

The Abdication Crisis

by Dónal Thompson



Imagine you fall in love but your boss says you can't get married. More than that. Your boss says that if you insist on marrying, you'll have to resign. Scandalous right? Well, spare a thought for King Edward VIII of Britain. He lost an empire for love.

But then you might not want to spare a thought for him. He later became a Nazi sympathizer and dreamed of leading England again, not as king but as Hitler's puppet dictator.

In 1936 Edward became King of England and Emperor of the British Empire. This job lasted only 325 days as he became the only English king in history to voluntarily give up the crown. Today in the year 2003 Queen Elizabeth II will not be seen publicly speaking with Prince Charles' partner Camilla Parker Bowles. It would be unthinkable. So imagine what it was like 67 years ago when the King of England himself was having a relationship with a twice divorced American woman.

Stanley Baldwin, the British Prime Minister at the time, tried to convince the king that he was

irreparably damaging the Crown by his actions. The King suggested a morganatic marriage.

In a morganatic marriage an aristocratic man marries a common woman on the understanding that she has no rights or titles from the marriage. This is rather like what Hollywood stars do in their prenuptial contracts today. The idea made the British people even angrier and the King had to choose between Wallis Simpson or the British Empire.

He addressed the nation by radio December 11 1936:

“A few hours ago I discharged my last duty as King and Emperor, and now that I have been succeeded by my brother, The Duke of York, my first words must be to declare my allegiance to him. This I do with all my heart.

You all know the reasons which have impelled me to renounce the Throne. But I want you to understand that in making up my mind I did not forget the country or the Empire which as Prince of Wales, and lately as King, I have for twenty-five years tried to serve. But you must believe me when I tell you that 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. “

He became the Duke of Windsor and Wallis was granted the title of Duchess. They left England to live in France and travel around Europe. The couple met Adolph Hitler in 1937 and the Duke said that Hitler's defeat would be a disaster!

Parliament sent him to the Bahamas as Governor when the war began. After 1945, with a steady income from the British government but no official role, the Duke and Duchess lived abroad -- in Paris, the south of France and in the United States in Florida and New York -- for the rest of their lives. The Duke died in 1972 and Wallis died in 1986. They are both buried at Windsor in England.

It is curious to think that the present monarch Queen Elizabeth II is queen only because of a twice divorced American woman's ability to turn a crowned head.