yes, some day,' answered Elizabeth.

'Poor you,' said Margaret.

There was no reply.

Then, refusing to be daunted by world events, Elizabeth sat down to write up her report about the last swimming lesson. At the top of the page she wrote 'Abdication Day'.

For Princess Elizabeth, maintaining a strict routine was the way to control, even negate, the painful vicissitudes of life. It was a policy she would retain throughout adulthood, often

to her disadvantage and, in 1997, to the severe detriment of the reputation of monarchy.

Lilibet wrote her notes on swimming class in the bold, clear hand George V had insisted she learn, but her future was irrevocably changed. She was now the heiress to the throne of Great Britain and its dominions. Unless her mother had a son, an event that seemed unlikely, she would take up the crown of one of the oldest and most influential monarchies in the world. As a mere Princess of York, her parents' sole ambition for her was that she should be happily married. But now her future was one of power, international influence, fame and great wealth, for which she would have to sacrifice privacy, intimacy and a family life. It was a role for someone able to hide her feelings and respond to duty. 'Isn't it lucky Lilibet is the eldest,' said Margaret.

'If I am ever Queen,' the ten-year-old Lilibet once declared, 'I shall make a law that there must be no riding on Sundays. Horses must have a rest too. And I shan't let anyone dock their pony's tail.'

In 2012, the year of her Diamond Jubilee, the Queen is less than four years away from superseding Queen Victoria as Britain's longest reigning monarch, and she has been one of the most popular queens in history. It is hard to see the Queen fulfilling her duties at Parliament, opening ceremonies and touring the Commonwealth, and imagine that she was not born to the role. Yet as the daughter of the second son of George V she was never destined to touch the orb and sceptre at all. She was brought up to be a good aristocratic wife and her education was to be very much like that of her mother, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon: casual, loving, unintellectual. As the Duchess of York said, 'After all, I and my

sisters only had governesses and we all married well – one of us *very* well.’

‘Give me a child of seven ...’ runs the Jesuit motto. For Elizabeth, the age of ten was when her life changed. The decision of Thelma Furness, lover of the Prince of Wales, to leave for America in 1934 and ask Wallis Simpson to look after her amour had fateful ramifications. It caused shock in the country, gossip in high society, distracted the government from the rise of nationalism in Europe and led to diplomatic problems between Britain and America. Most of all, the abdication changed the life of a precise, methodical little girl whose favourite activities were playing with toy ponies and weeding the garden with her doting father.