

Princess Olga
of
Yugoslavia

Her Life and Times

Robert Prentice



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To the Family of Princess Olga of Yugoslavia,
Greece and Denmark.

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Indeed, it soon became apparent that there was a sufficient depth of material to justify a biography. To this end, Princess Elizabeth subsequently provided me with copies of a wide selection of her mother's private correspondence, pages of Princess Olga's unpublished memoirs and copies of her mother's diaries in her possession. Meanwhile, Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia and his wife Barbara kindly allowed me to read and make copious notes from their extensive holding of Princess Olga's private diaries.

I am also indebted to Her Majesty the Queen for granting me access to, and permitting me to quote from correspondence to and relating to Princess Olga which is held at the Royal Archives in Windsor. I would also like to thank the (since retired) Senior Archivist, Miss Pamela Clark and her staff for their help.

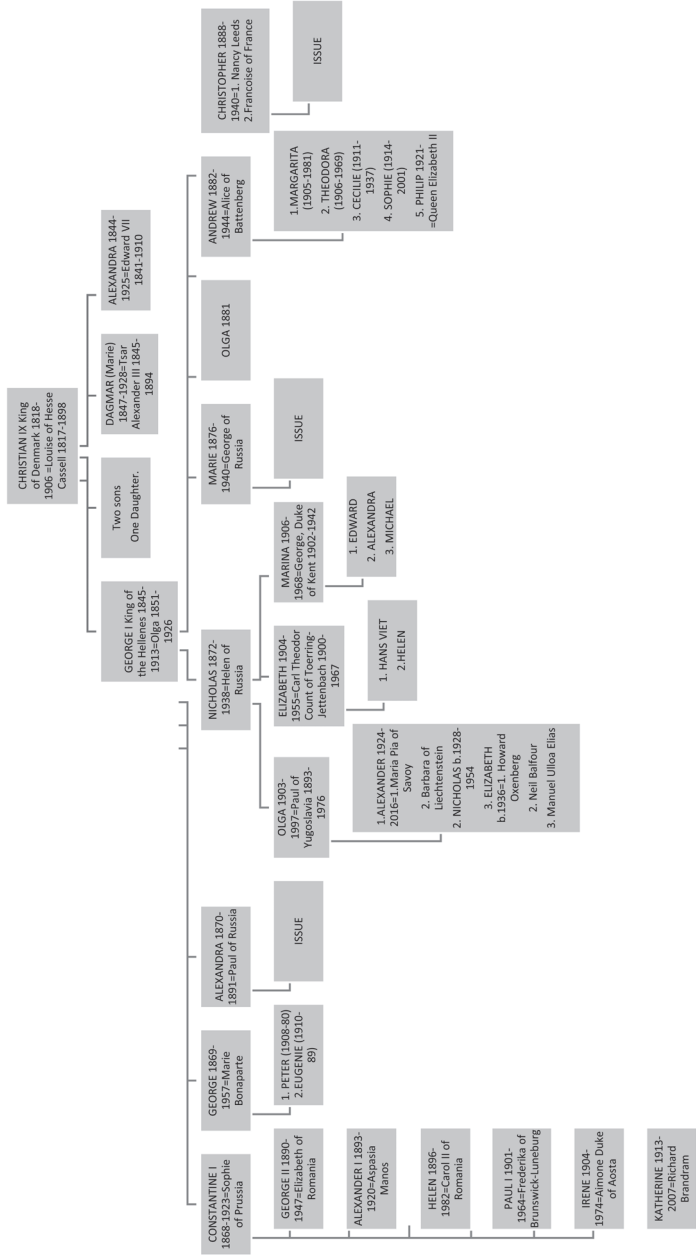
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Family Tree of Princess Olga of Yugoslavia



Introduction

Princess Olga of Yugoslavia is largely remembered today as the beautiful, older sister of the equally attractive and much-loved Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent. However, unlike Marina, she has not been the subject of numerous biographies; nor does she have the same “fan following” among those individuals who take a keen interest in royal matters. Indeed, this biography is the first in-depth study of her long life. Nevertheless, Olga or ‘The Princess’ as I will often refer to her, was to lead a life which was, in many ways, more interesting and involved than that of her younger sister.

The first chapters of this book focus on Olga’s dynastic links to the royal families of Europe, particularly those of Imperial Russia and Denmark. They cover too her childhood in Athens, among the ‘clannish intimacy’ of the Greek royal family, with several detours to the Imperial Court at St Petersburg and the bracing seaside resorts of southern England. This is a vital exercise as it helps the reader to understand Olga’s deep love of family, as well as her acute sense of dynastic awareness. These influences underpinned her life.

For the Princess, “family” was not only comprised of her immediate relatives, but also included a large, multi-national group of cousins, aunts and uncles, as well as a non-royal, Miss Kate Fox, Olga’s much-loved nurse or ‘Nurnie’. Certainly, I find that ‘family’ provided the Princess with a feeling of security, as well as the freedom to be herself. It was also through ‘family’ that some of her major character traits were forged: Loyalty, kindness, patriotism, duty, a sense of humour and, above all, a deep Christian faith. It is also fair to say that with such close blood ties, whatever affected a member of her family tended to affect her.

Yet, her sense of dynastic awareness is equally of note and not for nothing has she been referred to as ‘the most royal Princess in Europe’. While Olga was proud to be Greek and a Princess of Greece, I determine that she soon acquired a highly distinct ‘royal’ sense of self, largely thanks to her impeccable Imperial Russian heritage (and to a lesser extent due to her strong links to the Danish House of Sonderburg-Glücksburg). This ‘royal’ persona undoubtedly had its downsides, for the Princess could often come across as aloof and haughty. It may also have inclined her to be disapproving of others and their actions. Nonetheless, this dynastic awareness also helped to foster the steeliness

1 and determination which would carry her through the many crises of her
2 adult life.

3 Indeed, in examining Olga's life in subsequent chapters, I am struck
4 by the extent to which external factors impacted upon her, particularly
5 the political vagaries of 20th century European history. This is amply
6 evidenced by the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia, in 1934,
7 which led to Olga's husband, Paul, being declared Prince Regent, thus
8 propelling the Princess to the exalted position of 'Queen in all but name'
9 of her adopted homeland. Then, in a dreadful volte face, the British
10 backed a coup to remove Paul as Regent and dispatch him and Olga
11 (vilified in the British Parliament as 'a dangerous Royal Enemy') into
12 exile to Kenya as 'political prisoners'. Such happenings caused one
13 relative to rightly reflect that the Princess was actually 'part of history' as
14 opposed to a mere observer of it.

15 Nevertheless, despite the many challenges that life was to throw at
16 Olga including, in later years, the untimely death of a son, her strength of
17 character and deep religious beliefs helped to sustain her.
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Chapter 1 Setting the Scene

Her Royal Highness Princess Olga of Greece and Denmark was born at the Greek royal family's charming country residence, Tatoi at 10.45 am on 11 June 1903. However, the new-born Princess' heritage was anything but Greek: Olga's mother Grand Duchess Elena Vladimirovna, maternal grandfather Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich and paternal grandmother Queen Olga of the Hellenes were Russian and direct descendants of Tsar Nicholas I. Her paternal grandfather King George I of the Hellenes was born in Denmark, the third child of the country's monarch, King Christian IX (often referred to as the "father-in-law of Europe", as many of his children married the heirs of other European royal dynasties). Meanwhile, Olga's maternal grandmother, Grand Duchess Vladimir was born Duchess Marie of Mecklenburg-Schwerin in Ludwigslust, Northern Germany. Indeed, of all her antecedents, only her father Nicholas (born in Athens in 1872, the third son of King George I) and his siblings (except the youngest child Christopher) were actually born in Greece. So how did it come to pass that a minor Danish prince from the ancient Royal House of Oldenburg came to sit on the Hellenic throne?

The story begins in 1821, as Greece fought a valiant War of Independence to end nearly four-hundred years of Turkish Ottoman rule. During their (ultimately successful) eleven-year struggle, the rebels received assistance from Russia, Great Britain and France who, under the Convention of London of 1832, finally recognised Greece as an independent country under their protection. The "Great Powers" favoured a monarchical state. However, since the last Greek sovereign, Emperor Constantine XI, had been killed in the fifteenth century, they settled on a suitable foreign import, Prince Otto Friedrich Ludwig, the 17-year-old second son of King Ludwig I of Bavaria. Sadly, the new King of Greece lacked sound political judgment and this led to regular confrontations with the military. To compound matters, Otto's consort, Queen Amalia, was unable to provide him with a royal heir. Eventually, in 1862, this increasingly unpopular sovereign was overthrown in a military coup and he returned to his native Bavaria, where he died in 1867 at the age of 52.

So once again the Great Powers were faced with the troublesome task of finding a new Greek sovereign. Attention eventually fell on an

1 eighteenth-year-old Danish naval cadet, Prince Christian Wilhelm, the
 2 second son of Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-
 3 Glucksburg. ‘Willi’ was in many ways an ideal candidate: Although his
 4 father was heir to the Danish throne, the family lived simply in a grace-
 5 and-favour burgher’s house, the Yellow Palace, on Copenhagen’s
 6 Amaliegade. Consequently, the young prince remained relatively unspoilt
 7 and, as one of a large family of six, was at ease both with himself and
 8 with others. Willi was particularly close to his sisters Alexandra (‘Alix’)
 9 and Dagmar (‘Minny’) and the trio formed ‘a still more closely-knit inner
 10 circle’¹ within this loving family.

11 Indeed, it was during a visit to London to visit his older sister
 12 Alexandra (who had recently married the heir to British throne, Edward,
 13 the Prince of Wales) that the British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston and
 14 Foreign Secretary Lord John Russell arranged a meeting with Willi at
 15 Marlborough House (the Wales’ London residence) to ask him if he
 16 would consider becoming the King of Greece. In addition, the British
 17 Foreign Office made overtures to the Danish King (Frederick VII), who
 18 encouraged his young kinsman to accept the offer. A parliamentary
 19 deputation was then sent from Athens to Copenhagen to formally ask
 20 the Prince to accept the Greek crown.

21 Following the ratification of the appointment by the Greek
 22 parliament, on 30 March 1863, Willi was proclaimed King George I of
 23 the Hellenes (as the previous incumbent, Otto, had never formally
 24 abdicated as King of Greece). His accession was bolstered by the
 25 welcome news that the British government had decided to cede
 26 the Ionian Islands, which were currently a British protectorate under the
 27 terms of Treaty of Paris of 1815, to Greece.

28 The fledgling monarch arrived in Athens in October, a month prior
 29 to his father Christian ascending the Danish throne as King Christian IX.
 30 King George’s adopted homeland was a complete contrast to his
 31 birthplace: Greece was barren, sparsely populated (with barely more
 32 than a million people), had a low literacy rate, as well as the poorest
 33 economy in Europe.² Furthermore, the new King’s Athenian home, the
 34 Royal Palace, had been designed for pomp rather than practical living
 35 and was either boiling hot in summer or bitterly cold in winter. Wind
 36 (often mixed with dust) continually whistled down the long, draughty
 37 corridors while the unsatisfactory sanitary arrangements (there was only
 38 one bathroom) did little to alleviate the numerous pungent odours which
 39 permeated the interior.³

40 Nevertheless, George was determined to make a success of his new
 41 and demanding position. Aided by what the British Minister, Sir Thomas
 42 Rumbold, referred to as ‘[a] considerable firmness of character and
 43 personal courage’,⁴ the young King rose early to deal with his

correspondence and initially focused on learning the Greek language (so
 as to better establish contact with the ordinary people). As George's
 knowledge of his adopted homeland increased, this shrewd and
 democratic ruler championed the writing of a new constitution in
 1864; this would limit his powers to those of a constitutional monarch.
 George then dispensed with the services of his Danish advisors, for as he
 would subsequently emphasise to his sons, 'You must never forget that
 you are foreigners in this country, *but you must make them [the people]
 forget it*'.⁵

Having dealt with these matters, the King realised that to truly
 establish his new dynasty he must find a suitable queen. His gaze soon
 fell upon the youthful Grand Duchess Olga Constantinovna, a daughter
 of the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolayevich (the second son of Tsar
 Nicholas I) and his wife Grand Duchess Alexandra Iosifovna. Given that
 Olga's father was one of the richest men in Russia (he was variously a
 'Great Admiral' in the Imperial Russian Navy and a Viceroy of Poland),
 this Romanov Grand Duchess was accustomed to the finest things in
 life: In St Petersburg, she and her family lived in the lavishly appointed
 Marble Palace; they also owned a vast country estate at Pavlovsk.
 However, it was not Olga's impressive lineage or wealth which beguiled
 George, but rather the sixteen-year-old's sweet nature and youthful
 beauty. The couple were married amid imperial splendour, in October
 1867, at St Petersburg's Winter Palace.

When she later disembarked at Piraeus (the harbour near Athens),
 Queen Olga immediately secured a place in the hearts of the Greek people
 by wearing a dress in the national colours of blue and white. Nevertheless,
 unbeknown to the general populace, this shy young bride suffered from
 homesickness and often resorted to playing with her Russian dolls to lift
 her spirits. Yet, Olga also possessed a deep sense of duty and soon
 embraced her much simpler life in Greece: She mastered the language in
 less than a year and rapidly became acquainted with her public role,
 founding the Evangelismos Hospital in Athens and an industrial school
 where girls were taught weaving, lace-making and embroidery.

However, for King George, his wife's greatest achievement was
 providing him with heirs to secure the future of the Hellenic dynasty: In
 August 1868, she gave birth to a son Constantine ('Tino') followed at
 regular intervals over the next twenty years by another seven children
 (George, Alexandra, Nicholas, Marie, Olga [who died in infancy],
 Andrew and Christopher). The children were all raised in a relaxed
 atmosphere akin to that enjoyed by their father in Copenhagen.
 Consequently, the siblings were rather spirited and regularly upset the
 palace servants by roller skating through the hallowed State Rooms,
 often led by the King himself.

1 In 1871, King George decided to build a country retreat and
 2 purchased a 40000-acre plot of land, 35 kilometres north of Athens, at
 3 the foot of Mount Parnes. There, he supervised the building of a large
 4 house overlooking Phaleron Bay. This residence, known as Tatoï, was
 5 said to be an exact replica of a Victorian-style mansion which stood in
 6 the grounds of Queen Olga's childhood home at Pavlovsk.⁶ A visitor
 7 summed up the estate's attraction thus: 'From the balcony [of the main
 8 house] one drinks in the pure, light mountain air, perfumed with the firs
 9 that grow thickly below'.⁷ Predictably, Tatoï would come to be regarded
 10 by the royal family as their real home and future generations-including
 11 Princess Olga-would develop a very deep and enduring love for the
 12 place.

13 A welcome diversion from life in Greece could be found in the
 14 King's homeland of Denmark. Each year, Nicholas' father took his ever-
 15 growing family to stay with his parents King Christian IX ('Apapa') and
 16 Queen Louise ('Amama') at one of their country homes, the relatively
 17 modest Bernstorff or the more imposing Fredensborg Palace. The Greek
 18 contingent were invariably joined by King George's sisters Alexandra
 19 ('Aunt Alix'), Dagmar ('Aunt Minny', the wife of Tsar Alexander III of
 20 Russia) and Thyra ('Aunt Thyra', who was married to Ernest Augustus
 21 of Hanover) and their respective families. Olga's father Prince Nicholas
 22 was therefore accustomed, from a young age, to mixing happily with his
 23 many cousins including Aunt Alix's son George (later King George V of
 24 Great Britain) and his younger sister Victoria, as well as Aunt Minny's
 25 son Nicholas (from 1894 Tsar Nicholas II of Russia). This "royal mob"
 26 of Danish Glucksburg descendants happened to share an enduring
 27 passion for practical jokes and frivolity. Indeed, one guest, the Dowager
 28 Empress Frederick, complained to her mother Queen Victoria that 'The
 29 noise they all made and the wild romps they had were simply
 30 indescribable.'⁸ Prince Nicholas also developed a deep appreciation of
 31 this ancient Nordic Kingdom's history, customs and culture which he
 32 subsequently described as 'delightful [and] the height of civilisation'.⁹
 33 This is the view he would later pass on to his eldest daughter Olga, who
 34 came to regard it as the 'land of my ancestors...'.¹⁰

35 As the third son, with no expectations of inheriting the throne,
 36 Nicholas had an easier life than his eldest brother Crown Prince
 37 Constantine. However, King George was determined to impose a sense of
 38 duty and responsibility in all his sons. Keeping to his belief that his
 39 family must be identified as Greek, he insisted that the young princes
 40 complete their education in Greece. Nevertheless, Nicholas' upbringing
 41 seems to have served him well, for he would go on to become a talented
 42 all-rounder who could ride, paint, fish, play bridge, golf and sail. On an
 43 intellectual level, he enjoyed serious reading and, with a developing

interest in the theatre, would subsequently write many plays. 1
 Furthermore, Nicholas' wonderful sense of humour was accentuated by 2
 'a devastating aptitude for wickedly accurate mimicry.'¹¹ Meanwhile, 3
 strong moral and religious values were instilled in him by his pious 4
 mother, Queen Olga. 5

In 1897, the King had his first taste of the fickle nature of both 6
 Greek politics and the Greek people following the outbreak of the 7
 Greco-Turkish War. This conflict had its origins in a struggle over 8
 the future status of the Ottoman-controlled island of Crete, where the 9
 Christian majority had recently staged rebellions against their Muslim 10
 Ottoman rulers and now desired a union with Greece. As the two sides 11
 fought to consolidate their grip on power, the King and his government 12
 in Athens vacillated and were subsequently accused by the popular 13
 National Society (which favoured Greek military intervention against the 14
 Turks), of a betrayal of the Christian cause in Crete. Eventually the war 15
 spread to the mainland and Greek forces, under the command of Crown 16
 Prince Constantine, were sent to fight the Turks. However, the Hellenic 17
 forces were greatly outnumbered by Ottoman forces and were eventually 18
 defeated at Domokos. A humiliating peace treaty, brokered by the Great 19
 Powers, required Greece to pay an indemnity of £4 million to the Turks, 20
 in addition to ceding certain border areas of Thessaly. 21

Although it had been the Greek populace who had campaigned for 22
 this war against the Turks, they now rounded on their King and held him 23
 solely responsible for entering into the conflict. Furthermore, his son 24
 Constantine was denounced as an incompetent military leader.¹² 25
 However, amidst the ups and downs that would come to typify the 26
 rollercoaster fortunes of the Hellenic royal house, an event then occurred 27
 which would dramatically reverse public opinion: In February 1898, the 28
 King was returning by carriage from an afternoon outing to Phaleron 29
 Bay, accompanied by his daughter Marie, when their carriage was 30
 ambushed by two men who tried to assassinate the occupants. Although 31
 the assailants failed in their task, this attempt on their sovereign's life 32
 infuriated the majority of Greeks. During a subsequent spring tour of the 33
 provinces, King George was overwhelmed by the outpouring of sympathy 34
 and love from his subjects.¹³ 35

As Prince Nicholas matured, he began to make regular visits to his 36
 Aunt Alix and her husband the Prince of Wales ('Uncle Bertie') in 37
 England. He particularly enjoyed his forays to the Wales' Norfolk 38
 retreat, Sandringham House, where the lavish house parties provided 39
 countless opportunities for shooting, fishing and fun (During one stay, an 40
 enthusiastic Nicholas was observed encouraging his Aunt Alix to ride her 41
 new tricycle down the 'Big House's' long indoor corridors).¹⁴ When, in 42
 January 1901, Uncle Bertie ascended the British throne as King Edward 43

1 VII, Nicholas' beloved Aunt Alix (now Queen Consort) welcomed the
2 Prince (and subsequently his family) with open arms to Buckingham
3 Palace.

4 For all these strong Danish and British influences, it was in his
5 mother's Russian homeland that Nicholas would find a bride. Following
6 his first visit, in 1880, the Prince made frequent trips to his maternal
7 grandmother, Grand Duchess Alexandra Iosifovna at Pavlovsk, as well
8 as to his sisters, Alexandra and Marie, who had both married into the
9 Russian Imperial family. He was also, of course, welcome at the homes
10 of his Aunt Minny (Tsarina Marie Feodorovna, as Dagmar was then
11 titled) and her husband Tsar Alexander III. It was through these Imperial
12 connections, that Nicholas first made the acquaintance of Grand Duchess
13 Elena Vladimirovna, the youngest child (and only daughter) of the
14 influential Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich. The latter was the
15 senior Russian Grand Duke at the Imperial Court and derived great
16 power and prestige from his dual roles as Commander of the Imperial
17 Guard Corps and Military Governor of St Petersburg.

18 Elena's mother Grand Duchess Vladimir (also known in family
19 circles as 'Miechen' or Maria Pavlovna [the Elder]) was equally
20 influential and 'certainly the most brilliant of the women in the Imperial
21 Family.'¹⁵ This eldest daughter of Friedrich Franz II, Grand Duke of
22 Mecklenburg-Schwerin (by his first marriage to Princess Augusta of
23 Reuss), first encountered Grand Duke Vladimir when he was on a visit
24 to Germany in June 1871. The couple were immediately attracted to
25 each other and the ruthless Duchess Marie quickly called off her
26 engagement to Prince Georg of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt. Nevertheless,
27 her marriage to Vladimir was delayed for nearly two years, due to the
28 Lutheran Duchess' obstinate refusal to convert to the Russian Orthodox
29 faith. Fortunately, Tsar Alexander II eventually consented to the union
30 and the couple married in August 1874.¹⁶ This stance was an early
31 indication that Grand Duchess Vladimir knew her own mind, even at
32 the expense of ruffling some powerful imperial feathers. Thereafter,
33 Maria Pavlovna focused on becoming the driving force of St Petersburg
34 society. Her Salon in the Vladimir Palace, a magnificent granite brick
35 and stucco building, designed in the style of a Florentine palazzo,
36 overlooking the fashionable Dvortsovaya Embankment and the River
37 Neva, regularly attracted those of all nationalities with impeccable
38 social and political connections. She tended to favour those who could
39 amuse over the traditional Russian aristocracy. Furthermore, the Grand
40 Duchess ensured that her guests were treated to the very best: She
41 insisted on serving only the finest wines and black caviar, while her
42 confectionary was the finest Abrikosov and Sons (who specialised in
43 making glacial fruits and chocolate soldiers) could supply. Given that

other members of the Imperial family (particularly the new Tsar Nicholas II's consort, Alexandra, who habitually displayed a 'blushing shyness'¹⁷) preferred not to entertain those from outside their immediate circle, this strategy was to prove most effective in underpinning Miechen's social and political standing.¹⁸

Given her elevated circumstances (and not forgetting that she was already the apple of her father's eye), Elena ('Helen' or 'Ellen') led a charmed life at the heart of the Imperial court, overseen by her English governesses Miss Millicent Crofts (and later a Mrs Saville). Although devoted to her three older brothers the Grand Dukes Kirill, Boris and Andrei ("the Vladimirovitchi"), she was quite able to hold her own during their spirited recreational activities. Prince Nicholas' Aunt, the (by now) Dowager Tsarina Marie Feodorovna thought Elena 'really quite sweet, but vain and pretty grandiose.'¹⁹ Indeed, she would eventually earn the title of 'La Belle Hélène'²⁰ as she dined and danced the night away at the fashionable Restaurant Cuba.

This youthful Grand Duchess could also be tempestuous and passionate; her numerous love affairs were well-documented by the international press and included Prince Louis Napoleon. She was betrothed, in October 1898, to Prince Max of Baden. However, the engagement was broken off within the year. Unfortunately, poor Max was of a highly nervous disposition and according to one report '[Elena's] action in jilting him... affected his reason and necessitated his committal to the celebrated Austrian retreat for the insane [at Purkersdorff]'.²¹ Such media attention left Elena bereft and vulnerable, while Grand Duchess Vladimir grew increasingly exasperated as polite society speculated over her daughter's inability to settle down with a suitable suitor.

In August 1900, Prince Nicholas made another of his regular visits to St Petersburg. His maternal uncle, Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich mentions approvingly in his diary that, 'Nicky went for a long ride with Elena, whom he likes, as she does him, but Maria Pavlovna rebuked her daughter for this, and told Georgie [the King of Greece] that Nicky could not expect to marry Elena, being neither a future King, nor having any fortune. She and Nicky, however, go together perfectly'.²² However, Elena's name also continued to be linked with numerous potential suitors including Prince Albert of Schleswig-Holstein (a grandson of Queen Victoria). There was also a most unsuitable romance with a Count Lyoff Loubetskoi. To cap it all, in the spring of 1902 (and now described as the 'greatest Royal flirt in Europe'²³) Elena eloped with an impecunious student from St Petersburg. The couple managed to reach Warsaw before they were discovered. The spirited Grand Duchess was swiftly escorted back to St Petersburg to face the wrath of her parents.²⁴

1 Meanwhile, Nicholas bided his time and the elopement incident
2 actually worked in his favour, as it forced Maria Pavlovna to adopt a
3 more realistic outlook in her quest for a suitor for her daughter.
4 Fortuitously, in May, the young Prince and the Grand Duke Vladimir
5 were in Madrid to attend the celebrations marking King Alfonso XIII's
6 16th birthday. This provided the duo with an ideal opportunity to discuss
7 a possible marriage.²⁵ Elena and Nicholas' engagement was finally
8 announced on 13 June. The young couple were married, on 29 August,
9 in the lavishly gilded church attached to the Imperial family's country
10 residence, the Catherine Palace, at Tsarskoe Selo. Elena looked
11 particularly stunning in the traditional Russian Court dress of silver
12 cloth embossed with lilies and roses, over which she wore the heavy
13 ermine-trimmed ruby robe of an Imperial Grand Duchess. This attire
14 was offset by the splendid Romanov Nuptial Crown.

15 After honeymooning in Ropcha and Denmark, the bride and groom
16 visited the Tsar at his seaside summer palace at Livadia, in the Crimea, to
17 thank him for his wedding gift of a new home in Athens. They then
18 proceeded to Greece aboard King George's yacht and, on their arrival at
19 Piraeus, Ellen (as she was now invariably referred to) emulated Queen
20 Olga by making her first appearance in her adopted homeland dressed in
21 the Greek national colours. However, the reality of life in Greece must
22 have been a shock to Princess Nicholas (as she was now titled, although
23 her husband would always refer to her as 'the Grand Duchess'): Athens
24 was decidedly 'provincial'²⁶ when compared to the splendours of St
25 Petersburg and had no aristocracy to speak of, unless you counted the
26 wives of tobacco merchants. In addition, until the newlyweds' new
27 residence was completed (this would take several years), the couple had
28 to make do with a suite of rooms in the Royal Palace. However, Princess
29 Nicholas was not the first royal bride of her generation to arrive in
30 Athens: That privilege had fallen, thirteen years earlier, to Kaiser Wilhelm
31 II's daughter, Princess Sophie of Prussia, following her marriage to
32 Crown Prince Constantine. Like Ellen, this spirited and practical princess
33 had been raised in much grander circumstances, amidst the splendour of
34 Berlin's Kronprinzenpalais. She mainly concerned herself with charitable
35 initiatives involving children and the destitute. Constantine and Sophie
36 currently had four children (George, Alexander, Helen and Paul)¹-the
37 eldest of King George's grandchildren. They were ably watched over by a
38 Scotch Norland nurse, Catherine 'Gertie' Salmond.
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42 ¹ Sophie would subsequently give birth to two other children (Irene, born in 1904,
43 and Catherine in 1913).

SETTING THE SCENE

Fortunately, the redoubtable Princess Nicholas embraced life in her adopted land with a refreshing enthusiasm and quickly became fluent in Greek. However, those who fell under her charm soon learned that it was foolish to misinterpret her good manners for familiarity as this ‘austere, beautiful and commanding’²⁷ Romanov Grand Duchess’ eyes could quickly turn ice cold with Imperial anger if someone overstepped the mark. Indeed, Ellen’s standards and expectations would forever remain those of Imperial Russia and were backed, in a practical sense, by a considerable dowry of \$500,000 as well as an annual allowance from the Apanages, a fund set up by Tsar Paul I for the benefit of the Imperial family.²⁸

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Chapter 2 A ‘Clannish Intimacy’

When it was discovered, in the autumn of 1902, that Princess Nicholas was with child, there was a great rush of activity as Ellen set about organising the acquisition of her future child’s layette from a well-known London “Juvenile Outfitter”, M. E. Penson. The purchases, made over a six-month period, came to a staggering £188 13s 1d.¹ Further items were also bought in Paris by the Grand Duchess Vladimir who had already decided she would travel to Greece to be present at the birth of her beloved daughter’s first child. The King and Queen Olga offered her hospitality at Tatoi, which must have seemed like a country shooting box when compared to the grandeur of her Russian residences.

From the moment that Olga was born on that June morning, Maria Pavlovna was to take an almost proprietorial interest in her eldest Greek granddaughter’s upbringing. This would later prove bothersome. Meanwhile, in keeping with the established custom, the infant was suckled by a peasant foster mother and later weaned on to cow’s milk from the farm at Tatoi.² However, within months, Princess Nicholas discovered that she was again expecting. Troublingly, there were also ongoing concerns over little Olga’s physical wellbeing. The child’s anxious mother duly contacted Miss Isabel Sharman, the Principal of London’s prestigious Norland Institute, who engaged a Miss Kate Fox to come out to Greece on a temporary basis to oversee Olga’s care.³ The latter would later tell this devoted nurse that, ‘had it not been for your fateful arrival in Tatoi, my life might have been considerably shortened!’⁴ Unsurprisingly, this Middlesex-born spinster soon became an indispensable fixture of household life and, apart from a period from 1913 to 1920, Kate would never leave the bosom of the Nicholas family. Thus, by the time Ellen gave birth to her second daughter, Elisabeth, on 24 May 1904, Miss Fox (‘Nurnie’ to her charges; ‘Foxye’ to the adults) was firmly established in post. The short interlude between the birth dates of her younger sister and herself would forever amuse Olga and it later became her habit to write in her diary on Elisabeth’s birthday, ‘We are twins again for 18 days.’⁵

Following Elisabeth’s birth, the Nicholas family moved into their newly-built home, the Nicholas Palace, situated opposite the Royal Gardens on fashionable Sekeri Street. Possessing the atmosphere of an English country house, this white-washed edifice sported a long airy

1 veranda and a cooling fountain in the small front garden to combat the
 2 heat. Moreover, unlike the Royal Palace, it was equipped with every
 3 modern convenience including central heating and modern bathrooms. A
 4 visitor recalled, it was, ‘a happy home, the people in it were happy, and
 5 so were all the visitors who entered it.’⁶ This observation is unsurprising,
 6 for Prince and Princess Nicholas were devoted to their children, a fact
 7 Olga later acknowledged, ‘As I look back over those early years, I realize
 8 ...how important their influence has been in my life and what a debt of
 9 gratitude I owe them for the happiness and security of our childhood and
 10 the meaning of home.’⁷

11 Although Olga’s parents proved frequent visitors, the nurseries were
 12 very much Kate Fox’s domain: She brooked little interference from
 13 anyone, as she imposed a robust English-style discipline. But even the
 14 redoubtable Nurnie could not always have her own way: As was the
 15 habit at the Greek Court, the children were required to eat lunch at
 16 11am and dinner at 3pm. However, this did not deter Kate from
 17 complaining about the ‘foreign’ food. She was also concerned for Olga’s
 18 welfare as the toddler was proving to be a particularly slow eater.⁸
 19 Foxie’s remedy was to introduce traditional English nursery foods such
 20 as Robinson’s Patent Groats.⁹ Fortuitously, the little Princess flourished
 21 under this new regime and, by age three, had grown into a fair-haired,
 22 blue-eyed child with a rosy complexion.¹⁰

23 In the summer of 1905, Olga made her first visit to Russia with her
 24 parents and younger sister. The family broke their sea journey at
 25 Constantinople (Istanbul) to pay an official visit to the Turkish Sultan
 26 Abdul-Hamid at the Yildiz Palace. At the conclusion of this duty call, the
 27 Sultan made a “request” to see the little princesses.¹¹ Abdul-Hamid was
 28 duly impressed, embracing both children tenderly and exclaiming
 29 expansively in French ‘Ces sont des petits anges!’¹² Thereafter, the little
 30 group travelled on to Odessa to take the Imperial train north to St
 31 Petersburg.

32 Alarmingly, this excursion north was undertaken against a backdrop
 33 of great unrest in Russia. Olga’s great-uncle, Grand Duke Sergei
 34 Alexandrovich, had been assassinated in February, when a bomb was
 35 thrown at his carriage outside his home, the Nikolsky Palace. In June,
 36 the crew of the new Imperial Navy battleship *Potemkin* mutinied over
 37 the quality of the food. Meanwhile, in Odessa, workers went on strike
 38 and the ensuing disturbances would become known as the “1905
 39 Revolution”.

40 The Nicholas’ visit also happened to coincide with a time of conflict
 41 within the Imperial family. In October, Olga’s uncle, the Grand Duke
 42 Kirill married-at Tegersee-his divorced cousin Victoria Melita (the
 43 daughter of Grand Duke Vladimir’s sister, Marie Alexandrovna), who

had previously been married to the Tsarina's brother, Grand Duke Ernst of Hesse (the couple had divorced in 1901). When Kirill subsequently returned alone to St Petersburg to inform his relatives of the marriage, the Tsar's reaction was one of fury: He dispatched his Court Minister, Count Fredericks to Grand Duke Vladimir's home at Tsarskoe Selo to inform him that his eldest son must leave Russia within forty-eight hours; the Tsar also stripped Kirill of his titles and Apanage income.¹³ The next day, during a 'strong and disagreeable' audience with Olga's grandfather, Nicholas II resolutely refused to rescind his decision, so Grand Duke Vladimir resigned his position as Commander of the Imperial Guard.¹⁴ The Vladimirs, however, were convinced that the real blame lay with the Tsarina and her 'blind vindictiveness'.¹⁵

Throughout this dramatic interlude, Kate Fox and her charges initially remained at Tsarskoe Selo, while Prince and Princess Nicholas set out on an autumnal progress via Paris, for stays in London and Sandringham, before proceeding to Windsor for Christmas. Princess Nicholas was in raptures telling Miss Fox, 'England is too delightful for words. I wish I could always live here!'¹⁶ However, Kate had other things on her mind: A dangerous escalation in political turbulence in Russia had obliged Foxie to remove Olga and Elisabeth from Tsarskoe Selo to the safety of Grand Duchess Vladimir's childhood home, Schloss Schwerin, in north Germany. Princess Nicholas seemed unperturbed, merely instructing Kate to, 'Kiss and bless the little darlings from both of us...'¹⁷ However, Ellen should have been concerned for the protests would lead to the adoption of a new Russian Constitution in 1906 and the formation of a legislative assembly, the State Duma. These developments would give the ordinary people a dangerous taste for democracy which would gradually erode the absolute power of the Imperial family.

In the late spring of 1906, Princess Nicholas learned that she was expecting. She gave birth to her third child, a girl (named Marina), on 13 December. Olga remembered this event 'very vividly' and in particular, standing on 'tip-toe to peep into the cradle in our nursery at the tiny pink bundle and thinking it was a new doll'.¹⁸ However, her joy turned quickly to concern: The birth had proved exceptionally difficult (Marina was born with a slightly twisted left foot) and the Princess was informed her mother was 'very ill' and she must 'keep very quiet'.¹⁹ There were to be no more children for Ellen. In due course, a Norland probationer, Grace Gibb, was employed to assist Kate in the nursery.

As Princess Nicholas departed to take a 'treatment' at a health spa in Franzensbad, Olga adopted an almost proprietorial interest in her youngest sister and 'took charge' in her mother's absence.²⁰ It has been stated that the three sisters would become inseparable and form what has

1 been described as ‘a self-sufficient unit adoring each other and their
 2 parents with an equal enthusiasm which was never to waver’.²¹ This was
 3 not entirely accurate: Thenceforth, Olga and Elisabeth would share a
 4 bedroom, while baby Marina slept separately in the adjacent night
 5 nursery. Moreover, the two eldest sisters were more severely disciplined
 6 by their mother than the youngest child,²² behaviour which was mirrored
 7 by Kate Fox who tended to bully and boss the older girls.²³ There seems
 8 little doubt that much of this had to do with Marina’s minor disability
 9 which Ellen emphasised to Kate it was ‘important’²⁴ to hide. However,
 10 this would only have been one factor, for Princess Nicholas hated spoilt
 11 children, many of whom she encountered on her overseas visits to
 12 relatives.

13 Miss Fox was a great believer in fresh air and encouraged her ‘three
 14 beauties’²⁵ to play outdoors (even allowing them to crawl in the sun
 15 while attached by a long cord to a tree trunk until they were ‘brown as
 16 berries’²⁶). Visits to the beach at Vouliagmeni and Phaleron were also
 17 commonplace, as was Foxie’s insistence on sponging her charges down
 18 with cold sea water to ward-off the sun’s rays. This no-nonsense
 19 approach found particular favour with the egalitarian Prince Nicholas,
 20 who strove to bring up his children ‘on the simple principles of our own
 21 [childhood] home life, and to be unpretentious and full of consideration
 22 for others.’²⁷ In this he was aided by his parents (‘Amama’ and ‘Apapa’
 23 to their grandchildren) who were keen on maintaining a ‘clannish
 24 intimacy’²⁸ within their extended (and ever-growing) family. Thus, a
 25 tradition emerged whereby the whole royal family would dine each
 26 Tuesday at the Nicholas Palace and each Thursday at Crown Prince
 27 Constantine’s home nearby. Furthermore, following Sunday Mass at the
 28 Royal Palace, Olga would stroll with the rest of the family through the
 29 English-style gardens. It is therefore not surprising that, aside from her
 30 sisters, the young Princess’ closest lifelong friendships would be formed
 31 from amongst this tight-knit family circle. They included Crown Prince
 32 Constantine’s daughters Helen (‘Sitta’), Irene (‘Tim’ or ‘Tittum’) and
 33 Catherine (‘Baby’); Uncle George’s only daughter Eugenie; as well as
 34 Uncle Andrew’s children Margarita (‘Zighoi’) Theodora (‘Dolla’), Cecile
 35 and Sophie (‘Tiny’).

36 For Olga, her siblings and cousins, the time they spent together in
 37 the informal setting of Tatoi, during the warm months of late spring and
 38 summer, was truly special. From the moment they passed through the
 39 double gateposts, with its “Hansel and Gretel” gate lodge, they entered
 40 their own private playground that featured visits to the royal dairy-run
 41 by a Dane, Miss Petersen-which routinely supplied the King with milk
 42 products redolent of his homeland. The nearby home farm also proved a
 43 source of endless fascination, for each animal was given its own name

and the cattle wore cow bells and ate from white marble troughs. When these attractions palled, the children could visit “The Tower”, a tiered edifice filled with an eclectic collection of statues and marble columns unearthed during local excavations.

However, the occasion when Tatoi truly came alive was in late summer, during celebrations for Queen Olga’s birthday. A military band would arrive early from Athens to awaken the family, who would then dress in formal attire and process up the hill to attend a Te Deum service at the little church of St Elia. Later, the royals would lunch together in the garden, before welcoming local estate workers and the royal guard for a sort of “peoples’ festival” featuring a communal meal, supplemented by copious quantities of local wine. Afterwards, the guests enjoyed some spirited dancing well into the night.

As head of the Hellenic Royal House, King George was venerated by his people. For an impressionable young princess, several events held in his honour would be remembered with particular affection: On the King’s name day-23 April-the royal family would embark the royal yacht at Piraeus and sail to a different Greek port each year, to be greeted by local officials and attend a celebratory church service, followed by a reception at the local Town Hall. The King then returned this hospitality at a luncheon aboard his yacht. Again, on King George’s birthday, 24 December, the royal family and court would attend a Te Deum service in the palace Chapel and, in the evening, a grand reception was held in the State Apartments.

Princess Nicholas often despaired of the Greek court’s informality, not to mention the heritage of some of those marrying into it. She was not afraid to demonstrate this: Ellen insisted on being called Her Imperial and Royal Highness to distinguish her from her sisters-in-law, who now included Andrew’s wife Princess Alice of Battenberg and ‘Big’ George’s spouse, Princess Marie Bonaparte. They were *mere* Royal Highnesses. This distinction seems to have the desired effect for Marie Bonaparte admitted to being scared of Princess Nicholas’ ‘beauty and *her pride*.’²⁹ Additionally, given the comparatively small size of the Greek royal family, there were frequent displays of pettiness and jockeying for the King and Queen’s favour. This rivalry extended to the nursery accommodation at Tatoi, where the ultimate accolade was apparently to be awarded the use of, what Princess Nicholas described as, ‘the good nurseries with the big balcony’.³⁰ With her great wealth, Ellen was also able to ensure that her daughters shone brightly by having the best of everything. During a visit to London she boasted to Foxie of purchasing ‘a very smart dress for Olga...all real lace & of course very expensive’.³¹ Furthermore, all articles of clothing were embossed with a crown. In addition to these outward manifestations of royalty, Princess Nicholas

1 also made certain that her daughters received rigorous coaching in court
2 etiquette. This included instruction on how to correctly acknowledge the
3 presentation of arms by the Evzone sentries guarding the Nicholas
4 Palace.

5 Given Queen Olga's devoutness, it comes as no surprise that God
6 and religion played an important part in Olga's life. Ellen too had been
7 raised to respect the liturgies and dogma of the Russian Orthodox
8 Church and thoroughly approved of her mother-in-law's view that
9 services must follow the strict tenets of that Church. Throughout Holy
10 Week and Easter, Olga and her sisters would fast and attend two services
11 each day; one in public at the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Annunciation
12 and another in the Royal Palace's private chapel. On Easter Sunday, Olga
13 joined her contemporaries in the traditional breaking of eggs
14 ("tsougrisma"), which symbolised the opening of the tomb and Christ's
15 resurrection from the dead. To ensure that her granddaughter truly
16 understood the meaning behind such rites, Queen Olga arranged for
17 Olga to receive individual instruction from a Lady-in-Waiting.
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Chapter 3 The Russian Influence

As with Prince Nicholas, many of young Olga's character-forming experiences occurred during overseas stays to countries with which she had close family ties, particularly Russia. Ever since that first visit of 1905, the Princess and her sisters would accompany their parents on annual (and sometimes bi-annual) visits to their mother's homeland. These "Imperial" encounters, provided a direct contrast to the relative simplicity of the family's home life in Athens and would imbue the Nicholas' eldest daughter with a sense of dynastic awareness that would never leave her. The experience began as soon as the Nicholas family disembarked their boat in the Crimea and stepped aboard the Imperial train, with its luxurious intercommunicating saloons decorated in palest blue silk.

On reaching the Russian capital, the family were whisked by landau to the Vladimir Palace to savour the heated rooms favoured by their grandmother. The sisters were then led up the magnificent mirrored grand staircase towards the lavish top-floor nursery suite which featured a child-scale house that had once belonged to Princess Nicholas. While Olga later admitted to being frightened of Grand Duke Vladimir and his 'stentorian voice' (which could be heard 'a mile off'¹), she also recalled that the Grand Duchess ('Gammy') 'spoil us wildly and we were devoted to her.'² Certainly, Maria Pavlovna enjoyed inviting her granddaughters into her Moorish-style boudoir to play and frequently showered them with extravagant presents such as dolls, prams and jewellery. On other occasions, the sisters could not resist the temptation of sliding down the highly-polished banisters of the Palace's Grand Staircase. However, there were drawbacks: Olga recalled that 'Gammy' insisted on personally serving her granddaughter at table and 'heaped' the rich food on her plate, whilst also ensuring that she 'ate every scrap.' Inevitably, this sometimes had 'disastrous effects' on her digestion, a situation which was 'treated by the French doctor with drastic purges...'³

Olga was particularly mesmerised by her grandmother's extensive jewellery collection, which consisted of parures of diamonds, emeralds, rubies and sapphires-some as large as pigeon eggs. These were neatly arranged on blue velvet trays and placed in glass cabinets. The collection was under the care of two 'special' maids, who had charge of the keys. As a treat, on most evenings the three sisters would help their

1 grandmother to select her jewellery and they were then permitted to
 2 watch as she dressed for dinner or a ball. Adjoining her dressing room,
 3 the Grand Duchess had a large bathroom containing a deep tiled square
 4 pool. On occasion, she allowed her granddaughters to bathe there,
 5 although Olga recounts that, 'After having had more than her share of
 6 drenching, [she] would order us out!' Furthermore, 'if it was winter at
 7 the time, so we were each carried well-wrapped [back to the nursery] by
 8 two tall footmen, the nursery maid following with our night attire.'⁴

9 But always in the background were simmering tensions between the
 10 Grand Duchess Vladimir and Kate Fox, made worse by the latter's
 11 'almost autocratic arrogance'.⁵ This occasionally manifested itself in a
 12 fraught battle of wills between the two: The Grand Duchess liked the
 13 palace's interior kept at a uniform temperature and insisted the windows
 14 were kept closed to achieve this. However, Fokie firmly believed that her
 15 young charges benefited from the outside air (no matter how cold) and
 16 insisted on opening the nursery windows. When she heard of this
 17 contravention, Maria Pavlovna immediately proceeded to the nurseries
 18 to close the windows. However, to the Grand Duchess' fury Kate later
 19 reopened them. Another bone of contention was Miss Fox's belief
 20 (shared by Prince and Princess Nicholas) that the children should be
 21 spanked for any wrongdoing. This appalled their grandmother, who
 22 complained to friends, 'That dreadful woman knocks them about'.⁶

23 As in Athens, the family environment in Russia could be competitive.
 24 Princess Nicholas was certainly keen that her daughters should shine and
 25 kept a wary eye on the competition, particularly her brother Kirill's
 26 daughter, Marie. From Tsarskoe Selo, she was able to reassure Fokie that
 27 'as far as beauty goes, she [Marie] is not to be mentioned in the same
 28 breath as our babies'. Nevertheless, it was more than Ellen could bear to
 29 see 'little Marie' paraded around by her Norlander nurse Colinette, after
 30 her own daughters had returned to Athens. However, she quickly seized
 31 on the competitive advantage of having three daughters, compared to her
 32 brother's (then) one, and decided that Marina must have a dress 'like
 33 those Mama gave the two others, so now they can all be dressed alike'.⁷
 34 This attention-seeking style of couture would be imposed on the young
 35 princesses well into their teens.

36 Olga's maternal grandparents also owned a country residence, the
 37 bright and chintzy three-storey Villa Vladimir, adjacent to the Catherine
 38 Park at Tsarskoe Selo. To amuse her granddaughters, the Grand Duchess
 39 arranged for a little wooden house to be built there featuring a
 40 magnificent pink enamel Fabergé doorbell. As with Tatoi, the Catherine
 41 Park would prove to be a wonderful playground: It sported a grotto, a
 42 Great Pond (bordered by Dutch-style boathouses) and an imposing
 43 Chinese Pavilion. However, the chance to jump on the wooden planks of

the “Shaking Bridge” (which spanned the Krestovy Canal) probably trumped the other attractions. If the visit happened to take place in winter, the sisters would be transported through the park, wrapped in furs, on a heated droshky (sleigh).

At Tsarskoe, Olga and her sisters enjoyed the company of their mother’s family: Grand Duke Kirill and his family lived nearby at the comfortable Cavalier’s House, while his younger brother Boris inhabited a commodious English Tudor-style villa. However, the most prestigious neighbours were Tsar Nicholas II and his family, who lived in the nearby Alexander Palace. As Nicholas II had always remained very fond of his cousin Ellen, it was only natural that she and her family would often take tea with the Imperial family in the palace’s private wing. Olga would forever remember indulging in the wonderful selection of bon-bons accompanied by steaming glasses of tea flavoured with lemon or a spoonful of jam. The Princess became close to the Tsar’s youngest daughters Marie and Anastasia (as well as to their brother Alexei) and they would all spend many happy hours frolicking in the palace’s opulent nursery (which boasted a toy puppet theatre).

On occasion, Olga would travel separately from the rest of her family in the company of Miss Fox. After spending the Orthodox Easter of 1908 with her family in St Petersburg, she subsequently joined her Uncle Kirill and his family on a trip to a friend’s residence, Haiko Manor at Borga, in the Grand Duchy of Finland. From there, the five-year-old princess wrote a charming letter (probably one of her first) to Princess Nicholas (‘Mamma’) giving details of her exploits, which included paddling and riding in a hay cart.⁸ Given all these experiences, it is not surprising that her experiences in Russia would forever remain etched in Olga’s memory and influence her character.

Chapter 4 Turbulent Times

In a young individual's life, there is a moment when the easy acceptance of childhood is finally shattered. For Olga, such an event occurred in February 1909, with the death of her maternal grandfather, the Grand Duke Vladimir. Indeed, the Princess became so upset that she was unable to focus on her lessons.¹ Prince and Princess Nicholas left Athens immediately for St Petersburg and although they missed the funeral, they would remain in Russia until April, to offer comfort to the widowed Grand Duchess. However, Olga kept in touch with her parents through 'remarkably well written' letters which her mother thought was 'quite extraordinary for a child of her age!'²

Even as she mourned her father, Ellen arranged for Miss Fox to send on a selection of photographs of her 'chickies' in 'their lovely costumes' to St Petersburg.³ These she subsequently showed 'to everybody' and was 'particularly pleased' when her brother Boris mentioned that Olga was 'the prettiest' of all his nieces. Princess Nicholas also ensured that, in her absence, her daughters would still attract attention during the forthcoming Orthodox Easter celebrations in Athens. She issued Kate with firm instructions that they should all be attired in white and wear the crosses that their dear, departed Russian grandfather had given to them the previous Easter in Russia.⁴

Thereafter, Prince and Princess Nicholas returned to Athens to spend a long summer at Tatoi, while Kate enjoyed a holiday in England. However, Ellen was dissatisfied with the Greek food and the atmosphere proved far from carefree, for Marina often cried over nothing and the King kept a watchful eye over his family's activities from a well-placed balcony, so it was 'Goodbye to freedom'.⁵ However, more worrying, was the deteriorating political situation: In August, a section of the armed forces known as the Military (or Officers') League convened at Athens' Goudi barracks and demanded that the government undertake political reforms and relieve the royal princes of their military commissions. In response, the King dismissed Prime Minister Dimitrios Ralli and asked his sons to resign from their army posts. However, large demonstrations in favour of further change continued throughout September and Olga's grandfather now 'lived from day to day in the pleasant anticipation of being kicked out at any moment...'⁶ Unfortunately, Ralli's successor, Kyriakoulis Mavromichalis, resigned in January 1910, following a

1 disagreement with the League, thus creating a dangerous power vacuum.
 2 The King feared a civil war but was then assured that the Cretan politician
 3 Eleftherios Venizelos could break the current political deadlock. In
 4 November, the latter's Liberal Party won 300 out of 362 seats in the
 5 parliamentary elections. However, Venizelos would soon prove to be a
 6 particularly prickly thorn in the side of the Greek monarchy.

7 Fortunately, six-year-old Olga was blissfully unaware of these
 8 political machinations and spent an 'English Christmas', on 25 December,
 9 in the company of Grand Duke Vladimir's widowed sister Marie in
 10 Coburg. The three sisters then moved on to St Petersburg to celebrate
 11 the Orthodox Christmas, on 7 January 1910, with 'Gammy'. This
 12 opportunity to celebrate Christmas twice over was to prove a 'great
 13 delight'⁷ to the little princesses. In April, the children were reunited with
 14 their mother in Frankfurt. However, Ellen became so concerned about
 15 the condition of Marina's twisted foot that she arranged with a doctor in
 16 Grenoble to style her a special support.⁸ In early June, the Nicholas
 17 family proceeded to England, initially staying at Buckingham Palace. The
 18 recently-widowed Queen Alexandra remained devoted to Prince
 19 Nicholas and she was delighted to visit her nephew's daughters each
 20 evening in the palace nursery. In addition, Olga received lessons in
 21 English history from Marina's godmother, Queen Mary ('Aunt May').
 22 The family then ventured to the bracing seaside resort of Bognor. Out of
 23 kindness, Prince Nicholas invited his gossip-loving, spinster cousin
 24 Princess Victoria ('Auntie Toria') to join them at Field House, an
 25 establishment run by the Norland Institute. Auntie Toria was so delighted
 26 by the little princess' playtime antics, that she later asked the girls and
 27 Miss Fox to Buckingham Palace for her birthday celebrations.⁹

28 In the meantime, Ellen and Nicholas had travelled to Tsarskoe Selo,
 29 from where Princess Nicholas continued to express anxiety over Marina's
 30 foot and enquired of Foxie if 'Baby' had needed to make use of her new
 31 support.¹⁰ She was also somewhat perplexed by the behaviour of her
 32 mother: Although Maria Pavlovna had initially expressed her pleasure at
 33 receiving a 'very well written'¹¹ letter from Olga, she generally seemed
 34 disinterested in her Greek granddaughters. Ellen complained to Foxie
 35 that, 'she never asks about them, so I have made a point of always telling
 36 her the parts of y[ou]r letters which I think might amuse or interest her'.
 37 Unfortunately, Miss Fox's daily letters only served to remind the recently-
 38 widowed Grand Duchess Vladimir of the close bond that existed between
 39 her daughter and the English nurse. Sadly, Princess Nicholas totally
 40 misread the situation and thought that her mother 'seemed rather
 41 impressed' by the correspondence.¹² In fact, Maria Pavlovna was
 42 inwardly seething for, unknown to Ellen, a letter she had previously
 43 written to Kate, in April, advising her on how to behave in her mother's

presence, during the earlier spring visit to Cannes, had been delivered in error to Grand Duchess Vladimir who opened and read it.¹³ The latter was astounded to find her beloved daughter giving warnings about *her* (an Imperial Highness!) to this mere English servant of whom she had never approved.¹⁴ However, the wily Maria Pavlovna would bide her time before exacting a dreadful revenge on both her daughter and Olga's beloved Nurnie. Meanwhile, unaware of the true state of her mother's feelings, Princess Nicholas returned to chilly Bognor, in late September, to fetch her daughters and take them to Paris for an autumn stay with their beloved Gammy at the Hotel Continental. Tellingly, Miss Fox was obliged to lodge separately at another establishment nearby.¹⁵

After spending the winter in Athens, the Nicholas family were again reunited with Grand Duchess Vladimir, in May 1911, for a motor tour of Italy. As ever, Gammy indulged Olga by buying her a silver jug and basin before finally bidding the family adieu and travelling on to Contrexéville. The girls then returned to Athens under the care of Foxie, while Prince and Princess Nicholas remained in Italy. In the late summer, Olga and her sisters ventured to Bognor, but were clearly missing their absent parents and tested their Nurnie's tolerance by being 'naughty'.¹⁶ However, they were soon diverted by the arrival of an interesting visitor-their mother's former nurse, Millicent Crofts. 'Milly' came at the invitation of Miss Fox (and with Princess Nicholas' knowledge) and had a salutary tale to impart, which should have served as a warning to Kate: After being employed for ten years as a nurse to the Grand Duchess Vladimir's four children, she had suddenly been dismissed by her employer without being given a chance to say goodbye to her charges. Maria Pavlovna apparently informed Milly that she had favoured her son Boris, to the neglect of his siblings. Naturally, Foxie lost no time in writing to Ellen, in Rome, to impart this news. Princess Nicholas responded with feeling, 'How she must have suffered! I remember perfectly well when she left & how I was told that she would come back & her empty bed next to mine...'¹⁷

Miss Fox and her charges had now moved on from the autumn chill of Bognor to the equally bracing delights of Westgate-on-Sea where, in mid-November, Kate finally received word from Princess Nicholas (currently in Paris) to say that she and Grand Duchess Vladimir were en route to London for an appointment with an oculist. Foxie was asked to bring the children up to town on the 22nd for a photographic session, after which they would all return together to Paris.¹⁸ In the interim, Ellen had told her brothers all about Millicent Croft's visit and-still blissfully ignorant over the erroneously-opened letter (and her mother's growing resentment)-contrived a meeting (presumably during this visit to London) between Milly and Maria Pavlovna.¹⁹

1 However, as 1912 dawned, more pressing problems required to be
 2 addressed: Throughout the year there were increased tensions in the
 3 Balkans, as the Turks were oppressing the Christian section of the
 4 population in Thrace and Macedonia. In October, the situation
 5 deteriorated and the Balkan states of Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro
 6 joined with Greece to take joint military action to put an end to this
 7 tyranny, a stance which found great favour amongst the Greek population.
 8 As the princes' army commissions had been reinstated, Crown Prince
 9 Constantine was able to lead the Greek forces northwards to engage the
 10 Ottoman forces, ably assisted by Olga's Lieutenant-General father.
 11 Following a determined three-week campaign, Constantine entered
 12 Salonika, on 10 November, at the head of his victorious troops. He was
 13 joined there, two days later, by a joyful King George.

14 Meanwhile, just as Olga was concluding another holiday at
 15 Westgate-on-Sea, there was a problem with Marina's foot support and
 16 Kate Fox rushed her youngest charge to a private clinic at Berck-Plage in
 17 France, where her leg was encased in plaster. Princess Nicholas
 18 subsequently joined them there, although the elder sisters remained at
 19 Westgate under the watchful eye of Millicent Crofts. It is clear from
 20 Olga's contemporaneous correspondence with Miss Fox that a remedial
 21 procedure took place on Marina's foot in November.²⁰ Eventually, Olga
 22 and Elisabeth joined the others at Berck, although Princess Nicholas was
 23 already under pressure to return to Greece to attend to her wartime
 24 duties with the army medical services. As Grand Duchess Vladimir
 25 happened to be in Paris, she offered to have her granddaughters and
 26 Miss Fox to stay with her at the Hotel Continental.²¹ Naturally, the
 27 Princesses were delighted to see their Gammy who, puffed with Imperial
 28 pride, proceeded to introduce her grandchildren to her many Parisian
 29 friends. When that delight palled, the Grand Duchess would take the
 30 girls for drives in the Bois de Boulogne or to view the Princess' favourite
 31 Punch and Judy shows.

32 However, all good things come to an end and the three Princesses
 33 and their Nurnie travelled on with the Grand Duchess to Munich, never
 34 realising that they were about to be treated like pawns in a chess game,
 35 with their Grandmother acting as the ultimate arbiter. It was during this
 36 Bavarian stay that Ellen requested the children be returned to her in
 37 Athens. Maria Pavlovna now chose to act on her repressed fury and
 38 informed her daughter that, while she was happy to send Olga and
 39 Elisabeth back to Athens, Marina must remain under her charge until the
 40 troublesome foot had healed.²² The Grand Duchess had, of course,
 41 already calculated that Princess Nicholas would not want her daughters
 42 to be parted from each other or their beloved Nurnie. Maria Pavlovna
 43

also reasoned that Ellen's current responsibilities in war-torn Greece would prevent her from coming to Munich to intervene.

Thus, the little group travelled on from Munich to St Petersburg where the Grand Duchess, in her public-spirited way, held a Christmas charity bazaar in the Nobility Club, in aid of the children of Greek soldiers killed in the Balkan War. However, as 1913 dawned Maria Pavlovna and Miss Fox clashed (lancing years of pent-up frustration on both parts) after Kate had insisted on bathing Marina, despite the child having a troublesome cough.²³ Miss Fox and her youngest charge were then sent to stay at Harax, in the Crimea, with Prince Nicholas' sister Marie, while Olga and Elisabeth remained in St Petersburg, under the care of a newly-appointed French governess, Mademoiselle Perrin. When Princess Nicholas learned of these developments, she was 'absolutely dumbfounded'²⁴ and informed Kate that she would 'insist' on the Grand Duchess sending 'the big ones' to the Crimea from where 'it will be easier to get you [all] away'.²⁵ Ellen also described as 'almost ridiculous' Maria Pavlovna's latest accusation that Foxie had been 'mistreating' her charges and added mockingly, 'It is only now, mind you that the children are being properly looked after and cared for-you and I have never done anything for them and if baby had been left to us, she would have become a cripple.'²⁶ Yet, it was the three sisters who were suffering most in this drama and Olga would later remember that she and Elisabeth felt 'abandoned to our fate. I did suffer a lot at that time'.²⁷ The Grand Duchess-clearly with Kate Fox's dismissal from service in mind-also informed Princess Nicholas that 'They [her granddaughters] are old enough to be without a real nurse under the care of their mother who nursed the poor soldiers and will have learnt to take care of her own children'.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, Ellen was by now 'feeling as if my head was going to burst with all these worries'.²⁹

Despite the angst and upheaval around her, Olga wrote a charming letter to her grandfather in Salonika, where her parents were also now based, as Prince Nicholas had been appointed Military Governor. The King touchingly told his daughter-in-law that he been 'delighted' to receive this and had stayed up until 1a.m. to compose a reply.³⁰ Meanwhile, following a futile telegraphic appeal to her mother, Ellen concluded that it was now 'hopeless' to attempt to reunite her older daughters with Marina and Miss Fox in the Crimea. Instead, she proposed an 'option' whereby Prince Nicholas would request that 'the big ones' go to him in Salonika.³¹ Further negotiations must have followed, for by 17 March, Princess Nicholas was setting out for Vienna to collect Olga and Elisabeth. However, these plans were soon to be thwarted by a most dreadful occurrence.

1 In the late afternoon of 18 March, Prince Nicholas was sitting in the
 2 garden of his residence in Salonika, after entertaining his father to lunch,
 3 when a soldier ran in shouting, ‘They have struck the King’.³² It
 4 transpired that King George had been shot at close range from behind, as
 5 he strolled along the pavement and the bullet had pierced his heart. He
 6 was immediately rushed to a nearby military hospital, where his son
 7 arrived to find him lying lifeless on a bed in a private room. The new
 8 King, Constantine, was at army headquarters in Janina when he received
 9 a telegram from Nicholas informing him of their father’s death. He
 10 immediately returned to Athens to take the oath of allegiance to the
 11 Constitution and then progressed to Salonika in the royal yacht to bring
 12 back the late king’s body for burial. It seems especially cruel that King
 13 George should be denied his Golden Jubilee at the hands of a cowardly
 14 assassin.

15 Princess Nicholas (en route to Vienna) received the devastating news
 16 at Belgrade and immediately returned to Athens. The news also reached
 17 St Petersburg before Olga and Elisabeth had departed, so it was left to an
 18 ‘upset and embarrassed’ Grand Duchess Vladimir to break the dreadful
 19 news to her granddaughters and make arrangements for their speedy
 20 departure southwards under the care of Mademoiselle Perrin. Olga had
 21 ‘adored’ her grandfather and found ‘the sorrow of this loss was
 22 unbearable’.³³

23 After an emotional reunion with their parents in Salonika, Olga and
 24 Elisabeth returned to Athens for the funeral at Tatoi on 2 April. Despite
 25 this tragedy, Grand Duchess Vladimir remained focused on Marina’s
 26 health and arranged for her aide, Baron von Offenbergh, to accompany
 27 her little granddaughter and Miss Fox from Harax to the Institut
 28 Orthopédique at Berck-Plage, for further surgery on the troublesome
 29 foot. This was undertaken by the eminent orthopaedic surgeon Dr Calot
 30 and Maria Pavlovna was presumably paying the bill. The Grand Duchess
 31 decided that the time was now ripe to be rid of Miss Fox permanently
 32 and she threatened to intercede with the Tsar to cut off Princess Nicholas’
 33 Apanage income, unless the nurse was dismissed for inefficiency.³⁴
 34 Emotional blackmail was also deployed, for Ellen informed Kate that
 35 ‘The Gd Dchess wants me absolutely to send you away, if not, it means
 36 that I love you more than her and things will never be the same again
 37 between her & me.’ A somewhat cowed Princess Nicholas then made a
 38 painful plea, ‘Think it all over, put yourself in my position and try to help
 39 me through this hard moment...’³⁵ Unsurprisingly, Foxie seemed slow to
 40 react and this caused Ellen to write again and instruct the nurse to take ‘a
 41 thorough, good long rest’ after ‘Baby’s care in Berck is over’. In the
 42 meantime, she would try and find a temporary nurse.³⁶ The implication
 43 was that Kate’s departure was to be short-term, although whether the

doughty Norlander would have believed this, after recent events, is highly debatable.

In Athens, the Orthodox Easter was approaching and Mrs Caralou (a friend of Queen Olga's) had been charged with giving Olga further religious instruction, prior to her taking Holy Communion on Great Holy Thursday. The priest who took her Confession beforehand, informed her mother, 'that she was such an interesting, serious and dear child!' Tellingly, an increasingly distressed Olga and Elisabeth continued to pray every morning for 'dear Nurnie and Baby and please Jesus bring them back here very quickly.'³⁷ However, Dr Calot now dropped a bombshell: Marina might have to remain at Berck-Plage for up to a year to recuperate. In the meantime, an increasingly impatient Grand Duchess Vladimir had tired of waiting for her daughter to dismiss Kate and, without Ellen's knowledge, had already interviewed and appointed a replacement nurse, a Yorkshire-born Norlander, Margaret Alison. Princess Nicholas only learned of the change when she received an anguished letter from a distraught Kate Fox detailing how she was forced to hand over her beloved Marina into the care of her successor at Berck-Plage.³⁸

Ellen later informed Miss Fox that her mother would pay her a pension of £75 for the first year and £50 per annum thereafter³⁹ but this was given on condition that Kate did not have any contact with her former charges!⁴⁰ The children, meanwhile, were told that their beloved Nurnie, whom they last seen in January, was 'going home for a holiday.' However, Olga remained unsettled and displayed such 'grumpy' tendencies that her mother 'gave her a good talking to.'⁴¹ Nevertheless, the child continued to pester her mother about when Miss Fox was due to return.⁴² Furthermore, when Princess Nicholas later had to rush off to Berck-Plage to meet the new nurse, her departure seemed to trigger even deeper feelings of insecurity in Olga, for Prince Christopher informed Ellen that her eldest had 'cried bitterly'⁴³ all the way home after bidding her mother farewell at the station. Such an emotional outpouring is hardly surprising, given that over the past year the child had endured such a long sequence of traumatic experiences. Indeed, she might well have been wondering if she might never see her mother again.

However, regardless of all that had gone before with Foxie, one fact was indisputable: The time had come for the Olga and Elisabeth to have a more settled, organised and robust education. This was now overseen by Mademoiselle Perrin, with additional help from another (Greek) tutor, Kyria Anna. An additional female teacher was also hired to teach Maria Pavlovna's granddaughters her native German tongue, while a Swedish gymnast supervised Elisabeth and Olga's physical education classes. Mademoiselle would eventually be replaced by a Monsieur

1 Rousset, an emotional Frenchman with a deep and abiding love of
 2 French literature.⁴⁴ As enlightened parents, Prince and Princess Nicholas
 3 also insisted on external cultural activities including visits to museums,
 4 art galleries and local archaeological sites.

5 Meanwhile, the new King's reign inevitably brought changes to
 6 family dynamics: Ellen now complained to Foxie that Tatoi was so
 7 'crammed and full'⁴⁵ that she was actively seeking an alternative country
 8 refuge. Fortunately, by mid-July, the Nicholas' had discovered a bright,
 9 airy retreat at Kifissia, although poor Olga was laid low by the
 10 combination of a summer fever and a severe reaction to a cholera
 11 vaccination. Moreover, she and Elisabeth continued to fret for their
 12 Nurnie and implored their mother to tell Kate that they, 'Kiss her with all
 13 our heart.'⁴⁶

14 Back in the harsh world of European politics, relations between
 15 Greece and Bulgaria continued to deteriorate. Greece's northern
 16 neighbour was convinced that it had a justifiable claim on Salonika and,
 17 eschewing diplomatic niceties, suddenly launched an attack on the Greek
 18 forces in that city in late June. The Greeks retaliated and defeated the
 19 Bulgarians with the aid of Serbia and Romania. The Treaty of Bucharest,
 20 signed in August, almost doubled Greece's land area and population.
 21 Following such a decisive victory, King Constantine (who had again led
 22 his army in battle) was now eulogised as the "Son of the Eagle". The
 23 onset of peace meant that Prince Nicholas's post as Military Governor at
 24 Salonika was superfluous. He now turned to pursuits of a more aesthetic
 25 nature, such as organising the opening of a Byzantine Museum which
 26 would display a mixture of classical and modern art. A keen amateur
 27 artist himself, the Prince subsequently taught all of his children to draw
 28 and paint.

29 However, for Olga, there was further anguish to endure: At the end
 30 of September, Princess Nicholas finally informed her and Elisabeth that
 31 their Nurnie was not returning. Although Ellen 'consoled' them, she
 32 admitted to Miss Fox that 'it was dreadful to see their grief poor
 33 darlings!' Indeed, Olga had gone about 'with a sad little face ever
 34 since.'⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the sisters were delighted to be reunited with
 35 Marina (now wearing what was referred to as an 'apparatus') at Berck-
 36 Plage, in mid-October.⁴⁸ Touchingly, on her return to Athens, Olga
 37 received a recent photograph of her Nurnie which she carefully placed
 38 on her bedside table.⁴⁹

39 As 1914 dawned in wintry Athens, the sisters entertained nineteen
 40 of their cousins and friends at a New Year's Day tea party in the Nicholas
 41 Palace's dining room.⁵⁰ 'The Big Ones' (as Ellen often now described her
 42 eldest daughters) commenced riding lessons on a pony which belonged to
 43 their cousins Paul and Irene, although a fearful Olga hated this pursuit

(as much as Elisabeth adored it). However, she was ‘crazy’⁵¹ about babies 1
 and loved to pick them up and carry them around. In the summer, the 2
 family again escaped the heat of Athens at their villa in Kifissia, where 3
 the princesses had a large selection of pets, including a Persian cat 4
 (imaginatively called ‘Pussy’) and a stray mongrel dog named ‘Kiffy’. 5
 Despite Foxie’s absence, the sisters still lived by a set routine: They rose 6
 at 7am for baths and then played in the garden till breakfast and once 7
 again until lunch, after which they rested. Following tea, they ventured 8
 outdoors till bedtime and another bath! On Olga’s 11th birthday, she 9
 received the gift of a diamond wristwatch which had originally belonged 10
 to her maternal great-great grandmother. This keepsake must have 11
 whetted the Princess’ appetite for family history, as she subsequently 12
 asked Ellen to obtain a copy of Captain Walter Christmas’ recently- 13
 published book “The Life of King George of Greece”.⁵² 14
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Chapter 5 War and Revolution

It seems fair to assume that none of the royal families in Europe realised the full implications of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, at the hands of a Bosnian Serb, Gabriel Princip, in Sarajevo on June 28. Tsar Nicholas continued to cruise aboard his yacht *Standart* along the coast of Finland, while the Kaiser set off aboard his yacht *Hohenzollern* for his annual cruise around the coast of Norway. So it was that, on 18 July, Olga and her family commenced a 1500-mile journey to St Petersburg for their customary Russian holiday. They continued to travel onwards to Sebastopol by boat despite Prince Nicholas receiving a warning in Constantinople that there was serious tension in the Balkans.¹ Indeed, by the time the family reached Tsarskoe Selo on 30 July, Austria had declared war on Serbia and St Petersburg grew tense as the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Sazonov, convinced the Tsar to order a general mobilisation of Russian forces. However, eleven-year-old Olga was more concerned with visiting her four ‘cousins’ Olga, Tatiana, Marie and Anastasia at the Alexander Palace and was intrigued to learn they slept in pairs.²

On 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia and the Princess’ parents were anxious to return to Athens, although they were delayed for several weeks awaiting the issue of a travel permit.³ In the interim, Great Britain had declared war on Germany. As the streets of St Petersburg trembled to the cadence of men bound for the front marching down the Nevsky Prospect, Olga noticed the worried expressions on her parents’ faces and the ‘endless discussions and arguments as to the safest way to travel back to Greece.’⁴ The family eventually set out for home at the end of August, travelling via Moscow (where they made time to visit the Kremlin), Kiev, Bessarabia and Romania. They reached the latter country just as Russian troops were advancing into Eastern Prussia, only to be routed later at the Battle of Tannenberg. Indeed, the great Imperial Russian Empire of Olga’s forefathers was already beginning to crack under the pressure of war and the Princess would never return to her beloved Russia again.

Fortuitously, when they reached Romania, the family found that the ailing King of Romania had thoughtfully sent a special train to transport the little group from Jassy southwards to the resort of Sinaia, where they

1 were again obliged to wait for another travel permit. This gave Olga and
 2 her sisters the chance to spend time with 'Aunt Missy' (Crown Princess
 3 [later Queen] Marie) and her family at their romantic summer residence,
 4 Castle Pelisor. This vivacious and eccentric Englishwoman was a first
 5 cousin of Princess Nicholas (both were granddaughters of Tsar Alexander
 6 II) and young Olga was immediately captivated by her. However, even in
 7 wartime, future dynastic considerations were not forgotten: Marie was
 8 'greatly struck' by Olga's height and seemed keen that she might eventually
 9 marry her eldest son Carol (who was ten years the Princess' senior). Ellen
 10 was enthusiastic and informed Foxie that 'it would be a splendid
 11 marriage.'⁵ But for the present, Olga was more interested in visiting Aunt
 12 Missy's "Princesses' Nest", a 'most thrilling'⁶ tree house built atop a
 13 group of pine trees. She also encountered the King of Romania's eccentric
 14 wife Queen Elisabeth (also known as the writer Carmen Sylva), 'a
 15 fascinating character...oddly dressed in flowing robes with snow white
 16 hair',⁷ who had arranged a special film performance at the Royal Palace
 17 for the children who included Aunt Missy's daughter Marie ('Mignon').
 18 Little could young Olga have realised that 14-year-old Marie would play
 19 such a major and, at times, disruptive role in her future life.

20 After a four-day hiatus, the Nicholas family were finally allowed to
 21 proceed by train and car to a little village on the Danube, from where
 22 they caught the Orient Express down through Serbia to Salonika. They
 23 broke their journey there to view a newly-erected memorial to King
 24 George, which Olga recalled was watched over by a Cretan soldier.⁸

25 On 9 September, the Princesses were relieved to be back in Athens
 26 'to the home we loved'.⁹ Olga was now permitted to lunch with her
 27 parents' downstairs and, except on the days she played tennis, would
 28 join her sisters and cousins at Phaleron Bay to swim. The Princess'
 29 favourite playmate was her older cousin Helen whom she deeply 'loved
 30 and admired.'¹⁰ Tea was usually taken by the sea, before returning to the
 31 city at 6pm to do her "prep". Princess Nicholas was somewhat perplexed
 32 by her eldest child who, she informed Foxie, possessed 'a more difficult
 33 character [than her siblings]-she is so sensitive and makes life a burden
 34 for herself but in the same time she is so sensible and understands the
 35 justness of things.'¹¹

36 The outbreak of war contributed further to the existing frictions
 37 within the royal family: Ellen felt that Queen Sophie had become
 38 'exclusively German' in her tastes, where previously she had been 'quite
 39 English'. Furthermore, the Queen avoided discussing the war's progress
 40 with the pro-British Princess Nicholas, although the latter assured Foxie
 41 that the rest of the Greek royal family were 'on our side.'¹² Athens too
 42 had become a hotbed of division and political intrigue: King Constantine
 43 favoured neutrality, feeling that his Kingdom had suffered enough during

the Balkan Wars. However, his Prime Minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, 1
 wanted Greece to enter the conflict on the side of the Triple Entente 2
 powers of Great Britain, France and Russia. Indeed, his supporters now 3
 lost no time in accusing Constantine of pro-German sympathies with the 4
 pro-Venizelist press gleefully pointing out that the King had received his 5
 military training in Germany.¹³ Meanwhile, as the sister of the German 6
 Kaiser, Queen Sophie was increasingly subject to insults whenever she 7
 appeared in public.¹⁴ Fortuitously, Olga remained ignorant of these 8
 happenings and, as 1915 dawned, spent much of her time riding at 9
 Phaleron. With her love of babies, the Princess also formed a close 10
 attachment to one-year-old Sophie, the youngest child of Prince and 11
 Princess Andrew.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Olga particularly missed her pre-war 12
 seaside visits to Bognor and asked Princess Nicholas, ‘if after the war 13
 shall we get to England again?’¹⁶ 14

As was their custom, the family moved up to Kifissia in late June, 15
 just as a picture of Princess Nicholas and her dutiful (and beautiful) 16
 daughters (taken at a Red Cross charity bazaar) was released for general 17
 circulation. Whether this publicity contributed towards the on-going 18
 froideur between Queen Sophie and Ellen is unclear, but the latter was 19
 ‘disappointed’ that her daughters were no longer invited up to Tatoi, 20
 while the Queen had also seen fit to decline an invitation on behalf of her 21
 daughter Irene to join Olga for tea at Kifissia.¹⁷ The situation was 22
 doubtless not helped by what Princess Nicholas describes as ‘the jealousy 23
 of the other nurses for our children ...’¹⁸ It must have been a relief for the 24
 family to escape to Spetsai for a month, where for added privacy, 25
 Princess Nicholas had rented the entire floor of a hotel. This, despite her 26
 admitting to Miss Fox that she was suffering financially from the poor 27
 wartime exchange rate on her rouble payments from Russia.¹⁹ However, 28
 by December, relations with the Queen must have temporarily thawed, 29
 for Olga and her sisters were once again welcomed to Tatoi, just as snow 30
 began to fall. All were thrilled when cousin Helen built a snow man and 31
 carefully placed a lighted cigarette in its mouth.²⁰ 32

Meanwhile, letters sent from the family to Kate Fox were now being 33
 routinely opened by the British censor; while relations between the King 34
 and Venizelos had deteriorated to the point that the country was now 35
 divided into two irreconcilable camps. The allies were keen to take 36
 advantage of this “National Schism” and, despite the fact that Greece was 37
 officially neutral, they landed a combined party of French and British 38
 forces at Salonika, in October, at the invitation of Venizelos. This led to a 39
 heated confrontation between Constantine (who was already much 40
 weakened from attacks of pneumonia and pleurisy) and his Prime Minister, 41
 whom he subsequently dismissed. However, with the Triple Entente 42
 powers supporting Venizelos, the King’s time was running out. 43

1 Following the Christmas break, in January 1916, a by now ‘very tall
 2 and slim’ Olga and her sisters resumed their school studies amid a scarlet
 3 fever epidemic which confined them to the gardens of the Nicholas
 4 Palace. Surprisingly, sisterly relations were not all they might be: Marina,
 5 unlike her more reticent siblings, positively enjoyed being the centre of
 6 attention and was particularly unkind to her sisters who complained ‘of
 7 her nasty little ways.’²¹ Matters seemed to improve once Marina and her
 8 eldest sister commenced riding lessons together (Elisabeth was already a
 9 most accomplished rider).²²

10 As she celebrated her 13th birthday, in June, Olga was ‘very proud’
 11 at having entered her teenage years. Ellen observed that her eldest was
 12 ‘so distinguished and is beginning to be reasonable but in many ways,
 13 she is still quite a child of which I am pleased.’²³ Nonetheless, physically
 14 she was ‘getting quite formed...’²⁴ and had excelled academically in her
 15 summer examinations. Olga continued to display ‘a sort of admiration
 16 for Sitta [Helen]’²⁵ who had become something of a role model for her
 17 younger cousin. Helen cared greatly about outward appearances
 18 including ‘a tidy house, perfect dress, unruffled hair, punctuality,
 19 excessive politeness, good manners, form, procedure’.²⁶ Princess
 20 Nicholas accurately predicted that Olga, ‘will be very much the style of
 21 Sitta but prettier’.²⁷

22 During their summer sojourn at Kifissia, Olga was given the gift of a
 23 horse which was stabled at the villa and watched over by the royal family’s
 24 English groom, Taylor. This development may have been as a result of
 25 further tensions between Ellen and the Queen. The former felt that there
 26 was now a distinct lack of goodwill ‘in higher quarters’²⁸ about everything-
 27 including the borrowing of horses for riding lessons. While Olga and
 28 Elisabeth rode out regularly with Prince Andrew’s daughters Margarita
 29 and Theodora, the same did not apply with the King and Queen’s
 30 children.²⁹ Princess Nicholas had already concluded that, ‘the more one
 31 keeps away from that family the better...’³⁰ although she had tremendous
 32 sympathy for the King’s precarious position. Indeed, in July, Constantine
 33 had narrowly escaped death when fire had raged through Tatoi, destroying
 34 his residence and three-quarters of the estate. Pro-Venizelist supporters
 35 were thought to be the culprits, after the police discovered empty petrol
 36 cans in three separate locations in the forest; eighteen people lost their
 37 lives.³¹

38 In the autumn, Prince Nicholas made visits to Petrograd² and
 39 London to attempt to dissuade the Entente powers that his family were
 40 biased towards Germany. After an audience with the Tsar, the Prince met
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43 ² As St Petersburg was now called.

the Tsarevich Alexei who sent each of his daughters a kiss; Olga would later describe this forlornly as ‘the last contact.’³² In London, Queen Alexandra informed her beloved nephew that she continued to plead for ‘Tino’s’ cause in letters to her son, King George V.³³ However, by the time Olga’s father reached home in November, such family ties seemed irrelevant, as Venizelos had now formed a pro-Entente National Defence Government in Salonika, in direct opposition to Constantine’s government in Athens. On 24 November, Venizelos formally declared war on the Central Powers of Germany, Turkey and Bulgaria. Emboldened by this act, the French decided to unseat the Greek King and sent their fleet to blockade the harbour at Piraeus. On 1 December, French ships bombarded Athens. Initially, Olga and her sisters watched the barrage from their top-floor nursery window at the Nicholas Palace. However, when shells later fell around the King’s residence nearby, Princess Nicholas shooed her ‘frightened’ daughters down to the safety of the basement silver vault.³⁴ Meanwhile, pro-royalist forces were in an increasingly difficult position, as the Entente forces in the north, led by Admiral du Fournet, seized control of the Greek rail network and prevented much-needed artillery and ammunition from reaching Athens. To make matters worse, Ellen’s Apanage monies from Russia suddenly stopped and she was forced to make economies.³⁵

If events were proving difficult in Greece, they had become impossible in Russia. Over the last decade, the exalted status of the Imperial Family had been gradually undermined amid strikes, protests and calls for political change. Matters reached a critical stage in January 1917, when the Prime Minister, Prince Nicholas Galitzine, decided to postpone the opening of the Duma [Parliament] for a month and this act incited ‘widespread and bitter feeling’.³⁶ In early March, bread riots broke out in Petrograd and the majority of the military garrison mutinied and stormed the Winter Palace. Tsar Nicholas abdicated on 15 March and was placed under house arrest at the Alexander Palace. With the outbreak of revolution in Russia, there was very real concern for the well-being of Olga’s grandmothers: Queen Olga had been nursing the wounded at her hospital at Pavlovsk, while Grand Duchess Vladimir was taking a cure at the spa town of Kislovodsk in the northern Caucasus. She had been banished from Petrograd after an altercation with the Tsar over his decision to banish Olga’s cousin, the Grand Duke Dimitri, to Persia following his alleged involvement in the death of Rasputin.³⁷

Back in Greece, Venizelos continued to rouse revolt and, by May, felt able to inform the international press that, ‘It is impossible for King Constantine to maintain his position.’³⁸ Indeed, the Entente powers threatened to bombard the city if the King did not leave Greece.³⁹ Constantine’s second son, Alexander, was deemed to be an acceptable

1 replacement by the Entente powers as King *pro tem*, the eldest, George,
2 being excluded on the grounds that he had, like his father, undertaken
3 military training in Germany. When word got out that Constantine had
4 stepped down, thousands of people besieged the Royal Palace, where all
5 of the royal family were gathered, to indicate their support for the King.
6 Prince Nicholas met officials and tried to calm the situation. He also
7 asked that the people accept his brother's decision 'without resentment'.⁴⁰
8 However, the crowd steadfastly refused to allow Constantine to leave the
9 Palace and a stand-off lasted overnight. Meanwhile, the landing of
10 Entente troops at Piraeus only served to aggravate the situation. Finally,
11 by indulging in a little deceit, involving decoy cars, the royal family
12 managed to flee the palace. On 14 June, Constantine left Greece by boat
13 from Oropos, north of Athens, to travel onwards to Zurich. All the
14 family, including Olga, were present to wave him off.

15 King Alexander now turned to his Uncle Nicholas for comfort and
16 he was soon treating the Nicholas Palace as 'a temporary home'.⁴¹
17 Unfortunately, the Entente Powers newly-appointed High Commissioner,
18 Charles Jonnart, was focused on clearing Athens of all royalist influences,
19 both to facilitate Venizelos' reinstatement (he returned on 27 June) and
20 to isolate the new King. By 25 June, French troops were placed at
21 strategic locations around the city and it became increasingly clear that
22 the time had come for the Nicholas family to leave. On 4 July, the
23 family's servants and an emotional King Alexander gathered on the lawn
24 of the Nicholas Palace to wave them off. In the evening, they departed
25 Greece by sea, a distressed Olga watching as the coast of her homeland
26 gradually receded into the distance.⁴²
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Chapter 6 Swiss Exile

The Nicholas family initially spent their first months of their exile in St Moritz. The hotel proved too expensive and, in the autumn, they moved to the Savoy Baur en Ville Hotel in Zurich, where Princess Nicholas had managed to secure rooms at a discounted rate. Life was far from luxurious: The three sisters were required to share a bedroom, while a shortage of coal meant that there was only sufficient hot water for a weekly bath. Again, it was Olga, in particular, who seemed most affected by the move, with Ellen complaining to Miss Fox, ‘She was dreadful, we didn’t know what to do with her...a sweet nature but difficult to understand at times.’¹ The remaining royal family members lived in a more pleasant environment, in the hills above the city, and most days Prince Nicholas and his family would walk up from town to visit, although they always returned “home” in time for tea. Olga and her siblings initially attended a local school, but were unable to follow the lessons which were taught in German. It was then decided they should be educated at home and a tri-lingual, sport-loving, Swiss governess, Mademoiselle Genand, was employed. However, Ellen found exile ‘hard to bear...’² and confided to Foeie, that ‘the jealousy of certain people for our children’ remained a pressing problem. Certainly, Princess Nicholas’ best efforts to include the other cousins in her daughters’ gymnastic classes was met with a curt refusal. She was likewise furious to discover that Olga, Elisabeth and Marina had been excluded from dancing lessons arranged by Princess Alice for her daughters Margarita and Theodora, but to which cousin Irene was also invited. Ellen wished she could get to the bottom of the matter, ‘for the children’s sake as they feel it dreadfully and are heartily upset.’ The ‘rumours’ initially placed the ‘real cause’ squarely at the door of Queen Sophie.³ However, by late December, Princess Nicholas was able to report to Miss Fox that ‘things are much better now’ and it was all apparently ‘simply nastiness and jealousy’ on the part of Princess Alice.⁴

As this momentous year drew to a close, further economies (including staff dismissals) were needed as Ellen discovered that her Russian capital had been confiscated.⁵ The family observed an ‘English Christmas’, on 25 December, before leaving Zurich, in January 1918, for the inexpensive Neues Rosatch Hotel at St Moritz. This location proved a particular hit with the three sisters who enjoyed ice skating and learned

1 to ski. It was at this juncture that the family received news of Grand
 2 Duchess Vladimir: She was without funds and living with two of her
 3 sons in a small villa in the Caucasus. Ellen was incredulous: ‘One can’t
 4 believe it after all that luxury!’⁶

5 The family moved to the Savoy Hotel at Ouchy in mid-March,
 6 where Olga was laid low with chicken pox, just as she attempted to
 7 celebrate her 15th birthday, which she deemed ‘a very important age!’⁷
 8 The Princess was now taller than her mother and, in every sense, a
 9 woman. Nevertheless, she continued to be homesick for Greece and was
 10 ‘very sensitive [and] takes things to heart’ which her mother thought
 11 ‘unfortunate as she will suffer from it all her life.’⁸ Nevertheless, Olga’s
 12 spirits must have been uplifted by the arrival of Queen Olga from Russia,
 13 in late June. She brought with her the pleasing news that a Greek student
 14 had managed to smuggle her jewels out of the Marble Palace and they
 15 had been forwarded to Copenhagen for safekeeping.

16 In August, the Greek royal family were ‘completely devastated’⁹ to
 17 receive news of the recent murder of Tsar Nicholas and his immediate
 18 family at Ekaterinburg in mid-July. Princess Nicholas was verging on
 19 denial, informing Foxie, ‘We don’t know what to think about that
 20 dreadful news, *somehow I can’t think it is true, it seems too awful!*’
 21 When the events of the Tsar’s death were eventually confirmed in the
 22 press, it filled the Nicholas family with ‘unspeakable horror’ and the
 23 three sisters wept bitterly as they recalled their earlier experiences at
 24 Tsarskoe Selo in the company of their Imperial cousins.¹⁰ To add to their
 25 woes, the girls were informed that Nurse Margaret was leaving. She had
 26 been summoned to the British Consulate and was told in no uncertain
 27 terms that if she continued to work for Prince and Princess Nicholas
 28 (“Traitors of England”) she would be deprived of her British passport.¹¹
 29 Nevertheless, Ellen tried to make her daughters’ lives ‘as bright as
 30 possible’ with dancing lessons on a Saturday morning and attendance at
 31 Sunday afternoon tea dances. Tennis, however, remained the girls’ ‘great
 32 pleasure’; Olga and Elisabeth both played in the singles and doubles
 33 competitions of the “American Tournament”.¹²

34 The Nicholas’ returned to St Moritz’s Neues Rosatch Hotel, in late
 35 December, this time to celebrate a proper Orthodox Christmas. Olga was
 36 delighted to receive a calendar from her Nurnie, and in her letter of
 37 thanks, she expressed the hope ‘that happy day will come’ when they
 38 would meet once again and signed herself, ‘Yr. ever-devoted Baby
 39 Olga.’¹³ As 1919 dawned, the Nicholas’ agonised over the fate of their
 40 Romanov relatives and wondered if the Allied Fleet would be able to
 41 rescue Grand Duchess Vladimir from the Caucasus.¹⁴ It was also at this
 42 juncture that Ellen began to fret over how the family’s changed
 43 circumstances might impact on the marriage prospects of her daughters.

This concern was prompted by probing questions from her eldest child for, as Princess Nicholas informed Kate Fox, ‘the marriage question seems to preoccupy Olga very much, she wonders whom she will marry and asked me all about it the other day!’ It is possible that the young Princess’ enquiries might well have been triggered by the forthcoming wedding of her childhood friend, Sofica des Isnards, who was marrying into a rich Dutch family, the Burgens.¹⁵ However, Ellen opined that her fifteen-year-old daughter was far from ready for a serious relationship being still, ‘an extraordinary mixture of a big girl and a child.’¹⁶

In April, the itinerant family moved on to the Hotel Byron at Villeneuve where, to Olga’s delight, a baby was born in the hotel.¹⁷ Queen Olga paid another visit and Ellen’s Lady-in-Waiting, Mrs Tombazi, taught the girls to make their own summer dresses.¹⁸ When Kate Fox proposed to visit that summer, she was dissuaded from doing so by Princess Nicholas who cited the ‘very difficult’¹⁹ attitude of the Swiss Authorities.

In early September, the Nicholas’ decided to take a lease on a flat in Montreux’s new Riant Château complex. This boasted large, airy rooms and plenty of bathrooms. However, despite moving into this new home, Ellen was perplexed to observe that Olga continued to display ‘fits of grumpiness and was snappier and disagreeable and went about with a sullen face!’²⁰ Fortunately, she recovered her equilibrium in time to lunch with Queen Olga and seemed to enjoy an ‘English’ style Christmas on 25 December.²¹

As 1920 dawned, the Greek royal family continued to be unpopular with the Swiss and were referred to scathingly in the international press as ‘discarded royalty’ who could not pay their hotel bills.²² Prince Nicholas focused on his painting and held an exhibition of his work in Montreux, where he was grateful to be able to sell some pictures at a decent price.²³ The family were also uplifted by the marriage of Prince Christopher to the rich American heiress Mrs Nancy Leeds (the widow of William Leeds the American “Tin Plate King”) at the Russian Church at Vevey, on 1 February. Ironically, the *New York Times* would later misreport that seventeen-year-old Olga was betrothed to marry her son William B. Leeds, Jr.²⁴ The latter would actually go on to marry Olga’s cousin, Princess Xenia of Russia, in October 1921.

Around this time, Olga finally enjoyed an emotional reunion with Miss Fox, although this was not widely publicised²⁵ for fear it would reach the ears of Grand Duchess Vladimir, who was able to pay the Nicholas family a visit in Montreux, in June. Predictably, this determined grand dame had been the last member of the Imperial family to leave Russia. She had sailed, in February, accompanied by her Lady-in-Waiting, Princess Catherine Galitzine (‘Turia’), from her final refuge at

1 Anapa on the Black Sea to Venice aboard an Italian ship, having paid for
 2 the journey by selling some jewellery.²⁶ Olga recalls, ‘It was with deep
 3 emotion that we all met again. She was much thinner and looked ill. In
 4 spite of all she had been through she made plans for our future coming-
 5 out ball in the Winter Palace of St Petersburg!!’²⁷ Interestingly, while en
 6 route to Venice, the Grand Duchess’ ship had made a stop at Athens,
 7 where she disembarked to make a quick tour of the Nicholas Palace and
 8 pick bunches of violets from the garden. She later distributed these
 9 traditional symbols of good fortune to her family during their reunion.²⁸

10 Unfortunately, the strain and worry had taken its toll on Maria
 11 Pavlovna’s health and she was now beset with heart problems. She was
 12 therefore ‘anxious’ to rest and take a “cure” at Contrexéville, although
 13 the Nicholas’ were refused permission to accompany her there. Sadly, the
 14 Grand Duchess passed away on 6 September. Princess Nicholas somehow
 15 managed to obtain a visa to travel to France for the funeral, where she
 16 was reunited with her three brothers, whom she had not seen since prior
 17 to the revolution.²⁹ Maria Pavlovna was buried in the little Orthodox
 18 Chapel of Saint Vladimir and Marie-Madeleine at Contrexéville. As her
 19 grandmother had been a significant part of Olga’s life, the effect of her
 20 death, in such reduced circumstances, cannot be over-emphasised.

21 Given the carnage in post-revolution Russia, it was indeed amazing
 22 that the Grand Duchess Vladimir’s three sons Kirill, Boris and Andrei
 23 survived; they would all subsequently settle in France. Fortuitously, the
 24 Grand Duchess left her family a helpful legacy: Just after the revolution,
 25 an English friend, Bertie Stopford, disguised himself in the working
 26 clothes of an ordinary “comrade” and with the aid of two Gladstone
 27 bags, retrieved her jewels from the Vladimir Palace.³⁰ The gems were
 28 subsequently sent by courier to the British Embassy in Berne where,
 29 following Maria Pavlovna’s death, Princess Nicholas and her brothers
 30 met to divide them according to the Grand Duchess’ instructions.³¹ Ellen
 31 was to receive mainly diamonds and a magnificent tiara of fifteen
 32 interlaced diamond circles, with a swinging oriental pearl suspended in
 33 each. This was subsequently purchased by Queen Mary.³²

34 In October, news arrived from Greece that King Alexander had been
 35 bitten by a rabid monkey and had developed an infection known as
 36 sepsis. Although his mother, Queen Sophie, was denied permission by
 37 Venizelos to travel to Athens, his grandmother, Queen Olga, was allowed
 38 to make the journey. Delayed by rough seas, she arrived a matter of
 39 hours after the King’s death, on 25 October.³³ King Alexander had
 40 married Aspasia Manos in November 1919 and, although recognised as
 41 his legal wife, she was never acknowledged as Queen. At the time of her
 42 husband’s death, Aspasia was carrying Alexander’s child and their
 43 daughter, Alexandra, was born in March 1921.