CHAPTER XIII

Germany Jumps a Generation (1888-90)

The year 1888 was a turning point in the annals of the house of Hohenzollern and therefore in those of Germany in general and Bismarck in particular. Two German emperors died in that year. At the beginning of the year the throne was occupied by a seasoned veteran of over ninety; at its end, by an inexperienced and badly trained young man of twenty-nine. Within a few months the direction of the state jumped a generation. The main link with the past was the aging and irritable Bismarck.

The series of personal tragedies of the royal family of Prussia began several years before the death of William I. By the mid-eighties it was clear that the aged emperor could not live much longer. All eyes were therefore turned to the heir, Crown Prince Frederick, and his wife, Crown Princess Victoria, eldest child of the English Queen Victoria and her husband Albert, the prince consort. Frederick was an attractive personality. Tall and handsome, with a long auburn beard, he seemed almost a reincarnation of the medieval Holy Roman emperors. Exposed to English influences through his bride and her family, whom he often visited, Frederick developed the reputation of being a liberal. Not a great deal tangible is known of his political opinions, however, because after his one overt criticism in 1863 of the policies of his father and Bismarck, he was silenced. Thenceforth his activities were largely confined to military functions (he acquitted himself very well in the wars of unification) and decorative duties. He and his wife surrounded themselves with people of a liberal and artistic tinge, setting up a sort of rival court to the more military and less intellectual milieu of the king. The crown princess was a more positive character than her husband. She had very definite political views, most of which added up to an antipathy to Bismarck and his policies, which she shared with her mother-in-law, the Empress Augusta. The expectation was that the new reign would lead to a new orientation of policy in a liberal direction and that the ascendancy of Bismarck would end. Bismarck himself was keenly aware of this
possibility and did all he could to cut the ground from under the crown prince by lessening British influence in Germany and by discrediting the various branches of liberalism.

In the mid-eighties the crown prince began to complain of a painful throat disease, which was becoming more and more noticeable. Immediately the most distinguished German doctors were called to attend him. They pretty well agreed that the proper diagnosis was cancer and recommended an immediate operation. The crown princess, horrified at this news, demanded further consultation and requested the best medical advice available in Great Britain. A Scottish doctor, Sir Morell Mackenzie, arrived in Berlin, examined the prince, and gave his opinion that an operation was unnecessary and that the disease could be cured by painful cauterization. This advice was followed and Frederick suffered a martyrdom from these very exhausting treatments. Yet the condition did not improve. It became more and more difficult for the prince to speak, and the tone of his voice became increasingly hoarse and harsh. As the winter of 1887–88 approached, Victoria and the doctors agreed that it would be beneficial to remove Frederick from the raw climate of north Germany and take him to the gentler south. Accordingly the royal couple rented a villa at San Remo on the Italian Riviera and spent the winter there hoping against hope for a convalescence.

A good deal of criticism arose at the highhanded way in which the crown princess was directing the treatment of her husband, who was also of course a political figure of the first importance. Much of this criticism emanated from her eldest son William, prince of Prussia, who had never had a close relationship with his mother. He had been kept as far as possible from his ailing father’s bedside. William determined to travel to San Remo to see the situation himself. He did so, but had a difficult time gaining access to his father. By this time it was clear that the disease was gaining ground rapidly, and the fiction that it was not a cancer was no longer tenable. In fact, it was hardly possible for the invalid to speak.

Things were at this pass when on March 9, 1888, the news arrived at San Remo that the old emperor had died. The new emperor, a dying man, after some doubt about what number he should append to his name, proclaimed his accession to the thrones of Prussia and Germany as Frederick III and made his laborious way back to a wintry and snow-covered Berlin. Once there he was not physically able to attend his father’s magnificent funeral, but had to content himself with saluting the coffin from a window in the Charlottenburg palace and with watching his son William act as chief mourner in his own place.

The reign of Frederick III lasted only ninety-nine days. Owing to his
illness, the now-speechless emperor made no effort to effect any important changes in the government. He appealed to Bismarck to continue his control of affairs as chancellor, and there was no change in policy. Only one major stir occurred, which brought to an end the affair of Alexander of Battenberg. Since his abdication in 1886 that prince had been living in retirement with his family in Hesse-Darmstadt, but his engagement to Princess Victoria of Prussia had never been terminated although the prince had fallen in love with an actress at Darmstadt. Empress Victoria, desiring to make her daughter happy in the few months of power that appeared to be her lot, prevailed upon her husband to invite Alexander to Berlin to award him a high decoration and presumably to make the betrothal official. Upon word of this Bismarck descended upon the palace in wrath, and with the support of Crown Prince William forced the emperor to withdraw the invitation and to end all talk of the engagement. After this Bismarck permitted the facts to become public and engaged in an unhappy campaign of beating a dead horse (and a dying emperor). He raised the specter of Russian anger, although in fact the tsar had lost interest in Alexander since he gave no indication of returning to Sofia. There is some suggestion that Bismarck feared that the empress planned to replace him with Alexander as chancellor and was therefore making sure of the defeat of this possibility. In any case, the whole affair seemed unnecessarily cruel.

As spring wore on, the emperor’s condition deteriorated rapidly. To give him some pleasure he was transported by boat to Frederick the Great’s New Palace in Potsdam, which was renamed Friedrichskron in honor of the emperor. About the same time Queen Victoria arrived for a visit in Berlin to bid farewell to her son-in-law. By the beginning of June the emperor’s death was only a matter of days, and he died on the fifteenth of that month with a last gesture of placing his wife’s hands in those of Bismarck.

When Crown Prince William heard that his father’s death was imminent, he rushed to Potsdam and surrounded the palace with troops. As soon as Frederick died, he forbade anyone to enter or leave the building. Going into an adjoining room he wrote two proclamations, both dated not from Friedrichskron but from the New Palace. These proclamations violated a number of sensibilities because the first was addressed not to the people, as was customary, but to the army. He then organized a funeral for his father which was markedly less magnificent than that accorded to his grandfather three months before. With these ungracious acts William II, the last German emperor, began his thirty-year reign.

William II is a tempting but difficult person to describe: he was not
without virtues and intelligence; his fatuousness and his mercurial
impetuosity, combined with an almost religious belief in his position and
his own wisdom, make the historian recognize the tragedy of a person so
constituted in so decisive a post. At his birth in 1859, owing to profes-
sional malpractice, he was delivered a cripple with a severely withered
left arm. Some amateur psychologists in the historical profession use this
as an explanation for many of the attitudes which William later assumed.
They tell us that this physical defect led the prince to dislike his mother
and thus by projection to dislike England. This may be an extreme in-
terpretation, but it seems clear that the defect forced William psycho-
logically to overcompensate for it in various ways, in particular phys-
ically, so that he became very strong, bluff, and strenuous in his likes.
William was a bright child and interested in many types of things, but
his interests remained throughout his life those of a dilettante without
any real profundity. His tutor Hinzpeter was a martinet, who tried to
force him into a pattern and to push his development. He was schooled
at Kassel and at the University of Bonn, but suffered from the usual dis-
advantage of a prince at a school with less-favored colleagues. William
married Augusta Victoria of Schleswig-Holstein, a member of the Au-
gustenburg family; it was hoped that the marriage would erase the events
of the sixties. The princess was a domestic and religious woman, who
until the last years exercised little political influence over her husband.
William was happiest in two spheres: military and naval. He loved the
sea and took frequent cruises on his yacht. This love had the dubious
result of leading him to the creation of a large German navy. One of his
most outstanding characteristics was his genius for malapropism; he
always managed to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. He viewed
himself as a first-rate orator and frequently made extemporaneous re-
marks which cost his ministers much time and sweat to dilute. He had
an implicit belief in his own charm, which was not inconsiderable, and
felt that his presence could lure either foreign statesmen or opponents on
the domestic scene to his way of thinking. Above all he intended to be
boss and did not plan to play the secondary role which his grandfather
had done so competently. Given the highly personal relationship of
emperor-chancellor in the German constitution, it is easy to see that
stormy days were ahead between William and Bismarck, who were both
such dominant personalities.

Bismarck does not appear to have been conscious of the personality
of the new emperor. He no doubt thought of him as a clever little boy.
He had not given him much training in governmental affairs and seemed
to believe that William would depend on him for all major decisions, so
long as he enjoyed being emperor. Bismarck in fact spent very little time
in Berlin during the first months of the new reign, making his decisions from the distant seclusion of his estates and assuming that the emperor would accept them without demur.

For a time the situation seemed under control. William was enjoying himself. He decided, as soon as official mourning was over, to take some trips and see the world, thus earning the nickname of the reise Kaiser ("traveling emperor"). He made a rather unwelcome call on his cousin, the Russian emperor; he paid a visit to his grandmother, Victoria; and he went shooting with his contemporary and friend, Crown Prince Rudolf of Austria-Hungary. He even went so far as to visit the pariah monarch, Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, known also as Abdul the Damned and the Red Assassin.

The honeymoon was not to last very long between the emperor and the chancellor. More than two personalities—one young, vital, and anxious to act; the other aging, conservative, and looking backward—were at stake. Two generations were at issue, even two worlds. Bismarck still lived in the world of the mid-century, a world limited to the European continent where the industrial revolution had not yet created problems of a social and economic nature which have concerned governments ever since; William II, though he proved to be personally incompetent to deal with what he perceived, was a man of the new period, a man who saw that the world had become much smaller and recognized at least dimly the impact of social and economic change. William was ready to forge, if blindly, ahead; Bismarck wanted to return to the more comfortable old days. It seems clear that Bismarck was very much troubled about universal suffrage. When he instituted it in the sixties, it meant the vote for the conservative peasantry; now it meant the vote for the radical proletariat. Abundant evidence shows that Bismarck was meditating some sort of coup d'état to reduce the franchise drastically and shear the government of its liberal trappings.

It was no accident that the final disputes between William and Bismarck arose over the social question. As early as mid-1889 William, hoping to be all things to all men, had against Bismarck's views espoused the cause of miners on strike in the west. By the end of the year the question of renewing the antisocialist law was imminent. The Reichstag, dominated by the conservative cartel of 1887, was in Bismarck's pocket, though a new election loomed. There was a strong difference of opinion between the Conservatives and the National Liberals on the antisocialist issue. The former wanted the law with a provision that socialists could be forcibly removed from their homes, but the latter refused point blank to permit this clause. The Conservatives were ready to give in if Bismarck would announce the omission of the offensive clause as govern-
ment policy. At a crown council William advocated this idea strongly. Bismarck opposed it and won the day, saying that he would prefer no law, with consequent bloodshed and a final showdown, to the emasculated law. This horrified the emperor, who had no idea of provoking civil war to start his reign. The law failed, and William proposed his own solutions to the social problems. These involved concessions to the employees and, more important in the emperor's mind, an International Labor Conference in Berlin at which he would shine as the defender of the oppressed. In February 1890 decrees to this end were published but for the first time since 1871 without the chancellor's countersignature.

Soon afterwards the elections were held and resulted in a stunning defeat for Bismarck's supporters and a triumph for the parties of the left. Bismarck was now clearly in favor of provoking a constitutional crisis which would lead to changes in the organic laws. He was also trying to make a failure and nonsense out of William's plans for a labor conference. The tension was mounting rapidly.

The crisis reached its summit as a result of two new issues. One was Bismarck's revival of an order of Frederick William IV dating from 1852, which provided that Prussian ministers might report to the king only in the presence of the minister-president. William saw this as an effort of Bismarck to keep him from the center of government. The other issue involved Bismarck's hope to build some kind of majority upon a coalition of Conservatives and Catholic Centrists. He invited Windthorst, head of the Catholic party, to confer with him without informing the emperor. The conversation proved abortive, but the emperor was infuriated when he heard it had taken place.

On the morning of March 15, 1890, Emperor William appeared unannounced at the Foreign Ministry at an hour when the chancellor was still in bed. Bismarck dressed hurriedly and proceeded to face a scolding from his monarch because he had received Windthorst without permission. Bismarck lost his temper and the interview was very stormy, to such a degree indeed that William later said that he expected to have an inkpot thrown at him. However, Bismarck was not to be outdone. Accidentally on purpose, he permitted the emperor to see a recent communication from Russia in which the tsar was said to have described William as a "badly brought-up boy." This completed the interview, and William stalked out of the building in a fury.

The last straw was the emperor's fright at a routine report indicating Russian reinforcements in the Kiev area. This made William believe that Russia was planning war, and he wanted to warn the Austrians. Bismarck wouldn't stand for any meddling in foreign affairs, so he sat down to compose his carefully worded letter of resignation. The resignation
was accepted on March 18, 1890, but the letter was not published by the emperor because he didn’t want only Bismarck’s side of the dispute to be made public. As a parting gesture William made Bismarck duke of Lauenburg, offered him a cash gift, and sent him a portrait of himself. The portrait and title were accepted scornfully and the money refused. Bismarck never made use of the new title.

Bismarck outlived his dismissal by eight years. He spent nearly all his time at his two estates of Varzin in Pomerania and Friedrichruh near Hamburg. The first years were ones of bitter recrimination in which the old chancellor attacked the emperor and the new chancellor unmercifully, often in the Hamburg newspaper which he controlled. He also wrote his memoirs in an effort to clear his career and reputation. The government retaliated in any way possible. Perhaps the most insulting of its acts occurred when Bismarck went to Vienna to attend his son’s wedding. Both the government and the emperor wrote to their Austrian opposite numbers and to the German embassy in Vienna, requesting that no official notice be taken of Bismarck’s presence in the city. In spite of this sort of treatment, Bismarck’s popularity continued. Groups of Germans, often young people, made the pilgrimage to his home to see and hear the great man. Finally a public reconciliation was arranged between the old statesman and the young emperor. In January 1894 Bismarck visited Berlin and was entertained at dinner in the palace. The following year, on Bismarck’s eightieth birthday, William journeyed to Friedrichruh. However, this was all on the surface; the real acrimony continued. In the chancellery a thick file was kept of all mentions of Bismarck in the foreign press so that they could be countered if necessary. The news of Bismarck’s death on July 30, 1898, reached the emperor as he was cruising on the North Sea. He returned to Friedrichruh for the funeral and no doubt sighed happily as he saw the coffin lowered into the earth.

The last years of Bismarck’s life are melancholy in view of his immense contribution to German history. The dismissal of the chancellor was caricatured in perhaps the most famous political cartoon of all time, “Dropping the Pilot” in the English Punch. The cartoon shows a very youthful William wearing a crown and leaning over the deck watching the lumbering old man make his heavy way down the ladder to the pilot boat. There are two sides to the story. It is impossible not to feel sympathy for William’s position; it is also impossible to view Bismarck’s fall as other than pathetic. Less favorable are the insulting pigheadedness of the tested servant and the ignoble rudeness of the noble master.