

HELEN RAPPAPORT



FOUR SISTERS

The Lost Lives of the Romanov Grand Duchesses

MACMILLAN



First published 2014 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-76817-8

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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In memory of

Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia Romanova

four extraordinary young women

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Author's Note

Readers familiar with Russian history will know that any author taking on the pre-revolutionary period has to deal with the frustrations of two dating systems – the Julian calendar in use in Russia until February 1918 and the Gregorian calendar, then in use in most of the rest of the world, and which was adopted in Russia on 14 February 1918. For the sake of clarity, all dates relating to events taking place in Russia prior to this date are given in the Julian (Old Style) form (which was 13 days behind the Gregorian system); all events taking place in Europe during that period and reported in the foreign press or letters written outside Russia are given in the Gregorian (New Style). In cases where confusion might occur both dates are given, or qualified as OS or NS.

The transliteration of Russian words and proper names is a minefield of confusion, disagreement, and perceived error – depending on which transliteration system one favours. No single system has been set in stone as the correct one although authors are regularly belaboured for getting their transliteration supposedly wrong. Some systems are decidedly unattractive to the non Russian-speaking lay reader; many are unnecessarily pedantic. For this reason I have made the decision to drop the use of the Russian soft and hard signs, represented by the apostrophe, which in the main serve only to confuse and are a distraction to the eye. I have in the end gone with my own slightly modified version of the Oxford Slavonic Papers transliteration system, opting for example to represent the name Aleksandr as Alexander, in hopes of sparing the reader. I have also avoided using patronymics unless needed to differentiate one person of the same name from another.

When I first began writing *Four Sisters* I had to make a very clear decision about where my story was going to end, having already written about the Romanovs in my 2008 book *Ekaterinburg: The Last Days of the Romanovs*. In that book I undertook a close-up examination of the

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last fourteen days in the lives of the family at the Ipatiev House in Ekaterinburg and charted in forensic detail the horrific circumstances of their murder and the disposal of their bodies. I shall not repeat that part of the story here. Judging when and where exactly to end my narrative has therefore been difficult and I take full responsibility for the decision I have made about when to stop. I hope that readers will find that the Epilogue ties up the most important loose ends.

Finally, and most importantly, it is not my intention in the narrative that follows to give space to any of the numerous false claimants, a trail of whom, since Berlin in 1920, have variously attempted to persuade the world that they are one or other of the four sisters – somehow miraculously escaped from the bloodbath at the Ipatiev House. This book is not for anyone wanting to read more about the much mythologized Anna Anderson aka Franziska Szankowska, nor does it give the oxygen of publicity to the conspiracy theorists who continue to claim Anastasia's survival – or that of any of her sisters – in the face of extensive and rigorous scientific analysis and DNA testing undertaken since the most recent discoveries in the Koptyaki Forest in 2007.

This is a book about the *real* Romanov sisters.

Prologue

THE ROOM OF THE FIRST AND LAST DOOR



The day they sent the Romanovs away the Alexander Palace became forlorn and forgotten – a palace of ghosts. The family had spent the previous three days frantically packing for their departure, having been informed at short notice by Kerensky’s provisional government of their imminent removal. But when it came to the final moments, although the children took their three dogs with them, the cats – Zubrovka, the stray rescued by Alexey at Army HQ, and her two kittens – had to be left behind, with a plaintive request from the tsarevich asking that someone take care of them.¹

Later, when Mariya Geringer – the tsaritsa’s senior lady-in-waiting, charged with caretaking the palace after their departure – arrived, the hungry creatures emerged like wraiths from the shadows and hurled themselves at her, wailing for attention. But all forty doors of the rooms inside had been sealed; the palace kitchens were closed; everything was locked. Only the cats remained in a deserted Alexander Park, the last remnants of a family now heading hundreds of miles east into Siberia.

*

In the years that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917 anyone curious about where Russia’s last imperial family had lived could travel the 15 miles (24 km) from the former capital to take a look. You could get there either on a grubby suburban train, or – avoiding

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the many potholes – by car, along the old royal road that led, straight as a ribbon, across the plain of low flat fields and woodland to Tsarskoe Selo – The Tsar’s Village. Once considered the Russian equivalent of Versailles, in the dying days of the tsarist empire Tsarskoe Selo had acquired an increasingly melancholic air – a kind of *‘tristesse impériale’*, as one former resident expressed it.² By 1917, almost 300 years since Catherine the Great had first commissioned its construction, this village of the tsars was already anticipating its own imminent demise.

The Soviets were, indeed, quick to strip Tsarskoe Selo of its imperial links, renaming it Detskoe Selo – the Children’s Village. Located on higher ground away from the marshy Gulf of Finland, its unpolluted air and orderly grid of wide boulevards surrounded by parkland was considered the perfect place for vigorous exercise. The Alexander Park was transformed into a centre for sport and recreation that would breed healthy young citizens for the new communist order. Communism took a while, however, to make its mark on the town itself, which was still small, neat and mainly wooden. Beyond its modest market square, avenues of grand summer villas, built there by aristocrats who served the court, surrounded the two imperial palaces. Their once legendary occupants – the now vanished great Russian families of the Baryatinskys, Shuvalovs, Yusupovs, Kochubeys – were long gone, their homes requisitioned by the Soviets and already crumbling with neglect and decay.³

The focal point of this pleasant and peaceful little town had until the revolution been the elegant, golden-yellow Alexander Palace with its white Corinthian columns, but in previous centuries the even grander Catherine Palace next door, in all its gilded baroque splendour, had held centre stage. But in 1918 both were nationalized, transformed into object lessons in ‘the aesthetic decay of the last of the Romanovs’.⁴ In June the state rooms located on the ground floor of the Alexander Palace were opened to the public after a careful inventory had been made of all their contents. People paid their 15 kopeks to enter and gawp – not at what they had anticipated would be the lavish style in which their former tsar had lived, but rather in disbelief that such a homespun environment could have been the residence of the last Tsar of All the Russias.⁵

The interiors were unexpectedly modest by former imperial standards – no grander perhaps than those of a public library or museum in the capital, or the country house of a moderately well-off gentleman. But for the Romanov family the Alexander Palace had been a much loved home.

Dutiful members of the newly liberated proletariat, ‘munching apples and caviar sandwiches’, sometimes joined by a few intrepid foreign tourists, were encouraged to visit on Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays, making sure first to don the ugly but obligatory felt overshoes to protect the beautiful waxed parquet floors from damage.⁶ After doing so, they would be ushered through the imperial apartments to an accompanying – and frequently contemptuous – account of their former occupants. The well-drilled official guides did their best to decry the decidedly bourgeois tastes of Russia’s last tsar and his wife. The old-fashioned, art-nouveau-style furniture, the cheap, outmoded oleographs and sentimental pictures, the English wallpaper, the profusion of knick-knacks scattered around on every available surface (predominantly factory-made goods of the most ordinary kind), reminded visitors of the ‘typical parlour of an English or American boarding house’ or a ‘second-class Berlin restaurant’.⁷ The family themselves were dismissed in the glib phrases of Soviet-speak as an historical irrelevance.

As visitors were conducted from room to room, their doorways guarded by waxwork models of the scarlet and gold liveried real-life footmen who had once stood there, they could not avoid an increasing sense of Nicholas II, not as the despotic ruler painted to them but rather as a dull family man, who had crammed his study and library – where he received his ministers on matters of important state business – with photographs of his children at every stage of their development from babyhood to adulthood: children with dogs, on ponies, in the snow, by the seaside, a happy family smiling to the camera for home-made photographs taken on the Box Brownies that they took with them everywhere. Even in his private study the tsar had a table and chair where his invalid son could sit with him when he was working. This, the hub of now defunct tsarist power, could not have appeared more unremarkable, more domestic and child-friendly. Was it really the last home of ‘Nicholas the Bloody’?

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The tsar and tsaritsa's suite of interconnecting private rooms further testified to their three consuming passions: each other, their children and their devout religious faith. Their overcrowded bedroom with its English chintz wallpaper and curtains was more Russian Orthodox shrine than boudoir. Two modest single iron bedsteads – of the kind found in 'second-rate hotels', as one American visitor observed in 1934 – stood pushed together in a heavily curtained alcove, every inch of wall space behind which was crammed from floor to ceiling with religious images, crucifixes and 'pathetic, cheap little tin ikons'.⁸ On every shelf and table top in her private sitting room the tsaritsa had set out yet more knick-knacks and photographs of her children and her darling Nicky. Personal possessions were few and surprisingly trivial – useful domestic items such as a gold thimble, sewing materials and embroidery scissors, as well as cheap toys and trinkets – 'a china bird and a pincushion made like a shoe. The kind of things that one of the children might have given her.'⁹

At the far end of the corridor toward the gardens, the cupboards in Nicholas's dressing room still held his neatly pressed uniforms and, nearby, the Great Library of glass-fronted bookcases was full of carefully ordered French, English and German books bound in fine Moroccan leather of the kind that he often sat and read aloud to his family in the evenings. Visitors were often taken aback by what greeted them in the Mountain Hall beyond. This, one of the palace's formal parade rooms, had instead served as a downstairs playroom for the tsarevich Alexey. In the centre of this elegant hall of coloured marbles, caryatids and mirrors, a large wooden slide or 'American glide'¹⁰ – on which the children of previous tsars had happily played – still took pride of place, along with Alexey's three favourite toy motor cars. Near a door leading out to the garden stood a poignant reminder of the tragedy that had dominated the lives of the last imperial family of Russia – Alexey's 'small wheelchair, upholstered in red velvet', an evocative reminder of the merciless attacks of haemophilia that frequently disabled him, the contours of his body still visible on it.¹¹

Two flights of stone steps led up to the now deserted children's apartments – where once again the adored Alexey's large playroom

dominated – full of wooden and mechanical toys: a music box that played the Marseillaise, picture books, boxes of bricks, board games, and his favourite ranks of toy lead soldiers. Languishing among them a large teddy bear – one of the last gifts from the Kaiser before war changed everything – stood sentinel by the door.¹² The tsarevich's adjacent personal bathroom often made visitors gasp in sympathy; it was 'full of beastly surgical instruments' – the calipers and other 'encasements for the legs, arms and body made of canvas and leather' that had been used to support him when his attacks of bleeding had left him temporarily disabled.¹³

Beyond, and modestly subsidiary to the tsarevich's larger apartments – just as its occupants had been secondary to him in the eyes of the nation – were the bedrooms, classroom, dining and reception rooms of his four older sisters: Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia. Their light and spacious bedrooms were furnished with simple ivory-painted and polished lemonwood furniture and English chintz fabric curtains.¹⁴ A stencilled frieze of pink roses and bronze butterflies above pink coloured wallpaper had been chosen by the younger sisters Maria and Anastasia. For Olga and Tatiana, the frieze was of convolvulus flowers and brown dragonflies. On the girls' matching dressing tables there was still a scattering of boxes, jewellery cases, manicure sets, combs and brushes – just as they had left them.¹⁵ Elsewhere, on their writing tables, were piles of their exercise books with multicoloured covers, and in profusion on every surface, framed photographs of family and friends. Yet in the midst of so much typical, girlish ephemera, one could not fail to notice the presence everywhere in the sisters' rooms of icons and popular religious prints and pictures. By their bedsides there were gospels and prayer books, crosses and candles – rather than the usual clutter one might expect to find.¹⁶

In their wardrobes, the girls had left behind many of their clothes, hats, parasols and shoes; the uniforms worn by the elder sisters with such pride when they rode side saddle at the big military parades for the Tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty in 1913; even their baby clothes and christening robes. They would have no need in Siberia of their finely made formal court dresses – four of everything: matching sets in pink satin with silver embroidery, with pink brocade

kokosbniki headdresses; or for that matter of the four sets of large summer hats, all meticulously stored in boxes. Outside in the hallway trunks and hampers still stood, half-packed with many more of the girls' possessions – ready for that last journey, but never taken.

In the children's dining room the table was still laid with monogrammed Romanov china ready for the next meal. 'You feel the children are out playing somewhere in the garden', wrote a visitor in 1929. 'They will be back at any moment.'¹⁷ But outside, in the acres of parkland beyond the high iron railings surrounding the palace, a wilderness had grown up among the neat and orderly avenues of lindens, where in the soft undergrowth on either side the Siberian buttercups, 'large, double, and fragrant as roses', the wood anemone and forget-me-nots had bloomed in such profusion in the spring.¹⁸ The palace itself might have been preserved as a historical monument but its once admired park was now overgrown with weeds, the grass waist-high in places. The long leafy avenue where the Romanov children had once played and ridden their ponies and their bicycles; the neatly ordered canals where they went boating with their father; the little blue-and-white painted playhouse on the Children's Island with its profusion of lily of the valley and nearby the little cemetery where they buried their pets . . . everywhere and everything connected with those vanished lives now had about it a sense of absolute desolation.

*

The Alexander Palace might have once been the residence of now denigrated 'former people' liquidated by the revolution, of whom ordinary Russians were increasingly fearful to speak, but, as the palace's devoted curator recalled, that last lingering indefinable 'aroma of the epoch' was never quite eradicated. The honeyed scent of the beeswax used to polish the floors and the odour of Moroccan leather from the many volumes in the tsar's library lingered – along with the faint smell of rose oil in the icon lamps in the tsaritsa's bedroom – until the onset of the Second World War and the palace's occupation by the German military command consigned it to near destruction.¹⁹

In the days before the war, the tour of the state apartments

culminated in the central, semicircular hall at the rear of the palace, where the tsar had held official receptions and dinners for visiting dignitaries, and where, during the First World War, the family had sat down together on Saturday evenings to enjoy film shows. That last night, 31 July–1 August 1917, the Romanov family had patiently waited out the long tedious hours here, dreading the final order to leave their home for ever.

During the preceding days the four Romanov sisters had had to make painful choices about which of their precious possessions – their many albums of photographs, letters from friends, their clothes, their favourite books – they should take with them. They had to leave their childhood dolls behind, carefully arranged on miniature chairs and sofas, along with other treasured toys and mementoes, in hopes that they might be cherished by those who came after.²⁰

Legend has it that it was through the central door in the semicircular hall that Catherine the Great had first entered the palace in 1790, carrying her young grandson, the future Alexander I, when the palace that she had ordered to be built, and later presented as a gift to him, was completed. Just after sunrise on 1 August 1917, 127 years later, with the cars pulled up and waiting for them outside, the last imperial family of Russia passed out of the echoing space of the Italian architect Giacomo Quarenghi's eighteenth-century hall with its great arc of windows, through that same glass door and into an uncertain future – 1,341 miles (2,158 km) away in Tobolsk in western Siberia.

The four Romanov sisters, still thin from the after-effects of the severe attack of measles they had suffered early in the year, wept inconsolably as they left the home where they had spent so many of the happy days of their childhood.²¹ After they had gone, a dejected Mariya Geringer spoke of her still lingering hopes for them. Perhaps the girls would be lucky somewhere in exile and find decent, ordinary husbands and be happy, she said. For her, and for other loyal retainers and friends left behind, the memory of those four lovely sisters in happier times, of their many kindnesses, of their shared joys and sorrows – the 'laughing faces under the brims of their big flower-trimmed hats' – would continue to linger during the long, deadening years of communism.²² As, too, would the memory of

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their vivacious brother who daily challenged his life-threatening disability and refused to be cowed by it. And always, hovering in the background, a woman whose abiding virtue – and one that, perversely, destroyed them all in the end – was a fatal excess of mother love.

Chapter One

MOTHER LOVE



There once were four sisters – Victoria, Ella, Irene and Alix – who lived in an obscure grand duchy in south-western Germany, a place of winding cobbled streets and dark forests made legendary in the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. In their day, these four princesses of the house of Hesse and by Rhine were considered by many to be ‘the flowers of Queen Victoria’s flock of granddaughters’, celebrated for their beauty, intelligence and charm.¹ As they grew up they became the object of intense scrutiny on that most fraught of international stages – the royal marriage market of Europe. Despite their lack of large dowries or vast territories, each sister in turn married well. But it was to the youngest and most beautiful of the four that fate dealt the biggest hand.

The four Hesse sisters were daughters of Princess Alice – second daughter of Queen Victoria – and her husband Prince Louis, heir to the Grand Duke of Hesse. In July 1862, aged only eighteen, Alice had left England heavily veiled and in mourning for her recently deceased father Prince Albert, after marrying Louis at Osborne House. By the dynastic standards of the day it was a modest match for a daughter of Queen Victoria, but one that added another strand to the complex web of royal intermarriage between European first and second cousins. During her long reign Victoria had orchestrated the marriages of all her nine children, and remained meddling enough into old age to ensure that, after them, their children and even their grandchildren secured partners befitting their royal status. Princess Alice might well have achieved something better had she

not fallen in love with the rather dull Prince Louis. As royal domains went, Hesse was relatively small, perpetually financially overstretched and politically powerless. 'There are English noblemen who could endow their daughter with a richer dower than falls to the lot of the Princess Alice', observed one newspaper at the time. Hesse Darmstadt was a 'simple country, of pastoral and agricultural character', with an unostentatious court. It was pretty but its history till now had remained unremarkable.²

The capital, Darmstadt, set in the oak-forested hills of the Odenwald, was deemed 'a place of no importance' in the eyes of the pre-eminent Baedeker tourist guide.³ Indeed, another contemporary traveller found it 'the dullest town in Germany', a place 'on the way to everywhere' – nothing more.⁴ It was built on a uniform plan of long, straight streets and formal houses populated by 'well-fed burghers and contented hausfraus', not far from the River Darmbach, and 'the general absence of life' in the capital gave it 'an air of somber inactivity'.⁵ The older, medieval quarter had a degree of bustle and character, but aside from the grand-ducal palace, the opera house and a public museum full of fossils there was little to redeem the city from the insipid stiffness that permeated the Darmstadt court.

Princess Alice had been dismayed upon her own arrival there, for although her upbringing had been authoritarian it had been liberal, thanks to her father Prince Albert. For him, Alice was 'the beauty of the family', and she had grown up happy and full of fun.⁶ Her wedding day had, however, been totally overshadowed by her father's premature death and her mother's crippling state of grief. The brightness of an all too brief childhood was soon further dimmed by painful separation from her beloved siblings, particularly her brother Bertie, all of which heightened her deeply felt sense of loss. There was an air of sorrow about the princess that nothing would ever quite assuage.

Her new life at Hesse promised to be undistinguished. The old order that persisted there kept clever, forward-thinking women such as herself down.⁷ Virtue and quiet domesticity were all that counted, and Alice found the hidebound protocols at the Hessian court burdensome. From the outset, she suffered the frustrations of not

being able to exercise her own considerable progressive and intellectual gifts. An admirer of Florence Nightingale, Alice would have liked to take up nursing, having more than demonstrated her skills during her father's final illness in 1861. If this was not to be then there were other ways in which she was determined to make herself of use in her new home.

With this in mind she embraced a range of philanthropic activities, including regular hospital visiting and the promotion of women's health, fostering the establishment of the Heidenreich Home for Pregnant Women in 1864. During the wars of 1866 against Prussia and 1870–1 against France that stirred Darmstadt from obscurity and took her husband off on campaign, Alice refused any suggestion of taking refuge in England and took on the mothering of her children alone. But this was not enough for her crusading social conscience; during both wars she also organized hospital nursing of the wounded and founded the Frauenverein (Ladies' Union) for the training of women nurses. 'Life', Alice resolutely told her mother in 1866, 'is meant for work, and not for pleasure.'⁸ The duty that had ruled her father's life had become the watchword of her own.

Alice produced seven children in rapid succession with the same kind of stoicism with which her mother had given birth to her own nine. But there the similarities ended; unlike Queen Victoria, Princess Alice was a practical, hands-on mother who took an interest in every aspect of her children's daily lives, down to managing the nursery accounts herself. And, like her elder sister Vicky – and much to Queen Victoria's 'insurmountable disgust for the process' – Alice insisted on breastfeeding several of her babies, causing the queen to name one of her prize cows at Windsor after her.⁹ Alice also studied human anatomy and childcare, in preparation for the inevitability of nursing her own brood through childhood illnesses. There seemed to be no limits to her devotion as a mother, but she did not spoil her children; she allowed them only a shilling a week pocket money until their confirmation, after which it was doubled. She was an advocate of frugality, much like Queen Victoria, though in Alice's case economizing was often out of brutal necessity. The house of Hesse was far from wealthy and Alice often knew the 'pinch of

poverty'.¹⁰ But at the Neues Palais, built during 1864–6 with money from her dowry, she created a warm home-from-home, furnished with chintz fabrics and unremarkable pieces sent from England and cluttered with family portraits and photographs.

Born on 6 June 1872, Princess Alix – the sixth child of the family and future Empress of Russia – was a pretty, smiling, dimpled girl who loved to play. They called her Sunny and from the start her grandmother looked upon her as a golden child. Alicky was 'too beautiful . . . the handsomest child I ever saw', thought Queen Victoria, and she made no attempt to disguise her favouritism.¹¹ Although Princess Alice was much more closely involved in her children's upbringing than many royal mothers, her various welfare and charity projects consumed a lot of her time, and her children's day-to-day life was organized by their English head nurse Mrs Orchard.

Victorian values reigned in the plainly furnished Darmstadt nursery: duty, goodness, modesty, hygiene and sobriety, accompanied by generous amounts of plain food, fresh air (whatever the weather), long walks and pony rides. When she had time Alice walked with her children, talked with them, taught them to paint, dressed their dolls and sang and played the piano with them – even when little fingers, as she laughingly complained, 'thrust themselves under hers on the keyboard to make music like big people'.¹² She taught her daughters to be self-sufficient and did not believe in spoiling them; their toys were unostentatious and brought from Osborne and Windsor. Moments of idleness for the Hesse girls were always filled by something their mother deemed useful – cake-making, knitting, or some kind of handicraft or needlework. They made their own beds and tidied their rooms and there was of course always regular, obligatory letter-writing to *Liebe Grossmama* and annual visits to her at Balmoral, Windsor or Osborne. Other, more frugal family seaside holidays – of donkey rides, paddling, shrimping and sandcastles – were spent at Blankenberge on the treeless, wind-swept North Sea coast of Belgium; or at Schloss Kranichstein, a seventeenth-century hunting lodge on the edge of the Odenwald.

When it came to her children's religious and moral development Princess Alice took a very personal hand and inspired high ideals

in them, her greatest wish being that they ‘should take nothing but recollections of love and happiness from their home into the battle of life’.¹³ Life’s battle included being taught to appreciate the sufferings of the sick and poor, visiting hospitals with armfuls of flowers every Saturday and at Christmas. But Alice’s own life was increasingly one of chronic pain – from headaches, rheumatism and neuralgia, as well as overwhelming exhaustion brought on by her commitment to so many worthy causes. The last child of the family, May, was born two years after Alix in 1874, but by then the happy childhood idyll at Darmstadt was over.

Gloom had irrevocably settled over the family, when at the age of two Alice’s second son Frittie had, in 1872, shown the first unmistakable signs of haemophilia; his godfather, Queen Victoria’s fourth son Leopold, also was blighted by the disease. Barely a year later, in May 1873, the bright and engaging little boy, on whom Alice had absolutely doted, died of internal bleeding after falling 20 feet (6 m) from a window. Alice’s consuming morbidity thereafter – a species of *douleur* so clearly in tune with that of her widowed mother – meant that a mournful dwelling on the dead, and on the trials and tribulations rather than the pleasures of life, became part of the fabric of the young lives of the surviving siblings. ‘May we all follow in a way as peaceful, and with so little struggle and pain, and leave an image of as much love and brightness behind’, Alice told her mother after Frittie died.¹⁴

The loss of one of her ‘pretty pair’ of boys opened up a four-year gap between the only other son, Ernie – who also was forever haunted by Frittie’s death – and his next sibling Alix.¹⁵ With her three older sisters growing up and inevitably distancing themselves from her, Alix instinctively gravitated to her younger sister May and they became devoted playmates. With time, Princess Alice took solace in her ‘two little girlies’. They were ‘so sweet, so dear, merry, and nice. I don’t know which is dearest,’ she told Queen Victoria, ‘they are both so captivating.’¹⁶ Alix and May were indeed a consolation, but the light had gone from Alice’s eyes with Frittie’s death and her health was collapsing. At a time when she and her husband were also becoming sadly estranged, Alice retreated into a state of settled melancholy and physical exhaustion. ‘I am good for next to nothing,’ she told her mother, ‘I live on my sofa and see no one.’¹⁷

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The accession of Prince Louis to the throne of Hesse in 1877 and her own promotion to grand duchess brought only despair at the additional duties that would be placed upon her: 'Too much is demanded of me,' she told her mother, 'and I have to do with so many things. It is more than my strength can stand in the long run.'¹⁸ Only Alice's faith and her devotion to her precious children was keeping her going but her air of fatalistic resignation cast a shadow over her impressionable daughter Alix.

In November 1878 an epidemic of diphtheria descended upon the Hesse children; first Victoria, then Alix fell sick, followed by all the others bar Ella, and then their father too. Alice nursed each of them in turn with absolute devotion; but even her best nursing skills could not save little May, who died on 16 November. By the time she saw May's little coffin taken off for burial Alice was in a state of collapse. For the next two weeks she struggled to keep the news of May's death from the other children, but a kiss of consolation for Ernie on telling him the news may well have been enough for the disease to be transmitted to Alice herself. Just as her children were recovering Alice succumbed and she died on 14 December, at the age of thirty-five, achieving the longed-for *Wiedersehen* with her precious Frittie.

The trauma for the six-year-old Alix of seeing both her mother and her beloved little playmate May taken from her within days of each other was profound. Her treasured childhood tokens were taken from her too – her toys, books and games all destroyed for fear of lingering infection. Ernie was the closest to her in age but now under the separate control of tutors as heir to the throne, and she felt her isolation acutely. Her eldest sister Victoria recalled happier times to their grandmother: 'It sometimes seems as if it were only yesterday that we were all romping about with May in Mama's room after tea – & now we are big girls & even Alix is serious & sensible & the house is often very quiet.'¹⁹

It would be Grandmama, the solid and reassuring Mrs Orchard – known to Alix as Orchie – and her governess Madgie (Miss Jackson) who would fill the terrible void of her mother's death, but the little girl's sense of abandonment ran very deep. Her sunny disposition began to fade into an increasing moroseness and introspection, laying the foundations of a mistrust of strangers that became ever more

deeply ingrained as the years went by. Queen Victoria was anxious to act as a surrogate mother, for Alix had always been one of her favourite granddaughters. Annual visits to England by Alix and her siblings, especially to Balmoral in the autumn, had consoled Victoria in her own lonely widowhood, and such regular proximity allowed her to supervise Alix's education, her tutors in Hesse sending her monthly reports on her progress. Alix herself seemed content to play the role of the 'very loving, dutiful and grateful Child', as she so often signed her letters to the queen, and she never forgot a birthday or an anniversary, sending numerous gifts of her own exquisite embroidery and handiwork.²⁰ After her mother's death England became a second home to her.

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During her lifetime, Princess Alice had had strong feelings about the future for her daughters; she wanted to do more than educate them to be wives. 'Life is also meaningful without being married', she had once told her mother, and marrying merely for the sake of it was, in her view, 'one of the greatest mistakes a woman can make'.²¹ As she grew into a teenager, the best that the beautiful but poor Princess Alix of Hesse could have hoped for to relieve her from the unchallenging tedium of Darmstadt provincialism was marriage to a minor European princeling. But everything changed when on her first visit to Russia in 1884 (for the marriage of her sister Ella to Grand Duke Sergey Alexandrovich), Alix's third cousin, Nicholas Alexandrovich, heir to the Russian throne, had taken a shine to her. He was sixteen and she was only twelve, but thereafter Nicky, as she would always call him, remained besotted. Five years later, when Grand Duke Louis took Alix back to Russia on a six-week visit, Nicky was still stubbornly determined to win her as his wife. The shy schoolgirl had become a slender, ethereally beautiful young woman and Nicky was deeply in love. But by now – 1889 – Alix had been confirmed in the Lutheran faith prior to coming out, and she made clear to Nicky that despite her deep feelings for him, marriage was out of the question. Virtue prevailed. She could not and would not change her religion, but she did agree to write to him in secret, their letters being sent via Ella as intermediary.

The royal marriage stakes at that time were unforgiving to girls

who did not grasp a golden opportunity when it presented itself; as one contemporary newspaper observed, ‘Love in royal circles is not an epidemic affection’.²² It seemed that Alix’s inflexibility was going to deprive her of the one thing so many of her young royal contemporaries craved – a marriage based on love and not expediency. To a forlorn Nicky there seemed an insurmountable gulf between them and he allowed himself to be temporarily distracted by other pretty faces. For her own part, Alix was enjoying a degree of status back home, as a big fish in the very small Hesse pond. Her widowed father, whom she adored, increasingly depended upon her, as the only unmarried daughter, to take on formal duties for him at the Hesse court. Alix became his constant companion; the little time she did not spend in her father’s company was devoted to study, to painting and drawing, making and mending her own modest dresses, playing the piano (at which she was most accomplished) and a great deal of quiet, religious contemplation. And so, when Louis suddenly collapsed and died aged only fifty-four in March 1892 ‘dear Alicky’s grief’ was ‘terrible’, as Orchie confided to Queen Victoria. Worse, it was ‘a silent grief, which she locked up within her’, as she did most things.²³ Alix’s concerned grandmama gathered her orphaned granddaughter to her bosom, vowing that ‘while I live Alicky, till she is married, will be *more than ever my own child*’.²⁴ Alix joined her, in deep mourning, at Balmoral for several weeks of quiet, womanly commiseration. But by this time the press, paying little deference to royal grief, had other things on its mind.

Princess Alix was twenty and highly marriageable, and gossip began circulating about a possible match between her and the young Prince George, second son of Bertie, Prince of Wales. Three years previously, a surprisingly determined young Alix had vigorously resisted the queen’s attempt to marry her off to Bertie’s heir, Eddy, Duke of Clarence. Victoria had been extremely put out that Alix, by then in love with Nicky, should turn down the opportunity of being a future queen of the United Kingdom. As the last of the four daughters of the House of Hesse yet to be married, Alix’s prospects were hardly the best. Never mind; perhaps she could be persuaded to marry George instead, thought the queen, particularly once the unfortunate Eddy succumbed to pneumonia in January 1892. It

didn't work; Alix was adamant, and when George settled instead for Eddy's disconsolate fiancée May of Teck, it soon became evident where Alix's affections were firmly fixed. She only had eyes for the Russian tsarevich. Queen Victoria's anxiety at the prospect of such a marriage mounted. She had been highly mistrustful of Russia since the Crimean War, looking upon Britain's former enemy as 'false' and 'unfriendly' and much of its population 'half oriental'. Russia was 'a corrupt country, where you can trust no one'.²⁵ She fired off exhortatory letters to Alix's eldest sister Victoria, demanding she and Ernie intervene to prevent it: 'for the younger Sister to marry the son of an Emperor – would never answer, and lead to no happiness . . . The state of Russia is so bad, so rotten that any moment something dreadful might happen.'²⁶

In Russia, Alix's other sister Ella was meanwhile quietly working against the queen's plan to subvert the match. She had seen the lovelorn Nicholas at first hand and despite the fact that his father Alexander III and his wife were also, at this time, opposed to the match, Ella gave it her full support. In the midst of all the behind-the-scenes discussion of her future, Alix maintained a stony silence, locked into a personal vow made to her father before his death, that she would never change her religious faith. Since Louis's death she had become more devoted than ever to Ernie, for whom she was now performing a similar central role at the Hesse court. Behind the impenetrable, dignified *froideur* that she projected, Alix was proud of the high standards she set for herself; proud of her own purity of heart and her independence of thought and moral integrity. 'Of course, I am gay sometimes, and sometimes I can be pleasant, I suppose,' she admitted to a visitor from Romania, 'but I am rather a contemplative, serious being, one who looks into the depths of all water, whether it be clear or dark.'²⁷ But such high-mindedness and virtue carried with it a fatal flaw: Alix had not learned 'that virtue must be amiable'.²⁸ She already took herself and life far too seriously. There would be more than enough deep, dark waters for her to negotiate in the years to come.

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In 1894 another royal wedding drew Alix and Nicky together once more. Her brother Ernie at last found a suitable bride in his cousin

Victoria Melita (daughter of Queen Victoria's second son Prince Alfred) and the extended royal family of Europe gathered en masse in Coburg in April for the celebrations. It was here, after much earnest and tearful persuasion from Nicky, that Alix finally succumbed, backed up by the reassurances of Ella, who herself had now converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Perhaps also there was another reason: Alix knew that her pre-eminence in the Hesse court was over with Ernie's marriage: 'life will indeed be very different for me, as I shall be feeling myself *de trop*', she told the queen.²⁹ In the months that followed it became clear that she did not much like playing second fiddle to her new sister-in-law the grand duchess, but marriage to Nicky was far more than a welcome escape. Alix had at last allowed herself to be happy. She put to the back of her mind 'all those horrid things which were said about cousins marrying' (she and Nicholas were third cousins) and refused to worry about the 'disease which poor Frittie had' which had been 'so frightening'. 'Who else is there to marry?' she asked a friend; she at least had the great good fortune to be marrying for love.³⁰

Love also won over Alix's dictatorial grandmother Victoria. She quickly cast aside her disappointment and the considerable personal loss to her of someone she had considered her own child – no doubt remembering that she too had married for love back in 1840. She pushed her instinctive fears for her granddaughter on that 'very unsafe Throne' – and with it the dangers of political unrest and assassination – to the back of her mind and focused on the job in hand.³¹ Her beloved Alicky must prepare for the onerous public role to come and Victoria immediately ordained that she enter a period of retreat in England with her. And so the summer passed: quietly sewing, reading, playing the piano and going for drives with Grandmama. Alix also began taking lessons in Russian with Ella's *lectrice*, Ekaterina Schneider, sent specially from Russia, and entered into earnest discussion with Dr Boyd Carpenter, Bishop of Ripon, on how to reconcile her Lutheran faith with conversion to Russian Orthodoxy.

She was, however, far from well, already suffering the sciatic pain that would plague her throughout her life. This was a cause of some concern to her grandmother and other relatives. 'Alix is again lame

and cannot walk at all, she had even to drive to church', wrote the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg to her daughter during the visit. 'What a deplorable health she has'.³² Rumours had already been circulating that Alix had inherited her mother's sickly physique and nervous constitution, a fact that could not be advertised abroad when the wife of the future heir to the Russian throne should, above all things, be robust enough to produce healthy babies. She suffered also with inflammation of the ear (otitis), frequent nervous headaches that turned to migraines, and poor circulation. But it was the sciatic pain – often so severe that it was impossible for her to walk, ride, or play tennis – that was the real problem. Alix rarely complained about her 'wretched legs', but they frequently consigned her to long hours lying down or reclining on a sofa.³³ The European press had already got wind of her health problems and gossip was – and had been – circulating for some time, to the point where an official statement was issued in the summer of 1894 asserting that reports on the princess's poor health were 'absolutely without foundation'.³⁴

But Queen Victoria was taking no chances. Vigilant as she always was about her own health, she was a great believer in bed rest at every opportunity. She regretted that Alix had not been ordered 'a strict regime of life as well as diet' sooner (the fault of the family doctor at Hesse – 'a stupid man'), nor had she been able, the previous autumn, to take her granddaughter for a rest cure to Balmoral 'which is the finest air in the world' – Alix having previously found Scotland a tad too 'bracing'.³⁵ The queen had no doubt that all the stresses and strains of the young princess's engagement to Nicky had 'tried her *nerves very much*' and so, after Alix arrived from Darmstadt, on 22 May she was despatched to Harrogate to take the waters.

Alix's incognito as the 'Baroness Starkenburg' failed to convince anyone and word was soon out, fuelling further speculation in the press. 'Princess Alix would not have buried herself at a Yorkshire

* The former Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna, a daughter of Alexander II, who had married Queen Victoria's son Prince Alfred. She took the title Duchess of Edinburgh until Alfred inherited the throne of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1893, his older brother Bertie having relinquished his right of succession to it.

watering-place in the height of the London season if she was in perfect health', commented the *Westminster Budget*:

The anxiety of the Court to contradict the report that [she] is in delicate health is unquestionably due to an apprehension that it may cause her engagement to be broken off. It is a *sine qua non* that the wife of the heir to the throne of Russia should be of a thoroughly sound constitution, and his marriage to anyone not in good health is positively prohibited by the Romanoff family statutes.³⁶

Alix's four-week stay in Harrogate with her lady-in-waiting, Gretchen von Fabrice, was, despite the press attention, a happy one. She made the most of the home comforts of a roomy, terraced villa at Prospect Place in High Harrogate – the fashionable end of town. But every morning she had to run the gauntlet of prying eyes watching her – some even through opera glasses – as she went down the hill by bath chair or carriage to the Victoria Bathing House for sulphur or peat baths and glasses of the evil-smelling sulphurous waters. Every afternoon she would re-emerge, to be taken on excursions in a special Coventry Cycle Chair (a combination of bath chair and pedal cycle), to admire local beauty spots and be further invigorated by the bracing Yorkshire air. A detective followed by bicycle at a discreet distance.³⁷ Soon, however, Alix had to adopt avoidance tactics, as she told Nicky: 'They stand in a mass to see me drive out and tho' I now get in at the backyard, they watch the door and then stream to see me . . . when I go into a shop to buy flowers, girls stand and stare in at the window.'³⁸ The crippling embarrassment she felt was made doubly so by the fact that she was in a bath chair and felt vulnerable. For most of her stay it poured with rain and the pain in her legs was little better by the end of it, but she remained at all times cheerful and polite to the attendants and local people whom she encountered, all of whom remembered her as 'affable and unassuming, nothing stiff or formal about her'.³⁹

Shortly after her arrival at Prospect Place, Alix had been delighted to discover that her hostess, Mrs Allen, had just given birth to twins, a boy and a girl. She felt this was a lucky sign and asked to see the babies. She was extraordinarily informal around the household,

insisting that they treat her like an ordinary person, and ‘tripping and singing about the house, like a happy English girl, just home from school’,

now popping into her bedroom, and alarming the servant by helping her to make the bed; then startling Mrs. Allen by tapping at the kitchen door, with a pretty ‘May I come in,’ dandling the lucky twins, or standing with her back to the fire, like a Yorkshire man, whilst she chatted as to the cooking operations, or held lengthy discussions along with the Baroness Fabrice as to the best way of dressing and training children.⁴⁰

At the Allens’ request Alix agreed to stand as godparent for the twins at their christening on 13 June at St Peter’s Church, Harrogate, when they were given the names Nicholas Charles Bernard Hesse and Alix Beatrice Emma. Afterwards, she presented the children with generous gifts of gold jewellery, as well as photographs of herself and her fiancé, so that when they grew up the children would see who they were named after.* It was a happy interlude, filled with hopes for her own future life as a wife, surrounded by the children she longed for; a time when Princess Alix was her natural self – open, loving and generous to those who mattered within her own private, domestic world.

In mid-June, Alix was joined in England by Nicky – ecstatic to find himself at last ‘in the embrace of my destined one, who seemed to me even more beautiful, even more dear, than before’, as he told his mother.⁴¹ For three idyllic days by the River Thames at Walton, staying with Alix’s sister Victoria and her husband Louis of Battenberg, the couple spent time walking; sitting on a rug in the shade of a chestnut tree, with Nicholas reading aloud as Alix sat sewing; or going for drives, the latter, for once, unchaperoned. Then they joined the queen at Windsor and travelled on to Osborne

* A year later when the twins had their first birthday Alix sent gifts of Russian gold and enamelled cutlery, serviette rings and salt cellars bearing the imperial coat of arms and the babies’ initials, as well as two matching pink and blue petticoats that she herself made specially for the occasion. Further presents followed from Russia in 1910 when the twins were confirmed and again in 1915 when they reached twenty-one.

with her, during which time Nicholas's domestic chaplain, Father Yanyshév, arrived from Russia to give Alix instruction in the Russian Orthodox religion. He had a hard time of it; Alix was a rigorous and questioning pupil. Her evangelical upbringing had taught her to dislike dogma and she refused adamantly to make a formal statement renouncing her Lutheranism as heretical. A compromise had to be reached.

With the wedding scheduled for the spring of 1895, Alix anticipated having several quiet months back home in Hesse to prepare, but plans were dramatically changed with news from Russia that Alexander III had fallen dangerously ill and was not expected to live. By now reconciled to the marriage, he wished to see Alix before he died and she left Hesse in great haste, making the long train journey south to Simferopol in the Crimea accompanied by her loyal friend Gretchen. After she had joined Nicky at the Romanov palace at Livadia, the couple was formally betrothed in front of the dying tsar. Alexander's death on 20 October* was followed the day after by Alix's formal acceptance into the Russian Orthodox Church. As Nicholas was now tsar the marriage was brought forward. But it did not take place as the couple would have wished, in private, at Livadia.⁴² The Russian grand dukes objected; court protocol demanded a formal ceremony in the capital. And so in a bitterly cold St Petersburg, after three weeks of exhausting and excruciatingly protracted court mourning for the late tsar, Nicholas and Alexandra were married on 14 November in front of hundreds of invited guests at the chapel of the Winter Palace.

Alix could not have looked more beautiful or serene that day – tall and statuesque in her white-and-silver brocade dress, the train heavily trimmed in ermine and the imperial mantle of cloth of gold across her shoulders, her lovely figure complemented by her limpid blue eyes and her wavy reddish gold hair enhanced by the diamond-encrusted wedding crown. British envoy Lord Carrington was deeply impressed: 'She looked the perfection of what one would imagine

* All events taking place in Russia prior to February 1918 are given according to the Old Style, Julian calendar then in use there. Where confusion might arise, New Style dates are added in brackets.

an Empress of Russia on her way to the altar would be', he informed Queen Victoria.⁴³ Other witnesses noted the commanding stature of the princess alongside her shorter and rather delicate-looking consort; to all intents and purposes she appeared to be the one with the physical strength, a woman of considerable presence, 'much above the traditional level of Duchy Princesses'.⁴⁴

There was, however, something about the royal bride's solemn, guarded look and the thin tight mouth that told a different story, of a strong, determined personality fighting a natural, but violent, antipathy to being on public display after having enjoyed the domestic privacy of the Hessian court for so long. Alix endured the ordeal, but at the end of her wedding day, much like her grandmother Victoria before her, she retreated to bed early with a headache. For others who had attended the proceedings that day, such as Princess Radziwill, it had been 'one of the saddest sights I ever remember having seen'. So long as the authoritarian Alexander III had lived the Russian aristocracy had felt safe, but their sense of security had vanished with his untimely death, and had been replaced with 'the feeling of approaching calamity'.⁴⁵

After a few nights spent in the relatively cramped surroundings of Nicholas's bachelor apartments at the Anichkov Palace in St Petersburg (their own at the Winter Palace still being redecorated) the newly married couple travelled to the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. They ensconced themselves in the dowager empress's apartments in the east wing, where Nicky himself had been born in 1868, for four blissful days of absolute privacy, 'hand in hand and heart to heart', as Nicky told his brother-in-law Ernie.⁴⁶ Alix had also written shortly before her wedding assuring Ernie that 'I am so happy & never can thank God enough for having given me such a treasure as my Nicky'.⁴⁷ The obscure and serious-minded Alix of Hesse, whom even her own grandmother had described as 'ein kleines deutsches Prinzesschen with no knowledge of anything beyond small German courts', had won for herself not only one of the greatest royal catches but the richest man in the world.⁴⁸

But in leaving Darmstadt prematurely the new tsaritsa had arrived in Russia ignorant of its customs and profound superstitions, with a limited knowledge of its language and having made the enormous

leap of faith from the militant austerity of her devout Lutheranism to the mystical and opulent rituals of Russian Orthodoxy. The cultural divide was enormous. Princess Alix of Hesse encountered the same problems – on a much grander scale – that her mother before her had first met in Darmstadt, and – for that matter – her grandfather Prince Albert, who as a homesick Coburger had arrived in an alien English court fifty-four years before. Alix’s adoptive country was as wary of her, as a German and an interloper – the fifth princess of German blood to become a Russian empress in barely a century – as England had been of the obscure Saxe-Coburg princeling Albert.

She might have embraced Orthodoxy with all her heart, but Alix was English through and through, with English habits, English sentiments and a no-nonsense English approach to family life bred in the bone by her mother and grandmother before her. Such a background would have served her well had she remained within the familiar sphere of her Western-European bloodline, but Russia – despite the seductive beauty of its landscape, which she already loved – was unknown territory, a country legendary for its turbulent history and for the overpowering wealth and grandeur of its court. *Fin-de-siècle* imperial St Petersburg was a far cry from the comfortable domesticity of the Neues Palais and the rose gardens of Darmstadt.

Nevertheless, for the sake of love, ‘gentle simple Alicky’ had summoned up all her courage to leave the shelter of her brother’s quiet and peaceful *residenz* in Darmstadt to become ‘the great Empress of Russia’.⁴⁹ To counter her apprehensions about the unfamiliar court practices she was presented with, she closed the door to the hostile world outside and everything in it that frightened her. Instead, she clung to those few close, familiar things in which she took comfort, and to her role as Nicholas’s devoted ‘little wifey’. For now, the world – and Russia – could wait.

Except in one respect: shortly after Alexander III’s death, Nicholas had issued a proclamation commanding his subjects to swear the oath of allegiance to him as their new tsar. His younger brother Grand Duke Georgiy Alexandrovich, he proclaimed, would bear the

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title of tsarevich ‘until it please God to bless our approaching union with the Princess Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt with the birth of a son’.⁵⁰ In the dynastic scheme of things, Alix’s primary and most urgent duty was to provide a male heir to the Russian throne.