

PROLOGUE

Kensington Palace, September 1947

The afternoon fire burns low.

Pye always laughs at me, but I've needed the warmth, even in August . . . these palaces can be terribly drafty, and my circulation has always been dreadful.

"Here's the afternoon post, Your Highness."

Pye, my stalwart lady's maid of fifty years, makes no pretense of not having perused the contents of the tray before setting it down. There are several envelopes in the tray . . . perhaps letters from Dickie and Edwina in India, or Alice from Athens.

Underneath the pile is a large, thick, creamy vellum envelope. The other pieces are forgotten as I take the large one in my hand. Turning it 'round and 'round, I relish the luxurious feel of the paper with my fingertips and my heart beats just a little bit faster. The pleasure I receive from this vellum envelope is almost indecent. Oh, I've received plenty of heavy vellum envelopes with engraved announcements of births, marriages, balls, parties, and even naval promotions, but, this one is different . . . special. This is something that will validate Louis', and indeed, his entire family's lifetime quest for acceptance. This would have had Willy and Sasha on their ears. I smile a little, my grin of pleasure, tinged with mischief, then turning wistful. I profoundly wish that Louis could be here.

Slowly and painfully, I rise from my chair, and walk out of my sitting room. Pye protests as I close the door of my bedroom.

"Aren't you going to open it?" she calls after the shut door.

I go over to my jewelry case, turning on a small lamp at my bedside. My daughter Louise says that I own more old-fashioned

jewelry than all the antique shops in London. It's even funnier when you consider the jewelry I lost in St. Petersburg. Ah, well, I don't care. I love each of my Mama's jewels and all the fine old settings that Grandmama and Louis gave me. There's nothing to compare to them today, even considering what I lost in Russia. . . . I open up my secret compartment and take out the pearl. I smile, as I always have and my heart beats almost painfully. The pearl glows pink and incandescent -- I almost imagine that in its luminescence, it lights up the room.

I roll it between my fingers for a moment -- just enjoying the feel of it on my skin. I gently replace the pearl, wondering how many more times I will look at it. I close the box carefully, and go back into the sitting room, really needing the warmth of the fire; I am already feeling very stiff. Pye is standing, her arms akimbo, clucking at me.

"I'm opening it," I say, querulously.

Carefully, my trembling fingers slit the seal. The envelope is lined with heavy, dark paper. I lean over and turn on the lamp . . . the late afternoon is grey. I take a ragged breath and remove the stiff card.

It is here . . . the invitation I'd been waiting for . . . for so many years--

"The Lord Chamberlain . . ."

Yes, yes, yes . . .

". . . is commanded by Their Majesties . . ."

Blah, blah . . .

"...the Ceremony of the Marriage of ... The Princess Elizabeth . . ."

Ah . . .

"Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten, Royal Navy. . . ."

My grandson. . . .

Part One  
1868-1884

I

Heiligenberg, 1868

I have been often told I talked too much. Even Grandmama, who always gave me such excellent counsel, felt I was too garrulous and, in fact, called me a gasbag -- though it was lovingly said. That is why to say that I was struck dumb the first time I saw him in his naval uniform, may be a bit of an exaggeration. However, at five, I was, at least, momentarily tongue-tied.

Louis had joined the Royal Navy two years before at the age of twelve. Since it was necessary that he have a profession, his family wanted him to join the Austrian army, and his Aunt thought it would be a wonderful idea if he joined the Russian military. However, though this caused conflict with both sides later on, Louis preferred England and the Royal Navy. He was strongly influenced in this decision by my Uncle Affie, Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, and my Mama, Alice, Princess of Hesse and by Rhine.

We were all at the Heiligenberg for one of our annual summer get-togethers. Heiligenberg was Uncle Alexander and Aunt Julie of Battenberg's summer palace. It was a beautiful idyllic place, rich with courtyards in which to play and woodlands in which to stroll. There was Aunt Marie, Empress of Russia, and Uncle Alexander's sister, who came with her boys, we, Hesses, and, naturally, the Battenberg cousins.

My sisters and I were called the Three Graces. I suppose that meant that we were beauties. I couldn't see it, not that I cared much at five . . . but Ella - even at that young age, I could see that my sister Ella was a vision. Ella's name of Elisabeth was uncommon in a family full of Victoria's and Albert's. She'd been named for Papa's Mama. I cannot write as

well as Cousin Missy, Queen Marie of Romania, who described her as one of the most exquisite creatures she had ever beheld. Missy wrote that she had wanted to dip her pen in rich colors to describe her, for words never could.

But my Ella, the sister nearest to me in age, was as sweet and kind, as she was beautiful. She cared about everyone, from the lowliest servant, to the animals in the barn, and was even careful of the feelings of our bombastic Cousin Willy, Crown Prince of Prussia. I could never understand that any more than I could understand her attraction to Cousin Serge of Russia, but these things came much later.

For now, it was I, Victoria (yes, common, everyday Victoria), my dearest Ella, about four years old at the time, and the baby, Irène - sweet, amiable Irène, named for the Greek word for peace, because she had been born around the conclusion of the Austro-Prussian War. We sisters were lodged in the back house of the Heiligenberg with the rest of the young cousins, and managed to drive our nannies and various minders utterly insane with games of hide and go seek, blind man's bluff, and other pursuits.

Most of the time, however, Ella followed eleven-year-old Serge around like a puppy, and I fought with my Cousin Liko, Louis' little brother, Henry of Battenberg, who was five years older than I.

That day, the day I was nearly struck dumb by the splendor of Louis, I had managed to elude my nanny and was outside looking for a suitable tree to climb.

Liko trotted over and shouted,

"Victoria, come and look! Louis's in uniform."

"Why should I want to look at him?" I asked haughtily.

"I've seen him before."

Liko shrugged.

"I just thought you would. He's quite splendid. I'm going

to look just like that when I grow up," he declared and thumped his chest proudly.

Considering his love for uniforms in later years, I should have seen that as a prediction. At that time, however, I was completely unimpressed with male posturing. I was more interested in the tree I had spotted on the top of a small grassy mound, and ran to it. Disregarding my white dress with its sky-blue satin sash, I easily gained the lowest branch and took a seat, swinging my white-stockinged legs. I noticed a grass stain on my knee and shrugged fatalistically -- Mama would be angry that I'd got them dirty so soon.

Liko was following me up the mound and I could see a figure emerging from the house. I hoped it wasn't Orchie, the nanny, Mrs. Mary Anne Orchard. She'd tell me to get down and I had no intention of doing so.

"Louis is coming now to show us, and you look stupid sitting up there."

"Looking stupid is better than being stupid, you beast," I replied, smugly, I could always get the better of Liko in a verbal duel.

"Shut up," he whined.

"You shut up," I answered, charmingly, as he began to clamber up to the branch. "There's no room, you can't come up here."

"Yes, I can," he replied, and tried to get next to me on the branch. We began tussling, and I made the fatal error of using two hands to push him off. Instead, I was the one who tumbled unceremoniously to the ground. It was a wonder I didn't break my neck, but my concern was for the new rip in my dress. Orchie and Mama were going to roast me alive.

I was busy contemplating my unhappy fate, punctuated by Liko's crows of triumph, and trying to brush the dirt off my

frock, when a low voice said,

"Cousin Victoria, what are you doing on the ground?"

I looked up and was momentarily robbed of speech. Louis, in his naval cadet's uniform, was a sight to behold. He was tall, slim, though, as yet, no naval style beard, but terribly elegant, as he would always be - while I was, as I would always be . . . disheveled, untidy. . . .

"He pushed me."

Louis smiled and held out his hand.

"Orchie will have something to say about that," he grinned, eyeing the rip.

"He pushed me," I repeated, holding back tears.

"So he did," his voice gentle as he looked up at his younger brother.

"Liko," he called, "Come down, we have a lady in distress."

"That donkey . . . ?"

I began scrambling up, ignoring the gentlemanly hand.

"I'll show him, he can't push me around . . ."

I tried to climb up the tree again, but, without access to the lower branch that Liko now occupied, I couldn't. Tears of frustration rolled down my cheeks.

"Victoria," a gentle adult voice broke through the fracas . . . firm, resolute, and above all, quiet. "Victoria, come here at once."

I continued the struggle, but Louis grabbed me, once again, gently, by the scruff of my dress. I resisted briefly then stood still, head hanging, defeated.

"Here, Orchie, is your little offender." Louis took me by the shoulders and navigated me over to where Orchie was waiting. She looked stern and unhappy.

"Thank you, Prince Louis," she said graciously, and to me, "what have you done to your dress?"

She took my hand and began to cart me off.

"See you later," Louis murmured to my retreating figure.

Covered with humiliation, I said nothing, nor did I look back. He was so grown up, and I such a baby. It was strange for me, even then, to feel humiliated about anything. I had the kind of spirit that charged in and waited for the consequences to fall where they may. Later, I was more intelligent about rushing to action, but then, at five, I was fearless and heedless.

"I don't know what your Mama will say. What kind of hoydenish behavior is this, miss?"

"Oh, Orchie," I began, recovering my considerable verbal abilities. "I was only climbing a tree. If that stupid Liko hadn't pushed me off . . ."

"It looked a very equal struggle to me."

"Hmm, if it looked the least equal, it was because he cheated."

I saw a peep of a smile as she led me into the house, up the stairs to our bedrooms on the second floor. As usual, I was sharing with Irène and Ella. They, little angels, were playing with Marie Battenberg's old dollhouse. Marie, being all of sixteen, was no longer interested in such things.

"Let's get you changed, and if this dress doesn't survive, your Mama will have to be told."

I wrapped my arms about her and gave her a big, wet kiss. She wasn't going to tell Mama. I stood happily while she pulled the dress off. Now, my thoughts were free to concentrate on Louis.

I can't say that it was love at first sight that day, though seeds of confusing feelings began to foment. Rather, it was envy, as I thought it would be very fine idea to run away and join the English Navy. I could get into all the scrapes I wanted, and never worry about getting my clothes dirty or torn.

I wriggled into another white dress, hardly hearing Orchie's admonitions, instead thinking how much fun it was to come to Heiligenberg and have Mama with us. She was usually so busy that other than saying good morning or good evening, we never saw much of her. I realized later on, that we saw far more of her than our cousins saw of their parents. In fact, she and Papa had actually taken quite an interest in our upbringing - far more than was usual for aristocratic parents. At the time, however, like any child, I wanted all my Mama's attention and, naturally, I didn't get it.

She was here now, however, with our aunts, uncles, and cousins, and having a good time. She looked happy, which, in itself, was unusual because Mama rarely looked happy. I had always thought it was because I was not a good girl. I was always getting into scrapes, climbing roofs and trees, tearing my clothes, and talking too much.

I asked Orchie one day, while she was combing my hair.

"Your Mama has a lot on her mind, and works very hard."

I thought about this for a few moments.

"But, she is a princess, Orchie. She doesn't need to work hard. She has servants to do all the work for her." I couldn't understand why no one else thought of that.

"Listen, miss," Orchie tugged at my unruly braids, "it's true that princesses don't have to cook and clean, however, many feel very strongly about working hard to improve the countries in which they live. Your mother does a great deal of work organizing care for sick people, and helping the lot of the deserving poor . . . she's what the Hessians call a true *Landsmütter*."

That had me just about nodding off. She was beginning to sound like our Pastor Bender and church always had me squirming.

The first part, however, set me thinking. Princesses did work.

It was a concept I had never considered.

Orchie saw that I wasn't listening, and turned me around to face her.

"Another reason she might be sad is that she misses your Grandpapa. The ceremony of marriage between your Mama and Papa was a very sad affair. Your Grandpapa Albert had died six months before, and your Grandmama Victoria wore black and cried throughout the service. People there said it was more like a funeral than a wedding," she trailed off, tsk-tsking about what a shame it was for a young girl to be married in such an atmosphere.

That did, however, explain much to me. How could anyone be happy if people had been crying buckets throughout their marriage ceremony? With great satisfaction that I understood one of the mysteries of life, I was back in the present getting my hair combed, yet again. I thought about how much I would like to cut it all off and join the navy like Cousin Louis.

"There," Orchie said. It was the best she could do, as she squinted at me from all angles. I didn't care. I just wanted to be on the move again.

"Come play with us, Victoria." Ella came over clutching her doll. I remember many years later reading that someone had written that she was the most beautiful child they had ever looked upon. This, I could not know then, but I sensed, even in my childlike ignorance, that there was some special quality to her, something like a Christmas angel.

Ella had many times, even as a child expressed the desire to be a nun. We didn't pay much attention to such talk -- after all, I had wanted to be a teacher, and naturally that was thought to be absurd enough. Certainly in Ella's case, a princess, and such an incredibly beautiful one, had no business choosing the chaste life. No - Ella would marry and have a great many

children. I didn't understand it then, and I wouldn't always remember, though, much later it was to haunt me. Usually, however, as children, Ella and I fought like any sisters close in age.

I went to play with my sisters, though dolls usually bored me. I decided Orchie needed a break from my shenanigans.

That afternoon, we children took an excursion into the little village of Jugenheim. The village lay just below the Schloss and was a favorite place. This was our activity while the adults took their siestas. I thought it was very comical that they ate luncheon in full evening dress and was always going to the window to make sure it was still daytime. Poor things, they had so many courses, no wonder they were all tired out.

The party consisted of my sisters and me, with Serge and Paul of Russia. Our young hosts were Louis, Sandro, another of Louis' younger brothers, Liko, and Franzjos, a year older than I, who was the youngest of the Battenberg clan. I thought it was a pretty rotten deal that there were no other girls besides my sisters and me.

The nannies took the other carriage, relying on the older boys to watch us. Since I was in awe of Louis and Ella would have jumped off a cliff for Serge, we were a fairly orderly group.

We loved to look in the tiny shops and have our nannies buy us wonderful pastries called *schneeballen*, or in English, snowballs. These were strips of noodle-like dough that were formed into a ball, deep fried, and sprinkled with lots of powdered sugar - surely food for the gods.

That day as we walked down the narrow cobbled streets of the town, I especially remember Louis saying,

"Come, Victoria, I've still some money from my navy pay, I'll buy you a *schneeball*."

It was nice of him, I suppose, but since I'd never had to buy anything on my own, I wasn't that impressed.

We went into Frau Morgenstern's bakery for the pastries. Frau Morgenstern was a jolly and robust woman with a red face and a loud booming voice, just the sort of woman you'd expect to run a bakery. She, like most of the shopkeepers in the village, knew my cousins and me. We were frequent visitors over the summer, and always in town to buy sweets. I remembered specially a time when Frau Morgenstern showed me how to make *schneeballen*. It was an epoch in my small life.

Louis bought this delicious treat for everyone including our nannies and nursery maids. That, I decided was exceedingly generous of him and looked at him quite admiringly, as I chomped on my *schneeball*. I must have been quite a sight with powdered sugar all over my face, hands, and dress. Poor Orchie, once again, she would be required to admonish me.

I slipped my sticky hand in Louis' and looked up at him. I had to reward him for his generosity and tried to think of something suitable. As we left the shop, and distributed the treats to the others, I thought of something.

"I have a secret," I began, in a dark, confiding tone.

To his everlasting credit, Louis manfully suppressed a smile at the thought of my childish confidences.

"Really," he replied, seriously. "Perhaps we should walk over to the square so that the others won't hear."

I nodded my agreement, and off we went just a few steps away. Like most German villages, Jugenheim had a square with a splashing fountain. This fountain was a little odd, even to a small child like me. I never liked the statue of the poor martyred saint I forget which one, out of whose wounds, sprang the waters of the fountain. It was something frightening and grotesque.

At any rate, Louis and I sat down on the edge of the pool and finished our pastries. When he was finished, Louis put his hands in the water, to wash them and I followed suit, managing, of course, to get myself and my dress wet.

"Now, Victoria, for your secret," he urged, his deep brown eyes looking at me with admirable concentration.

"Well, I happen to know . . ." I paused, looking around, and lowering my voice, as I leaned forward, "that Mama is going to have a visit from the stork."

That he didn't burst out laughing, he told me much later on, was just a sign of the tremendous self-control he was beginning to learn in the Royal Navy.

"You don't say," he began quietly, "and how do you know this?"

"Well," I said, delighted to impart such juicy news. "I asked Orchie why Mama was getting so fat, and she said that she was expecting a visit from the stork, and I know what that means, too."

"You do?" he replied, maintaining his serious demeanor.

"Yes, of course, I do. It means the stork is going to bring me another brother or sister. However, I happen to know that it will be a brother."

"And, how do you know that?"

"Because Orchie said a boy was what Mama wished for, so naturally . . ."

"Yes, naturally."

"However, he won't be born in the Tapestry Room in Windsor."

"He won't?" He looked slightly puzzled at this turn in the conversation.

"No," I replied in triumph. "I was, though . . . in the Tapestry Room, in the Lancaster Tower, at Windsor Castle," I recited proudly. I was the only one of my sisters that had

actually been born in England.

"So, you are an English girl?"

"Well, I'm half-and-half, aren't I," I replied proudly. I liked, even then, anything that connected me intimately with Grandmama.

"Certainly."

So, although Mama was six months pregnant at the time, I thought that I was the only one who had noticed. Typical of the insularity of children, I suppose.

That night, as we did every night at Heiligenberg, we children fell asleep to the music of the dance orchestra below. I imagined my Mama, looking beautiful in one of her exquisite ball gowns, and Papa, handsome in his uniform, waltzing away those warm summer nights. I dreamed about the times when I would also be dancing. That night, Louis was the partner in my waltzing dream. He took up residence there, and never seemed to leave.

Later that year, my little brother Ernst Ludwig, whom we called Ernie, was born, not, as I had told Louis, at Windsor, but at the New Palace at Darmstadt. I remembered being disgusted that he was in precedence before me, as the hereditary Prince of Hesse, but, as time went on, he listened as attentively and slavishly to my orders as the rest of the children.

## II

Windsor, 1871

Sometimes I think I am a time traveler. I close my eyes to remember something, and by some mysterious alchemy, like the traveler in Mr. Wells' story, I'm there. I lose myself in the sounds, feelings and sights of eighty years ago, within, metaphorically, the blink of an eye.

The Franco-Prussian war had robbed my Papa of sovereignty over his little Grand Duchy. From then, until the end of the

Great War, we were just another part of the German Empire with two measly votes in the Imperial Council. It had, altogether, been a difficult year for us. Not only had my mother worn herself out nursing, but as new members of the German Empire, we were required to pay indemnities to that Empire. Not yet being the Grand Duke and having completed the building of a New Palace in Darmstadt with my mother's dowry, we were, at least relatively speaking, poor. Therefore, a long visit to England, living under my Grandmama's largesse was not only welcome, but necessary.

I was, of course, blissfully ignorant of all of this, while my Mama was gone during that awful time during the summer of 1870. She worked hard at nursing -- being a devoted advocate of Florence Nightingale's Notes on Nursing, and a personal friend of that worthy lady. Mama, herself, went into the hospitals, supervised the cleaning and disinfecting of each ward. She cared for wounded soldiers, and came home exhausted every night. To make matters worse, my Papa was away nearly the entire time, fighting on the side of Prussia. There was constant worry about his well being and safety. Princesses surely did do work.

Again, during this inopportune time, Mama was expecting another visit from the stork -- or so I persisted in thinking of it at the time. I always wondered about the relationship between my Mama and Papa. She struck me as the tireless intellectual, always questioning the world around her, to the extent that she even thought that Royalty was an anachronism. She was a progressive liberal who thought continually of the best way to help people without that help resulting in the loss of their dignity.

She read voraciously, something I inherited from her; she listened to and played music - even extending to playing duets with the composer Johannes Brahms; she loved the theater, opera and so many other pursuits. Yet, she had a spiritual side that

was sometimes melancholy - I think that my sister Ella, and certainly, Alix, inherited this from her. My Papa, however, sweet and loving man that he was - well - I can't honestly claim that he was a shining star of brilliance.

They seemed to have a loving partnership and I believe that Mama truly missed him when they had to be parted. However, I had felt for a long time that they were indeed a mismatch.

That fall, Frittie was born. Dear precious little boy, who, by the time we joined Grandmama in England, was beginning to show ominous signs of bruises. Mama had this new sorrow to add to all her others - just like her dear brother Leopold, she would murmur around the palace - just like poor Leopold. . . .

She naturally thought of Uncle Leopold. He was, of all the Uncles and Aunts (and there were many), our favorite, and was a very close friend of my Papa's. Cursed as he was with hemophilia, he, nevertheless, was determined to live as normal a life as possible, even though Grandmama was so determined otherwise. He was our most intellectual and artistic uncle, and Mama and he had many a lively discussion on those topics. He lived until adulthood, and even married, producing two children. Unfortunately, he slipped on the stairs while on holiday in France, and did not recover from the incident.

There was, however, nothing ominous about our visit to Grandmama at Balmoral and Windsor, the following year. It had been a marvelous summer. Traditionally, my Grandmama spent much of her summer at Balmoral so when we came over from Hesse we made our first destination that Scottish Castle. I loved Balmoral, though I think I was one of the few that did. It was always fashionable to wince at the dullness of the place, the awfulness of the tartan wallpaper with thistle designs, and the inedible, traditional Scottish fare.

Never mind the naysayers, though, we always had a wonderful

time.

My sisters and I played with our Wales cousins, Eddy, Georgie, and Louise, the first of Aunt Alix's girls. We would tramp about the misty, grey, countryside playing games, singing, and generally eluding adult supervision. We usually ended up in the small village near the castle to buy sweets. Like Jugenheim, everyone in the village knew us and was always so nice to us.

Poor Eddy was the leader of the children in our walks. He never had much to say, and was leader only by virtue of his seniority; there wasn't the least bit of forcefulness or even personality in his character. I never said it out loud, not even to my sisters, but I frankly thought there was something essentially wrong with his brain. How could someone so slow and stupid be the heir presumptive to the British throne?

I didn't worry about that too much, after all, my cousin Willy, a terrible bully, was heir presumptive to the German throne, and everyone thought that was normal. Ella and I agreed, however, that playing with Georgie and Eddy wasn't nearly as much fun as being with Louis and Serge. I had never considered Serge fun, but I did agree with the sentiment.

In the fall, instead of going back to Darmstadt, we went to Windsor. I believe that Grandmama missed my mother and her Hessian grandchildren, and this year seemed to be one that we spent almost entirely with her. Mama told me that she and Grandmama had a slight falling-out after she had married. Grandmama had expected Mama and Papa, since they weren't yet ruling the Duchy, to spend most of their time in England and do the drawing rooms and other functions that Grandmama refused to do because of her perpetual mourning.

When my Mama refused to spend nearly all her time in England, Grandmama became angry and thought of her as undutiful and disloyal. However, when Uncle Bertie married Aunt Alix, the

duty of drawing rooms fell to her, and Grandmama's feelings of resentment dissipated somewhat. After that, they slowly began to retrace some of their old and close relationship.

While at Windsor, however, several calamities, in the form of serious illnesses, occurred. We had lingered quite a while in England and by November, we were at Buckingham Palace having tea with Grandmama playing with the Wales's and having our lessons. That month all of us, the Wales's and the Hesse children, came down with whooping cough and had to stay at Buckingham Palace, while the rest of the party moved on to Sandringham. More important, my Uncle Bertie of Wales came down with a nearly fatal case of typhoid. Since Uncle Bertie was my mother's favorite brother, there was absolutely no way that she could or would leave during such a critical time.

Mama knew about typhoid since she had been Grandpapa's principal nurse during his fatal bout with the relentless disease. She left us at Buckingham Palace and joined Aunt Alix, who was wringing her hands nearly worried to death about the whole thing. Sick as we were, I remember that we had a good time playing with Mama's and all the Aunts and Uncles' toys at the nurseries. It was particularly ironic that one of our favorite toys was a large stuffed lion, meant to represent the British Empire, who, when you cranked his tail, would swallow a Russian soldier whole. Perhaps we should have all taken that as a warning. Certainly, Grandmama would have thought so.

Naturally, even when we got over the cough, it was decided that we children should not join Mama and Papa at Sandringham. It was considered prudent that the Queen, and her youngest daughter, my Auntie Beatrice, who was only six years older than I, stay away from the residence as well.

We did, however, remove to Windsor when we were all feeling better. That left my Aunt, my sisters and me, with Ernie and

baby Frittie, in the care of Grandmama. I always loved being with Grandmama. When I was very little I thought of her as a being quite apart from the rest of the human race. She had auras and powers that we mere mortals could never understand. She could also inspire loyalty, love and obedience that the rest of us could only aspire to, but never attain.

Our governess, Madgie, Miss Margaret Hardcastle Jackson, didn't tax us too much with lessons when we were ill, but she did her best to instruct us about our deportment in the presence of the Queen. I don't suppose we learned too badly, because the Queen did not complain to my parents, except at certain times, about the noise.

I remember vividly the times when Ella, Irène and I were combed, cleaned and dressed within an inch of our lives in white lawn dresses with innumerable flounces, eyelet edging, and satin sashes, and marched over to the Queen's apartments in, appropriately enough, the Queen's tower. We didn't take normally take any meals or teas with the Queen, being too young, so these little teas were all quite momentous.

When we were ready and inspected by Madgie, she, and several of our nurses, would take us to the Queen's apartments. As we came ever closer, the instructions, the scoldings and the admonishments would come in more and more hushed tones. The carpets seemed thicker, so that our heels made not a sound as we trod closer and closer to the rooms.

Madgie would knock, ever so discretely, while I would fidget and Irène would ask a question in a normal tone and would be frantically shushed. The door would open and in, quietly and reverently, we would go. Once we entered Grandmama's drawing room, no further admonishments were necessary. Just being there was inspiration for good behavior. As we walked in slowly, we would quietly look about us, taking in all the decorations and

photographs that Grandmama kept. Mostly, they were of Grandpapa - family groups and Grandpapa, Grandpapa in kilts, and Grandpapa with Grandmama gazing lovingly at him. These were all there, along with portraits and photos of innumerable cousins, aunts, uncles, and the like.

We were bid to sit down, which we did solemnly and would look upon Grandmama, who, as ever, was clothed in black silk. She must have been in her late forties or early fifties then, but she looked positively ancient to us.

The cakes and tea always had a very special taste in Grandmama's drawing room. She would talk mostly to Madgie, questioning her about our deportment, our health, and all that we had been doing and looking terribly sad when some transgression was reported. Sometimes, she would address a few remarks to us and we would answer slowly and carefully, as we had been taught.

Then, I would notice a twinkle in her eye, and she would look at us and give a shy little laugh. Grandmama's smile, though a rarity was so sweet . . . especially since she must have been worried sick about Uncle Bertie. Her anxieties at that particular time were, no doubt, magnified by the fact that we were nearing the sacred date -- December 14, the day Grandpapa died.

But nevertheless, Grandmama did smile, and it was then that I really loved her that I had a glimpse of the person under the plumpish figure in severe mourning clothes; the person of whom I would forever be reminded when I smelled the scent of orange blossoms.

It was ironic, or, as Grandmama would say, mysterious, that when we received word that Uncle Bertie was out of the wood, it was on that very date. My Mama and Aunt Alix had been nursing him tirelessly and he had finally passed the crises.

I didn't see much of Louis that year. I heard from Aunt

Julie that he had been appointed Midshipmen and was sailing around on a ship called the Royal Albert. I was growing up in an eight-year-old sort of way and thought I was getting rather good-looking with my red-gold hair and blue eyes. Perhaps he wouldn't think I was such a baby next time he came home.

### III

New Palace, Darmstadt 1878

When you're browsing through time and memory, you can't be as selective as you'd like. You're faced with the imps and demons of your life wherever you look. It's unfair, but your brain works that way - it refuses to skip the bad bits.

I was reading Alice In Wonderland to my brother and sisters one very cold and gloomy November evening. We were home in Darmstadt, and had done all our lessons, and had our supper, so Mama permitted us to spend some time in the drawing room with her and Papa. It was a treat and family time of which many others in our positions never took advantage.

I was just getting to the part about the Mad Hatter's tea party when I started to cough.

"You continue, Ella," I said between gasps. "My throat is getting quite sore."

"Come sit with me, darling," Mama said, her nursing instincts coming into action. She felt my head, and shook hers.

"You're a little warm, Victoria, perhaps you ought to go to bed."

She gently took six year old Alicky off her lap, and I shook my head.

"Mama, may I listen to the story a bit longer?"

"All right, but then, right to bed," she said tenderly, and put her arm around me as I rested my head on her shoulder.

As we continued to listen to Ella reading in her low, sweet

voice, I looked about me. Two more additions had come since that harrowing winter at Grandmama's: Victoria Alix, whom we called Alicky, and dear little May, who was now about four and a half. We also had tragedy. Little Frittie had died of a hemorrhage after falling out of a window in Mama's bedroom. He'd been playing hide and seek with Ernie, and had run, arms outstretched, toward a window, that he thought was closed. It wasn't, poor lamb, and he tumbled out, falling on the concrete below. For a few moments, we had actually thought he would be all right, but, unbeknownst to us, he was hemorrhaging internally, and fiercely. He died that evening.

Mama, who was playing Chopin's Funeral March, during the morning game, never stopped blaming herself and became extremely morbid. It had a similar effect on little Ernie. I'll never forget what he said at the time,

"Why can't we all die together? I don't want to die alone like Frittie."

I'm afraid that from then on, Ernie inherited not just a little of Mama's morbidity.

I sighed, hoarsely, and Mama looked at me sharply. I nestled into her arms, enjoying being her baby again for a few minutes.

We also had come into good fortune. My strange old Uncle Hesse died, and Papa became the Grand Duke. Though it made Mama even busier than ever, there was no doubt that it made things a lot easier on our family.

I shivered; it was getting cold.

"That's it, Victoria, you're going to bed with a cup of hot milk and a hot water bottle."

I was beginning to feel positively dreadful and made very little protest as Mama and Orchie led me away to my room. That was the evening of November 5 and I never forgot it because it was the last peaceful time I spent with Mama.

I ran a high fever that night, and later, I was told that everyone else in the family, but Ella, came down with diphtheria.

As I was the first down with it, I was the first to mend. Ella was sent away, and I helped Mama with Papa and the others, as best as a weak convalescent could. Grandmama sent her special physician, Sir William Jenner, and we had a whole host of nurses and doctors attending us - but that didn't save my poor little sister, May, who developed a membrane over her throat and went quickly.

The famous story goes that Mama, heartbroken at the death of May, eventually told Ernie, who had been asking incessantly about his little sister, that she had died, and put her arms around him for comfort, kissing his brow. The disease, insidious and contagious, struck her. She, being worn out from all the nursing and melancholy from all the tragedy, could not, or would not fight the illness. She sank fast and died on the 14th of December. Dearest, sweetest, Mama -- with so much to give to the people of her Grand Duchy and her family - was gone in an instant - and none of us would ever be the same.

Mysterious, Grandmama pondered.