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# THE WIDOW OF WINDSOR

QUEEN VICTORIA CAME TO THE BRITISH throne through a series of tragedies and a conflux of familial dereliction. She was born in 1819, in the last full year of the tumultuous reign of her grandfather King George III; his illness had placed his son George at the center of power when the latter assumed the title prince regent for his father in 1811. In 1785 Prince George, a man of insatiable appetites and thoroughly disagreeable reputation, had married his mistress, the Catholic Marie Fitzherbert, in a morganatic union; the marriage was also illegal under the Act of Settlement, which forbade any heir to the throne to enter into a union with a Roman Catholic. Perpetually in debt as a result of his extravagant building schemes, George eventually—and bigamously—married Princess Caroline of Brunswick in hopes of gaining a large monetary settlement from Parliament. Their union was a disaster from the very beginning: George complained that he found his wife ugly and common, and spent his wedding night passed out on the floor; Caroline, in turn, was scarcely enraptured with the licentious, grossly overweight prince, who flaunted his continued affair with Lady Jersey before the eyes of the court and his spouse, and both husband and wife proved wildly unfaithful.

As time dragged on and relations grew worse, George increasingly humiliated his wife in a series of deliberate acts that won her much sympathy; Caroline, in turn, carried on her own affairs, although the public continued to side with her, even through her husband's unsuccessful attempts to divorce her. She reached the height of this humiliating martyrdom when she was turned away from the door of Westminster Abbey at her husband's coronation as King George IV; much to his relief, his hated consort died in August 1821. The couple's only child, Princess Charlotte, born in 1786, married Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and was an immensely popular figure as the heiress presumptive to the throne. Her death in childbirth in 1817 left the succession to the throne in a tangled, dynastic mess.

With Princess Charlotte's death, the court suddenly realized that George IV had no direct heir: in the event of his death, the throne would pass to his brothers in order of primogeniture, yet none of these men had any legitimate children who might inherit after them. The Duke of Wellington once described these princes as "the damndest millstone around the necks of any government that can be imagined."<sup>1</sup> Corrupt, dissolute, and perpetually broke, they caused scandal after scandal, tainting the image of the British monarchy in the eyes of the public.

In 1791 Prince Frederick, Duke of York, the next in line to the throne, had married his cousin Princess Frederica, daughter of King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia, who found her new husband so disagreeable that she promptly retired to a house in the country, leaving her husband free to carry on with his numerous mistresses. One of these women attempted to ruin the duke when their affair ended by claiming that she had influenced military appointments; although an inquiry conducted by Parliament found the prince innocent, his reputation was irreparably damaged, and he died in 1827 with no legal issue.

For George III's other sons, however, Charlotte's death meant a mad marital dash to provide legitimate heirs to the throne. Prince William, Duke of Clarence, had lived with his mistress, the actress Dorothy Jordan, for more than two decades, and she bore him ten children; these royal bastards, christened with the surname of Fitzclarence, were ineligible for the throne, and William, in exchange for a large grant from Parliament to

pay off his debts, agreed to marry a suitable bride, Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Coburg and Meiningen, twenty-seven years his junior.<sup>2</sup> The couple's hopes to provide an heir to the throne were dashed, however; both of their daughters died in infancy.

Prince Ernst August, the Duke of Cumberland, was a thoroughly disreputable man, called "the Hanoverian Ogre," with no living children by his equally disagreeable wife, Princess Frederica of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, who was popularly believed to have murdered both of her previous husbands.<sup>3</sup> Society whispered that the duke himself had murdered his own valet in a fit of rage after a homosexual affair, and that he had fathered his own sister Sophia's bastard child.<sup>4</sup>

In 1793, another brother, Prince Augustus, had married Lady Augusta Murray, daughter of the fourth Earl of Dunmore, while on holiday in Rome, in direct contravention of the Royal Marriages Act of 1772, which decreed that those in the line of succession had to obtain the prior consent of the sovereign and of the Privy Council before entering into any union. Although two children were born of the marriage, George III had it annulled when he learned that Augustus was amenable to abandoning his wife and offspring in exchange for the title Duke of Sussex and an increased allowance from Parliament. Thus styled, the prince promptly fathered an illegitimate daughter with a young woman whose parents owned an inn near Windsor Castle; in 1831, Sussex again contracted a morganatic marriage, this time with the daughter of the second Earl of Arran. Only George III's youngest son, Prince Adolphus, Duke of Cambridge, had contracted an equal marriage, with Princess Augusta of Hesse-Kassel, but no children had as yet been born of the union.

This left George III's third son, Prince Edward, Duke of Kent. A military man of no great distinction, he was a martinet whose love for corporal punishment and even executions earned him the animosity of his men. For three decades he had lived with his mistress, Thérèse-Bernadine Mongenet of Besançon, a woman seven years older than he, who went by the name of Julie de St. Laurent.<sup>5</sup> On learning of Princess Charlotte's death, the Duke of Kent reluctantly abandoned his mistress and sought out a suitable wife who would provide him with a legitimate heir. At forty-nine years of age, corpulent and balding, the duke was no longer a prize

catch, and his opportunities were thus considerably reduced. Eventually he settled on Victoire, Dowager Princess of Leiningen, whose husband, Duke Emich Karl, had died in 1814 after eleven years of marriage. At thirty-one the widowed Victoire had two young children, Karl and Feodora, to raise; she spoke no English and was something less than an ideal consort, but she was of equal rank and had produced healthy children, the two factors seemingly most important to the Duke of Kent.<sup>6</sup> She was also the sister of the late Princess Charlotte's husband, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, a tenuous tie that seemed redolent of fate, and the Duke of Kent married her in May 1818.

A year later, on May 24, the new Duchess of Kent gave birth to a girl at Kensington Palace in London. "Look at her well," her father presciently commented, "for she will be Queen of England."<sup>7</sup> Christened Alexandrina Victoria, the baby knew nothing of her father, who died of pneumonia seven months after her birth and just six days before his father, King George III. With the accession of the prince regent as George IV, the infant Alexandrina Victoria was suddenly second in line to the throne.

This marked a sharp downturn in the fortunes of the Duchess of Kent. Her husband's death had left her saddled with debts, and she was forced to rely on George IV for her future welfare. The king allowed her to live at Kensington Palace, but it was money from her brother Leopold that helped finance the lives of the duchess and her children.<sup>8</sup> George IV refused his sister-in-law's continual requests for a suitable allowance, and eventually Parliament had to step in and offer the duchess an annual income from the Civil List.<sup>9</sup>

The young Victoria lived a stifled existence at Kensington Palace. The duchess refused to allow her daughter her own room, and Victoria slept on a cot near her mother's bed. Despite her extraordinary possessiveness, the duchess found her daughter's nervous and contradictory temperament a burden to which she was unequal. Once, when her music teacher told her that she must practice, Victoria responded by slamming the lid of the piano, saying, "There! You see there is no must about it!"<sup>10</sup> Such outbursts were common: Victoria could behave with startling willfulness, accompanied by bursts of temper, screams, and floods of hysterical tears.<sup>11</sup>

The young Victoria also lived an isolated existence at Kensington Palace. Although her half brother, Karl, occasionally came to England on holiday,

as the future ruling prince of Leiningen, he was expected to remain in Germany and continue his education. His relationship with Victoria was always tenuous at best, and they only occasionally saw each other during their youths. Victoria's only real companion was her half sister, Feodora, although, with a twelve-year age difference, the two girls initially had little in common except their mother. The widowed Duchess of Kent kept her daughter secluded at Kensington Palace, away from members of her late husband's family and from the public at large. The duchess, with her censorious tales of Victoria's "wicked" uncles, did all within her power to inculcate in her daughter a horror of the king and the royal family, with their numerous bastards, flaunted mistresses, and constant scandals; she was particularly offended that the Duke of Clarence's illegitimate children, endowed with the surname of Fitzclarence, were seen openly at court, and she harbored an abiding hatred of the Duke of Cumberland; the young Victoria heard all manner of stories about him, including warnings that he was not above assassinating her so that he could himself take the throne. As the heiress presumptive to the throne, her mother warned, Victoria must do all in her power to distance herself from her Hanoverian relatives.

Relations with her mother worsened as the Duchess of Kent relied more and more upon her husband's former equerry John Conroy, who attempted to control the duchess and, through her, the presumptive queen.<sup>12</sup> For solace, Victoria turned to her governess, the German Louise Lehzen, who, though devoted to her young charge, proved a rather disastrous influence on her impressionable character. The Duchess of Kent had never got on well with the imperious Lehzen, who in turn did all in her power to undermine the mother in the daughter's eyes.<sup>13</sup> Lehzen also encouraged in her young charge an almost preternatural sense of her own superiority and future position.

Conroy was responsible for the Kensington System, an education program he designed to help train Victoria for her role as future queen; at the same time, it carefully secluded her from any outside influences. Victoria was a good student, intelligent and generally diligent in her studies. Her favorite subjects were history and geography; she did well in German and French, and despite her dislike of music lessons could play competently. She took an early interest in art, making delightful sketches and watercolors, and had a fine soprano voice when she sang.<sup>14</sup>

King George IV died on June 26, 1830, and the Duke of Clarence took the throne as William IV, but the Duchess of Kent's relations with the new king were scarcely better than those with his predecessor, and a number of petty quarrels over money, titles, and precedence soured any lingering vestiges of familial affection. When the king refused to give Victoria precedence at his coronation over his brothers, the duchess refused to allow her to attend.<sup>15</sup> The duchess objected to the fact that the king had moved his illegitimate children into Windsor. "I never did, neither will I ever, associate Victoria in any way with the illegitimate members of the Royal Family," the duchess declared. "Did I not keep this line, how would it be possible to teach Victoria the difference between virtue and vice?"<sup>16</sup> Victoria herself later recalled: "It was dreadful . . . always on pins and needles, with the whole family hardly on speaking terms. I (a mere child) between two fires—trying to be civil then scolded at home."<sup>17</sup>

The worst incident took place in August 1836. Victoria and her mother were at Windsor Castle to celebrate the king's birthday, but William IV was in a foul mood, having learned that, contrary to his instructions, the Duchess of Kent had commandeered an additional suite of apartments at Kensington Palace for her own use. At the birthday luncheon, with seventeen-year-old Victoria opposite him and her mother seated next to the king, William loudly declared, as the guests listened in shocked silence, "I trust in God that my life may be spared for nine months longer, after which period, in the event of my death, no regency would take place. I should then have the satisfaction of leaving the royal authority to the personal exercise of that young lady, the heiress presumptive of the crown, and not in the hands of a person now near me, who is surrounded by evil advisors and who is herself incompetent to act with propriety in the station in which she would be placed. I have no hesitation in saying that I have been insulted—grossly and continually insulted—by that person, but I am determined to endure no longer a course of behavior so disrespectful to me." Victoria burst into tears, while her mother, embarrassed at so public a rebuke, was shocked into uncharacteristic silence.<sup>18</sup>

William IV was genuinely fond of his niece, and she of him. In the spring of 1837, in anticipation of her eighteenth birthday, the king wrote to Victoria, suggesting an increase in her allowance and the right to

appoint her own household. Conroy intercepted the letter and took it to the duchess, who, acting on his instructions, ordered Victoria to write a reply dictated to her: "I wish to remain in every respect as I am now in the care of my mother. Upon the subject of money I should wish that whatever may be necessary to add may be given to my dear mother for my use, who always does everything I want in pecuniary matters."<sup>19</sup>

The king was not fooled, and guessed that his niece had been forced to write this reply; indeed, Victoria had at first refused to do so, and only gave in after repeated scenes with both her mother and Conroy. Concerned about this growingly distasteful turn of events, the Duchess of Kent's brother Leopold, who in 1830 had accepted the offer of the Belgian throne, dispatched his personal physician, Baron Christian Stockmar, to Kensington Palace to report on what was taking place. Stockmar found Victoria angry and alienated from her mother, and blaming Conroy for her untenable position.<sup>20</sup>

Within days, the situation at Kensington Palace took another, unforeseen turn. William IV had been ill for some time though, as he had hoped, he lived to see Victoria's eighteenth birthday, on May 24, 1837. Just after two on the morning of June 20, he died. The Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Conyngham, the lord chamberlain, arrived at Kensington Palace soon after the sun had risen, and demanded to see the princess, who was asleep, at once. She appeared before them in her dressing gown and listened as they told her of her uncle's death. That night, the new, eighteen-year-old queen had her bed moved from her mother's room and dined alone in triumph.

Queen Victoria had always been a woman of immense contradiction. She could be charming and unassuming, yet she was also stubborn, impulsive, and capable of violent emotions when challenged. "Mama," her son Arthur once complained, "will always look at everything in her own light, and will not allow anybody else to have *any views* of their own."<sup>21</sup> Victoria was somewhat plain, not unattractive but certainly no great beauty, with the wide face, weak chin, and protuberant eyes of her Hanoverian ancestors framed by a head of luxuriant golden hair. She stood just four feet, ten inches tall—a perpetual source of worry to the royal family—and

even at eighteen she was plump, a tendency that only increased with the passage of time; by the 1880s she weighed 170 pounds, and her short stature only increased the impression of ever-expanding girth.<sup>22</sup> “I noticed when she left her bath chair,” remembered one visitor of the elderly queen, “that she was no taller standing than she was sitting down.”<sup>23</sup>

Though somewhat dour in her later years, Victoria could also be quite entrancing. She delighted in humorous anecdotes, and possessed a strong liking for stories that revealed human foibles. Her laughter was frequent: “I have seen the Queen’s lips quivering with suppressed laughter,” recorded Frances, Countess of Warwick, “and, if it were not an un-courtier-like thing to say, I might go so far as to state that I have seen Her Most Gracious Majesty shaking like an agitated jelly.”<sup>24</sup> To the end, her voice was enchanting, “like a silver stream flowing over golden stones.”<sup>25</sup>

Queen Victoria was a curious amalgam of beliefs and prejudices, her character complex and enigmatic. Although she appeared to be one of the most powerful women in the world, Victoria firmly opposed the rights of women; she deemed universal suffrage a hideous idea, once declaring that Lady Amberley, one of its proponents and mother of Bertrand Russell, “ought to get a good whipping.”<sup>26</sup> She harbored certain political and national prejudices, yet seemingly she was without any class or racial prejudices. She insisted on the rights and the deference due her position, yet for much of her life she happily surrounded herself with powerful men who were allowed to dictate to her and in many cases order her around, including her first prime minister, Lord Melbourne; her husband, Albert; and later, the ghillie John Brown and the munshi Abdul Karim. (A ghillie is a Scottish estate worker; munshi is the Hindu word for teacher.) Benjamin Disraeli was one of the few prime ministers she liked, and he knew how to win her over. “Everyone likes flattery,” he once explained, “and when you come to royalty, you should lay it on with a trowel.”<sup>27</sup>

Filled with high ideals, the new queen was a young woman of immense contradiction. Victoria adored gaiety, dancing, and parties, yet she was at least determined to be diligent in her work as queen. She understood her basic position, but the first years of her reign were marked with occasional missteps, including scandals, accusations of political favoritism, and her tendency to let personal prejudice dictate her policies. She could be



charming, unassuming, and friendly with her servants, yet she was capable of violent displays of arrogance, insisting on every prerogative due to her as sovereign, and conscious of any perceived slight. A member of her household recalled that Victoria “bore no resemblance to an aristocratic English lady, she bore no resemblance to a wealthy middle-class English-woman, nor to any typical princess of a German court. . . . Never in her life could she be confused with anyone else, nor will she be in history. Such expressions as ‘people like Queen Victoria,’ or ‘that sort of woman,’ could not be used about her.”<sup>28</sup>

Victoria, having been raised in isolation and alienated from her mother, had no emotional center on which to draw. She was susceptible only to her moods and feelings, and frequently gave way to excessive emotional displays when challenged or displeased. Stubborn and often impulsive in her decisions, Victoria was frequently intolerant of those around her, their circumstances, and their own concerns. She was undoubtedly remarkable, with a quick mind and a determination to rule not only her country and empire, but her extended family as well. Her grandson Kaiser Wilhelm II recalled: “She has been a very great woman. I have never been with her without feeling that she was in every sense my Grandmama and made me love her as such. And yet the minute we began to talk about political things she made me feel we were equals and could speak as sovereigns. Nobody had such power as she.”<sup>29</sup>

The queen possessed a profound, unquestioning belief that hers was a position ordained by God, even as she presided over a democratic country and an increasingly powerful Parliament. As a constitutional monarch, what she lacked in real power she possessed in symbolic authority, and she relished her role as the nation’s moral compass. She diligently read through official papers that arrived each morning in dispatch boxes, signing them with her firm “Victoria R” as a signal of the required royal assent, and the prime minister regularly briefed her on both domestic and foreign affairs. But these obligations were little more than time-consuming formalities as the government grew stronger and the monarchy weaker.

Victoria had been reluctant to wed, and it was her uncle King Leopold of the Belgians who finally pressed the issue, recommending his nephew Prince Albert of the German Duchy of Saxe-Coburg. Born in 1819 at

Schloss Rosenau in the Thuringen Forest, Albert had suffered through a tormented childhood that shaped his character. His father, Duke Ernst (brother of Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent), was, wrote Sir Roger Fulford, "not a pleasant character, for he was fired with political ambition which he lacked the capacity to realize and in personal habits he was selfish and extravagant."<sup>30</sup> Nor was he an ideal husband, which may have been one reason why his wife, Louise of Saxe-Coburg-Altenburg, left him; after her divorce in 1826, Albert never saw her again, and she died five years later of cancer. The scandalous, absent mother and the morally erratic father seared Albert's childhood; he was a deeply emotional, melancholy boy, and there were frequent outbursts and tears.<sup>31</sup> He had a horror of anything that smacked of impropriety, and brought these attitudes with him to England when he married. Unable to cope with his conflicted feelings, he repressed them, leading to deep bouts of depression coupled with symptoms that manifested themselves in poor health, including fainting spells and frequent headaches.

Albert impressed everyone with his studious nature and strength of character, though with his high-minded ideals and distaste for frivolity and moral impropriety, he had little in common with other young princes. He was awkward in social settings; disliked balls and receptions as a waste of time; and with his stiff, somewhat formal manner, often unwittingly gave offense. On meeting her cousin, Queen Victoria initially found his intensely serious character less than appealing; by October 1839, however, the queen was positively gushing in her impressions, writing: "Albert really is quite charming, and so extremely handsome, such beautiful blue eyes, an exquisite nose, and such a pretty mouth with delicate moustachios & slight but very slight whiskers: a beautiful figure, broad in the shoulders & a fine waist; my heart is quite going."<sup>32</sup> Feeling that Albert himself would never be so bold as to propose, she took the matter into her own hands, confiding to him in German, as she wrote in her diary, that "it would make me too happy if he would consent to what I wished (to marry me); we embraced each other over and over again, and he was so kind, so affectionate; Oh! To feel I was, and am, loved by such an Angel as Albert was too great delight to describe! He is perfection; perfection in every way—in beauty—in everything!"<sup>33</sup>

Victoria and Albert were married on February 10, 1840, in the Chapel Royal, St. James's Palace. Victoria appeared in a gown of white satin sewn by two hundred women, her veil of Honiton lace held in place by a wreath of orange blossoms.<sup>34</sup> After the wedding breakfast at Buckingham Palace, the couple departed for Windsor, where they were to spend their honeymoon. The next morning, Victoria confided to her journal: "I never, never spent such an evening! My dearest, dearest dear Albert sat on a footstool at my side, and his excessive love and affection gave me feelings of heavenly love and happiness I could never hoped to have felt before! He clasped me in his arms, and we kissed each other again and again."<sup>35</sup>

Albert was far from a popular choice as consort to the queen. Many still despised his uncle Leopold, blaming him for the death of Princess Charlotte in childbirth, and saw his hand in the union of his niece and nephew. There was grumbling, too, about a foreigner coming to England, and the royal family, on the whole, disliked him intensely. But Albert had the good sense to ignore most of the sniping and often rude behavior toward him; in many cases he actually interceded with the queen to grant an occasional concession to them, hoping to achieve some measure of familial harmony. He befriended the widowed Queen Adelaide, one of the few members of the royal family of whom Victoria herself approved, and he made great pains to win over the Duchess of Kent, acting as a liaison to smooth over their past difficulties. Under his influence, Victoria eventually came to forgive her mother for all she believed she had suffered in her childhood.

The queen, consumed as she was by her duties, had little time for her husband by day; unaccustomed to sharing her power or influence, she treated him as something of a nonentity, and Albert in turn was frustrated, lonely, and often bored at the insignificance of his life. When the queen received officials or the prime minister, Albert was asked to leave them alone, nor was he allowed to see any state papers. "I am happy and contented," he confided, "but the difficulty in filling my place with the proper dignity is that I am only the husband, and not the master of the house."<sup>36</sup>

With no official position or responsibilities, and condemned to a life lived in his wife's shadow, Albert struggled to maintain some semblance of self-worth and dignity. Eventually he channeled his energies into the role of her unofficial adviser. He recognized that Victoria's education, while

exceptional for a lady of her day, had been far from comprehensive, and he sought to train her in areas that lay beyond the realm of her own interest. He helped her understand the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution and their effect on her subjects; exposed her to diverse literature and art; and devoted himself to instilling in her a thorough understanding of affairs of state.

Eventually Victoria agreed to make some concessions; Albert was given his own key to her dispatch boxes and allowed to read and comment on state papers to assist his wife. Albert was very much a Renaissance man, with interests in architecture, agriculture, diplomacy, science, and industry. He was responsible for the abolition of dueling, helped pass legislation that finally outlawed slavery, established the Imperial College in London, and left a rich artistic legacy that included expansion of the National Gallery, the design of the new Palace of Westminster, and the museums of London's South Kensington.<sup>37</sup> In the end, Victoria and England were fortunate in her choice. His greatest personal triumph was the Great Exhibition in 1851. The prince had conceived such an exhibition as a means of demonstrating the progresses of the industrial age and the increasing reliance of countries on each other, at the same time highlighting British achievement. After much fuss and many arguments, the exhibition opened on May 1, 1851, in the new, enormous Crystal Palace, built by Joseph Paxton in Hyde Park for the event, and the royal family turned out in force. Victoria, clad in a pink satin gown, entered on her husband's arm as a fanfare of trumpets sounded and a band played Handel's *Athalia*. Six years later, after much maneuvering, the queen bestowed the title of prince consort upon her husband, in recognition for his numerous services to the crown and the country.

Victoria and Albert were a study in contrasts: she was impetuous, prone to outbursts, and loved gaiety, while he was measured, calm, and reflective. Before the wedding, in a rare moment of candor, she confided, "I have always had my own way. . . . Suppose he should endeavor to thwart me and oppose me in what I like, what a dreadful thing it would be."<sup>38</sup> Albert took Victoria in hand, urging her to act cautiously, to discipline herself to undertake the work that accompanied her position, and to be more conscientious of her duties. He helped smooth her rough edges, warning of her temper

and the manner in which she could often unwittingly give offense. In many ways Victoria's relationship with her husband fit a pattern that she was to repeat throughout her life: the search for a trusted protector, a figure who might, in effect, fill the void left by the death of her father when she was just six months old. She, in fact, described Albert in precisely these terms, calling him "my father, my protector, my guide, and adviser in all and everything, my mother (I might also say) as well as my husband."<sup>39</sup>

Victoria was a deeply sensual woman, while Albert seemed moderate and less impulsive. Although first cousins, they were virtual strangers when they became engaged, and while Victoria was certainly the more passionately devoted of the two, in time both husband and wife developed a deep and abiding bond. Behind his prim exterior, Albert shared his wife's sensuality. The queen once wrote to her daughter that women were "born for Man's pleasure and amusement," noting that this was "a sin from which Dear papa even is not quite exempt, though he would not admit it."<sup>40</sup> Victoria loved her husband, but she was also passionately in love with him, and yearned for him; when, after the birth of the couple's ninth child, Victoria was advised to have no more, she is said to have asked her doctor, "Can I have no more fun in bed?"<sup>41</sup>

Yet the relationship was far from the passionate idyll that Victoria herself later described. The couple had a stormy relationship, and there were many battles fought, not only concerning Albert's lack of a proper role but also over Victoria's mercurial temperament. "There is often an irritability in me," Victoria confessed, "which . . . makes me say cross and odious things, which I don't myself believe and which I fear hurt Albert, but which he should not believe . . . like being miserable I ever married."<sup>42</sup> This gives some hint of the kind of scenes that often took place, but Albert was more forthright in his assessment. "Victoria," he once confided, "is too hasty and passionate for me to be able often to speak of my difficulties. She will not hear me out but flies into a rage and overwhelms me with reproaches and suspiciousness, want of trust, ambition, envy, etc."<sup>43</sup> At times it was a delicate balancing act and, often exasperated by her behavior, he simply avoided his wife: "I am trying to keep out of your way," he once wrote to Victoria, "until your better feelings have returned and you have gained control of yourself."<sup>44</sup>

To the end, Victoria remained deeply, passionately in love with her husband. "My dearly beloved Albert shows me not only as much affection and kindness as ever, but as much love and tenderness as on the first day of our marriage," she wrote after celebrating her twentieth wedding anniversary. "How can I ever repay him for it? How be sufficiently thankful to God for His goodness?"<sup>45</sup>

The death of Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent, in March 1861 coincided with a sharp decline in Albert's own health. With his years of constant work and worry and lack of exercise, he had lost the fine figure of his youth and prematurely aged. His face was worn and creased, his once-vibrant blue eyes clouded and tired, his hair thinning. Victoria, who disliked heated rooms, regularly kept the temperatures in all of her residences at an uncomfortable chill, and the prince increasingly suffered from colds, headaches, fits of shivering, insomnia, gastric trouble, and severe stomach pains.<sup>46</sup> Victoria, accustomed to his complaints, was less than sympathetic, writing that Albert "never allows he is any better, or will try to get over it, but makes such a miserable face that people always think he's very ill. . . . His nervous system is easily excited and irritated and he's completely overpowered by everything."<sup>47</sup>

Albert's decline was exacerbated in November 1861, when he inspected several new barracks at Sandhurst on a miserable, rainy day and quickly caught cold; as the days passed and his temperature rose, he complained of headaches, pains in his extremities, and insomnia.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, he insisted on traveling to Cambridge to speak directly to his eldest son, whose affair with a young Irish actress had recently been disclosed; by the time he returned to Windsor, Albert was exhausted.<sup>49</sup>

Victoria rejected suggestions that specialists examine him, and Albert became worse. At night, unable to sleep, he shuffled along the castle corridors in his quilted dressing gown; by day, he lay in bed as his fever rose. Typhoid was suspected; this was not altogether out of the question, nor was the matter of simple influenza, but the prince may have been suffering from stomach cancer.<sup>50</sup>

By the end of the first week of December, Albert asked to be moved to the Blue Room at Windsor, where he could enjoy the warmth of the winter sun from its tall windows. It was an ominous request: both George IV

and William IV had died there.<sup>51</sup> One night, the couple's third child, Princess Alice, told her father that she had written to her elder sister, Vicky, saying that his illness was serious. "You did wrong," he told her. "You should have told her I am dying."<sup>52</sup> By this time the doctors had all but given up hope; the prince had eaten nothing for several days, and was provided only with a constant stream of brandy, given in the hope that it would ease his suffering.<sup>53</sup>

On Friday, December 13, the prince's condition worsened considerably, and his family gathered around him. That night, for the first time, Victoria was told that her husband was almost certainly dying. The queen, shocked, collapsed in sobs, unable and unwilling to believe the devastating news, but she managed to conceal her alarm when she returned to the Blue Room late that night, holding her husband's hand and kissing his forehead.<sup>54</sup> Albert was barely conscious, and he faded in and out of delirium, thinking that he was back at his childhood home, Schloss Rosenau.<sup>55</sup>

Saturday, December 14, was a clear, cold, sunny day; as Albert had wished, the winter sunshine spilled through the tall Gothic windows of his death chamber, though by now he was too weak to notice.<sup>56</sup> As night fell, Albert's breathing grew more shallow, and his painful gasps for breath filled the room; his brow covered with perspiration, he fell in and out of consciousness. "Oh, this is death!" Victoria screamed. "I know it! I have seen this before!"<sup>57</sup> With his wife at his side, Albert died at a quarter to eleven that night.

Victoria was plunged into a shattering grief from which she never fully emerged. She had lost her husband, lover, most trusted adviser, and most cherished friend. Her emotional instability came to the forefront, expressing itself in angry outbursts, headaches, and incessant weakness. Her grief was pervasive. To King Leopold, Victoria declared: "My life as a happy one is ended! The world is gone for me! If I must live on, it is henceforth for our poor fatherless children, for my unhappy country, which has lost all in losing him—and in only doing what I know and feel he would wish, for he is near me—his spirit will guide and inspire me. . . . His purity was too great, his aspiration too high, for this poor, miserable world."<sup>58</sup> "My only comfort," she confessed, "is the hope that I may soon be able to follow him and then be united with him forever!"<sup>59</sup>

"Day," Victoria wrote, "turned into night."<sup>60</sup> She decreed that "mourning for the Prince Consort shall be ordered for the longest term in modern times."<sup>61</sup> Windsor was immediately draped in black crepe; so much was used that the entire country's supply was depleted within a day.<sup>62</sup> In her determination to cherish her grief, Victoria created a cult devoted to the memory of her husband. The Blue Room at Windsor was to be kept "in its present state," she ordered, "and not be made use of in the future," although she herself added memorial wreaths and a bust of Prince Albert.<sup>63</sup> For forty years, to the end of her reign, Albert's rooms were the scene of an incredible ritual. Each morning, a servant delivered a fresh jug of hot water to the unused washstand, as if Albert's specter might appear and need a shave, and laid out a change of clothes amid the fresh flowers that covered the bed; even his unused chamber pot was scoured and replaced at night.<sup>64</sup> On Victoria's orders, everything remained as it had been on that fateful December day; nothing was to be changed. At Windsor, at Buckingham Palace, at Osborne, and at Balmoral, the prince's desks were preserved exactly as he had left them, his books in place and his papers ready.<sup>65</sup>

Mourning dominated every aspect of Victoria's life. Her writing paper was now edged in an inch-thick black border; a photograph of her husband on his deathbed was hung on the right side of every bed she occupied, and at night, Victoria fell asleep clutching her dead husband's nightshirt in her arms.<sup>66</sup> Gloom descended on the court. Victoria decreed an official year of mourning, though in practice she insisted on the observance from those in her service for decades to come. For three years, the ladies of the court were forbidden to appear in anything but black; after this, maids of honor were allowed to wear dresses in the colors of half mourning: white, pale gray, or mauve. Servants sported black armbands for the eight years following Albert's death.<sup>67</sup> Visitors calling on the queen were required not only to write their names in her register, but in Albert's as well, a macabre charade that Disraeli likened to "calling on a dead man."<sup>68</sup> When Disraeli himself was dying, he declined Victoria's offer to visit him, remarking, "She would only ask me to take a message to Albert."<sup>69</sup>

With Albert's body laid to rest, Victoria was determined that he would not be forgotten. Memorials to the prince consort were erected across the country, and cairns were built in his honor at Windsor and Balmoral. She



personally approved the most magnificent and public display, the Albert Memorial at the edge of Hyde Park, depicting the prince, clad in Garter robes, beneath a 180-foot-high Gothic canopy adorned with allegorical representations of the continents and the arts and sciences; it faced Royal Albert Hall, which the queen opened in 1871.<sup>70</sup>

The queen inflicted her grief on every member of her family. She complained that she caught Bertie smoking two weeks after his father's death, a sure sign of his lack of respect.<sup>71</sup> Princess Victoria Melita, one of her granddaughters born long after Albert's death, later recalled that visits with the queen were often gloomy affairs, as Victoria talked incessantly of her dead husband, and fully expected even those too young to have known him to revere his memory as she did; even her youngest daughter, Beatrice, just four when Albert had died, was often made to feel guilty at enjoying any normal childhood fun.

Five days after her husband's death, Victoria retired to Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. This was not only a move to avoid the terrible ordeal of Albert's funeral, but also an attempt to immerse herself in the world her husband had created. For the next forty years, the queen spent as much of her time as possible at either Osborne or at Balmoral Castle in Scotland; it was no coincidence that Albert had designed and built these two residences. Osborne and Balmoral were the places most intimately connected with Albert, where at every turn Victoria was surrounded by memories of their life together, and where—if only temporarily—she could once again bask in his spectral presence.<sup>72</sup>

Victoria could not abandon altogether her duties as queen, but she insisted that she could no longer receive officials; even the prime minister was asked to conduct his official business through her daughter Princess Alice, who would then advise her mother. Government papers were still conveyed to her that required her assent, but she worked out a novel solution when the prime minister objected to having to make reports to a seventeen-year-old girl. Victoria would sit in one room, while several representatives of the Privy Council would stand in another; the door between the two rooms was opened slightly, and as the privy councilors read each item, the queen would nod her consent, her approval conveyed to them by a clerk stationed in the doorway.<sup>73</sup>

The queen refused to appear in public. At first she fell back on the period of mourning, but once this had ended, she turned to a series of constant complaints about her health. Few were convinced but, as Sir William Jenner, her physician, once candidly explained to an official, "Isn't it better to say the queen can't do so and so because of her health—which is to a certain extent true—than to say she won't?"<sup>74</sup> In reality, the only thing wrong with the queen was her emotional state. Jenner referred to her distress in these years as "a species of madness."<sup>75</sup> Victoria, whatever her fragile mental condition, was not mad, but she was so highly strung that nearly anything could cause sudden bursts of temper or tears, bouts of screams, or onslaughts of incessant headaches.

For the first few years, her subjects respected her privacy, but as month after month passed and she remained isolated at Windsor, Osborne, or Balmoral, the voices of complaint grew louder as Victoria indulged in unreasoned grief. "It is impossible," declared the *Times* of London, "for a recluse to occupy the British throne without a gradual weakening of that authority which the sovereign has been accustomed to exert."<sup>76</sup> Cartoons lampooning the incessant mourning began to appear in the press, and one wag was bold enough to affix a notice to the gates of Buckingham Palace, announcing: "These extensive premises to be let or sold, in consequence of the late occupant's declining business."<sup>77</sup>

"It is impossible to deny," wrote one official, "that Her Majesty is drawing too heavily on the credit of her former popularity, and that crowned heads as well as other people must do much that was not necessary in former days to meet the altered circumstances and altered tone of modern times. . . . The mass of the people expect a king or a queen to look and play the part. They want to see a crown and scepter and all that sort of thing. They want the gilding for the money. It is not wise to let them think . . . that they could do without a sovereign who lives at Osborne and Balmoral as any private lady might do."<sup>78</sup>

In time, Victoria's morbid isolation began to ease. Through his flattery and cautious exhortations, Disraeli managed to draw her out, but it was John Brown who did much to lead her back toward life. A former stable boy at Balmoral, Brown had become the queen's groom, and in 1865, he was appointed the queen's Highland servant. Brown was abrupt, uneducated, and frequently drunk. But Victoria saw him not only as the living

embodiment of happy days with her husband at Balmoral but also as protector. She valued his presence, his strength, and his devotion, and in turn she drew from him the attention that nourished her vanity and satisfied—even if they did not replace—the emotional void left in her life after Albert's death.

While there was some grudging respect for Brown's ability to draw the queen out of her self-imposed isolation, it never extended to actual liking for the man himself, an attitude shared by her children. Her sons Bertie and Affie made no secret of the fact that they despised him, while her daughter Louise once called him "an absurd man in a kilt."<sup>79</sup> Some anonymous wag published a pamphlet titled *Mrs. John Brown*, leading to open speculation about the nature of the relationship.<sup>80</sup> Despite such controversies, Brown remained faithfully at the queen's side until his death in 1883.

Victoria's gradual return to public life was never complete, and she continued to resent the ceremonial obligations imposed on her, but the passing decades did much to lessen the pain of her loss. For the forty years following Albert's death, she was "the widow of Windsor," a misnomer, as she spent much of her time at Osborne and Balmoral. As her popularity returned, and her country and her realm flourished and expanded, the image of Victoria as head of a united royal family was gradually supplanted by a second vision, which sanctified her as a mystical symbol of empire. The Diamond Jubilee of 1897 was to be the final step in this sixty-year transformation, fashioning, as one historian noted, a "charismatic image of Victoria" that "overwhelmed and finally obliterated the old image of the melancholy, widowed queen."<sup>81</sup> The elderly Victoria, however, was somewhat less enthusiastic; she knew that her years were numbered, and as the summer of her Diamond Jubilee approached, she commented sadly, "Now comes my swan song."<sup>82</sup>

