

CHAPTER THREE

Princess Alix

MY DREAM is some day to marry Alix H. I have loved her a long while and still deeper and stronger since 1889 when she spent six weeks in St. Petersburg. For a long time, I resisted my feeling that my dearest dream will come true."

When Nicholas made this entry in his diary in 1892, he had not yet established his temporary little household with Kschessinska. He was discouraged about the prospects of his interest in Princess Alix. Russian society did not share Nicholas's rapture for this German girl with red-gold hair. Alix had made a bad impression during her visits to her sister Grand Duchess Elizabeth in the Russian capital. Badly dressed, clumsy, an awkward dancer, atrocious French accent, a schoolgirl blush, too shy, too nervous, too arrogant—these were some of the unkind things St. Petersburg said about Alix of Hesse.

Society sniped openly at Princess Alix, safe in the knowledge that Tsar Alexander III and Empress Marie, both vigorously anti-German, had no intention of permitting a match with the Tsarevich. Although Princess Alix was his godchild, it was generally known that Alexander III was angling for a bigger catch for his son, someone like Princess Hélène, the tall, dark-haired daughter of the Pretender to the throne of France, the Comte de Paris. Although a republic, France was Russia's ally, and Alexander III suspected that a link between the Romanov dynasty and the deposed House of Bourbon would strengthen the alliance in the hearts of the French people.

But the approach to Hélène did not please Nicholas. "Mama made a few allusions to Hélène, daughter of the Comte de Paris," he wrote in his diary. "I myself want to go in one direction and it is evident that Mama wants me to choose the other one."

Hélène also resisted. She was not at all willing to give up her Roman Catholicism for the Orthodox faith required of a future Russian em-

press. Frustrated, the Tsar next sent emissaries to Princess Margaret of Prussia. Nicholas flatly declared that he would rather become a monk than marry the plain and bony Margaret. Margaret spared him, however, by announcing that she, too, was unwilling to abandon Protestantism for Orthodoxy.

Through it all, Nicholas nurtured his hope that someday he would marry Alix. Before leaving for the Far East, he wrote in his diary, "Oh, Lord, how I want to go to Ilinskoe [Ella's country house, where Alix was visiting] . . . otherwise if I do not see her now, I shall have to wait a whole year and that will be hard." His parents continued to discourage his ardor. Alix, they said, would never change her religion in order to marry him. Nicholas asked permission only to see her and propose. If Alix were denied him, he stated, he would never marry.

As long as he was well, Alexander III ignored his son's demands. In the winter of 1894, however, the Tsar caught influenza and began having trouble with his kidneys. As his vitality began to ebb alarmingly, Alexander began to consider how Russia would manage without him. Nothing could be done immediately about the Tsarevich's lack of experience, but Alexander III decided that he could at least provide his heir with the stabilizing effect of marriage. As Princess Alix was the only girl whom Nicholas would even remotely consider, Alexander III and Marie reluctantly agreed that he should be allowed to propose.

For Nicholas, it was a great personal victory. For the first time in his life he had overcome every obstacle, pushed aside all objections, defeated his overpowering father and had his way.

Alix Victoria Helena Louise Beatrice, Princess of Hesse-Darmstadt, was born on June 6, 1872, in the medieval city of Darmstadt a few miles from the river Rhine. She was named Alix after her mother, Princess Alice of England, the third of Queen Victoria's nine children. "Alix" was the nearest euphonic rendering of "Alice" in German. "They murder my name here, Aliicé they pronounce it," her mother said.

Princess Alix was born "a sweet, merry little person, always laughing and a dimple in one cheek," her mother wrote to Queen Victoria. When she was christened, with the future Tsar Alexander III and the future King Edward VII as godfathers, her mother already called her "Sunny." "Sunny in pink was immensely admired," Princess Alice reported to Windsor Castle.

If the emotional ties between England and the small grand duchy of Hesse-Darmstadt were strong, those between Hesse and Prussia, ruled by the House of Hohenzollern, were weak and embittered. Only two years before Alix's birth, Hesse had been forcibly incorporated into the newly created German Empire. As recently as 1866, Hesse had sided with Austria in an unsuccessful war against Prussia. Alix's father, Grand Duke Louis of Hesse, hated Prussia and the Hohenzollerns, and throughout her life Alix shared his bitterness.

Darmstadt itself was an old German city with narrow cobblestone streets and steeply roofed houses covered with ornamental fifteenth-century carvings. The palace of the Grand Duke stood in the middle of town, surrounded by a park filled with linden and chestnut trees. Inside, Victoria's daughter had filled its rooms with mementoes of England. The drawing rooms were hung with portraits of Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and all the living English cousins. Sketches of English scenes and English palaces lined the walls of the bedchambers. An English governess, Mrs. Orchard, ruled the nursery. Mrs. Orchard was not one for frills. The children's bedrooms were large and airy, but plainly furnished. Meals were simple; Alix grew up eating baked apples and rice puddings. Mrs. Orchard believed in strict daily schedules with fixed hours for every activity. Years later, when Alix had carried this training to Russia, the Russian Imperial family ate on the stroke of the hour and divided its mornings and afternoons into rigid little blocks of time while Mrs. Orchard watched and nodded approvingly. She, along with her well-drilled habits, had been brought to Russia.

Before she was six, Alix drove her own pony cart through the park, accompanied by a liveried footman who walked at the pony's head. In the summertime, her father, Grand Duke Louis, took his family to a hunting lodge called Wolfsgarten. There, Alix spent her mornings in a sun-filled courtyard, running up and down a flight of high stone steps and sitting by the courtyard fountain, dipping her hand in the water, trying to catch a goldfish. She liked to dress in her mother's cast-off dresses and prance down the hall engulfed in crinoline, imagining herself as a great lady or a character from a fairy story.

Christmas was celebrated with German lavishness and English trimmings. A giant tree stood in the palace ballroom, its green branches covered with apples and gilded nuts, while the room glowed with the light of small wax candles fixed to the boughs. Christmas dinner began with a traditional Christmas goose and ended with plum pudding and mince pies especially shipped from England.

Every year, the family visited Queen Victoria. The Hessian children loved these visits to Windsor Castle near London, to the granite castle of Balmoral in the Scottish Highlands and to Osborne, the tiled Renaissance palace by the sea. Many years afterward, in Russia, the Empress Alexandra was to dream of herself as a little girl again, fishing for crabs, bathing and building sand castles on an English beach.

In 1878, when Alix was six, diphtheria swept the palace in Hesse-Darmstadt. All but one of the Grand Duke's children were stricken. Victoria sent her own physician from England to help the German doctors, but, despite their efforts, Alix's four-year-old sister, May, died. Then, worn out from nursing her children, Alix's mother, Princess Alice, also fell ill. In less than a week she was dead.

The death of her mother at thirty-five, had a shattering effect on six-year-old Alix. She sat quiet and withdrawn in her playroom while her nurse stood in the corner, weeping. Even the toys she handled were new; the old, familiar toys had been burned as a precaution against the disease. Alix had been a merry, generous, warm little girl, obstinate but sensitive, with a hot temper. After this tragedy she began to seal herself off from other people. A hard shell of aloofness formed over her emotions, and her radiant smile appeared infrequently. Craving intimacy and affection, she held herself back. She grew to dislike unfamiliar places and to avoid unfamiliar people. Only in cozy family gatherings where she could count on warmth and understanding did Alix unwind. There, the shy, serious, cool Princess Alix became once again the merry, dimpled, loving "Sunny" of her early childhood.

After her daughter's death, Queen Victoria treated Grand Duke Louis as her own son and invited him often to England with his motherless children. Alix, now the youngest, was the aging Queen's special favorite and Victoria kept a close watch on her little grandchild. Tutors and governesses in Darmstadt were required to send special reports to Windsor and receive, in return, a steady flow of advice and instruction from the Queen. Under this tutelage, Alix's standards of taste and morality became thoroughly English and thoroughly Victorian. The future Empress of Russia developed steadily into that most recognizable and respectable of creatures, a proper young English gentlewoman.

Alix was an excellent student. By the time she was fifteen, she was thoroughly grounded in history, geography and English and German literature. She played the piano with a skill approaching brilliance, but she disliked playing in front of people. When Queen Victoria asked her to play for guests at Windsor, Alix obliged, but her reddened face betrayed her torment. Unlike Nicholas, who learned by rote, Alix

loved to discuss abstract ideas. One of her tutors, an Englishwoman named Margaret Jackson—"Madgie" to Princess Alix—was interested in politics. Miss Jackson passed her fascination along to Alix, who grew up believing that politics was a subject not necessarily restricted to men. Alix's grandmother, after all, was a woman and still managed to be the dominant monarch in Europe.

Alix first traveled to St. Petersburg at the age of twelve for the marriage of her sister Ella to Grand Duke Serge, younger brother of Tsar Alexander III. She watched with interest as her sister was met at the station in St. Petersburg by a gilded coach drawn by white horses. During the wedding ceremony in the chapel of the Winter Palace, Alix stood to one side, wearing a white muslin dress, with roses in her hair. Between listening to the long, incomprehensible chant of the litany and smelling the sweet incense which filled the air, she stole side glances at the sixteen-year-old Tsarevich Nicholas. Nicholas responded and one day presented her with a small brooch. Overwhelmed, she accepted, but then shyly pressed it back into his hand during the excitement of a children's party. Nicholas was offended and gave the brooch to his sister Xenia, who, not knowing its history, accepted it cheerfully.

Nicholas and Alix met again five years later in 1889, when she visited Ella in St. Petersburg. This time, she was seventeen, he was twenty-one—ages when girls and young men fall in love. They saw each other at receptions, suppers and balls. He came for her in the afternoon and took her skating on frozen ponds and tobogganing down hills of ice. Before Alix departed, Nicholas persuaded his parents to give her a special tea dance, followed by a supper of *blinis* and fresh caviar, in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo.

The following summer Alix returned to Russia, but not to St. Petersburg. She went instead to Ilinskoe, the Grand Duke Serge's country estate near Moscow. There Serge and Ella lived a simple country life with friends invited for prolonged visits. Summer was at its golden height, there were lazy rambles in the fields and searches through the woods for berries and mushrooms. It was Alix's first sight of the wide expanse of Russian meadowland, of the white birch groves and the peasants in their loose blouses and baggy knickers. She was impressed by the deep, respectful bows they gave to her, a visitor. When she visited a country fair with Ella, she happily bought wooden dolls and gingerbread to take back home to Darmstadt.

Alix and Nicholas did not meet on this trip, and that autumn he left on his long cruise to the Far East. Alix was increasingly sure, however, that she loved the Russian Tsarevich. From the beginning, Nicholas

had been polite and gentle. She liked his wistful charm and his appealing blue eyes. She saw that Nicholas still was treated as a boy by his parents, but she also saw his quiet persistence in pursuit of her against their wishes. In his devotion, he was a person in whom she could confide.

For Alix, the insuperable obstacle to any thought of marrying this shy, affectionate youth was his religion. Confirmed into the Lutheran Church at sixteen, Alix had accepted its Protestant theology with all the fervor of her passionate nature. She took everything in life seriously, and religion was the most serious matter of all. To reject casually a faith she had just sworn to accept seemed to her a direct affront to God. Yet still she loved Nicholas. Princess Alix plunged herself into a turmoil of doubt and self-examination.

The fact that Nicholas would one day be one of the mightiest rulers in Europe influenced Alix not at all. She had no interest in titles or the size of empires. In 1889, she rejected the proposal of Prince Albert Victor, the oldest son of the Prince of Wales and, after him, the heir to the British throne. This gay, popular young man, known to the family as Prince Eddy, died in 1892 at the age of twenty-eight, a sad event which put his younger brother, George, in line for the throne. It is one of the fascinating "if's" of history that if Alix had accepted Prince Eddy's proposal and Eddy had lived, he and Alix, not King George V and Queen Mary, would have ruled England. In this case, today Alix's grandchild might sit on the British throne.

In any case, Alix had no interest in Eddy, and even Queen Victoria, who favored the match, admired the strong-minded way in which her granddaughter rejected Eddy's suit. "I fear all hope of Alicky's marrying Eddy is at an end," the Queen wrote to a friend. "She has written to tell him how it pains her to pain him, but that she cannot marry him, much as she likes him as a Cousin, that she knows she would not be happy with him and that he would not be happy with her and that he must not think of her. . . . It is a real sorrow to us . . . but . . . she says—that if she is forced she will do it—but that she would be unhappy and he too. This shows great strength of character as all her family and all of us wish it, and she refuses the greatest position there is."

Alix played the part of a conscientious princess. She visited schools and hospitals and sponsored charities. She went to costume balls, sometimes dressed as a Renaissance princess in a gown of pale green velvet and silver with emeralds in her red-gold hair. With a friend, she sat in a palace window, singing songs and playing a banjo. She escorted Queen Victoria on a tour of the mining districts of Wales

and insisted on being taken down the shafts and walking through the grimy labyrinthine tunnels. On a visit to Italy, she toured the palaces and galleries of Florence and settled herself into a gondola for a ride down the canals of Venice.

In the spring of 1894, Alix's older brother Ernest, who had succeeded his father as Grand Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt, was to be married. The wedding in Coburg had attracted Europe's most distinguished royalty. Queen Victoria, then seventy-five, was coming from England with her son Edward, Prince of Wales. Kaiser William II, Victoria's thirty-five-year-old grandson, was arriving from Berlin. And Nicholas, having wrung from his father permission to propose to Alix, was coming to represent Russia.

On a warm April night, Nicholas boarded a train in St. Petersburg accompanied by three of his four uncles, Grand Dukes Vladimir, Serge and Paul. When he arrived in Coburg a day and a half later, dressed in full uniform, Alix was waiting at the station. That night, they went to dinner and an operetta with the family. The following morning, unable to wait any longer, Nicholas went straight to Alix and proposed. In his diary and in a letter to his mother he described what happened.

"What a day!" he wrote in his diary. "After coffee about ten, I went with Aunt Ella to Alix. She looked particularly pretty, but extremely sad. They left us alone and then began between us the talk which I had long ago strongly wanted and at the same time very much feared. We talked till twelve, but with no result; she still objects to changing her religion. Poor girl, she cried a lot. She was calmer when we parted."

In his letter to Gatchina, Nicholas wrote: "I tried to explain that there was no other way for her than to give her consent and that she simply could not withhold it. She cried the whole time and only whispered now and then, 'No, I cannot.' Still I went on repeating and insisting . . . though this went on for two hours, it came to nothing."

But Nicholas was not alone in his suit. As the relatives gathered from all over Europe, there were so many people present that family dinners had to be divided into two sittings, one at seven, the second at nine. A few hours after Nicholas's first talk with Alix, Queen Victoria arrived, escorted by a squadron of British Dragoons. The Queen favored the Russian marriage and had a talk with the reluctant girl, taking the somewhat original tack that Orthodoxy was not really so very different from Lutheranism. The following day, the Kaiser appeared. Not at all unhappy at the prospect of marrying a German princess to the future Tsar of Russia, he too pressed Nicholas's suit

with Alix. Above all, it was Ella who calmed Alix's fears and encouraged her ardor. Ella had not been required to change her religion to Orthodoxy when she married Serge, since her husband was not in line for the Russian throne. But she had accepted Orthodoxy voluntarily. She insisted to Alix that a change of faith was not really so enormous or unusual an experience.

Long before it took place, Grand Duke Ernest's wedding had been thoroughly overshadowed by the matter of Nicholas and Alix. During the wedding ceremony, Nicholas watched Alix closely. "At that moment," he wrote, "how much I would have liked to have been able to look into the depths of Alix's soul."

The very next day Alix capitulated. Nicholas wrote exultantly in his diary: "A marvelous, unforgettable day. Today is the day of my engagement to my darling, adorable Alix. After ten she came to Aunt Miechen* and after a talk with her, we came to an understanding. O God, what a mountain has rolled from my shoulders. . . . The whole day I have been walking in a dream, without fully realizing what was happening to me. William sat in the next room and waited with the uncles and aunts till our talk was over. I went straight with Alix to the Queen [Victoria]. . . . The whole family was simply enraptured. After lunch we went to Aunt Mary's Church and had a thanksgiving service. I cannot even believe that I am engaged."

To his mother, Nicholas wrote: "We were left alone and with her first words she consented. . . . I cried like a child and she did too, but her expression had changed: her face was lit by a quiet content. . . . The whole world is changed for me: nature, mankind, everything, and all seem to be good and lovable. . . . She is quite changed. She is gay and amusing, talkative and tender."

Later, everyone present remembered the moment that this fateful match was made. "I remember I was sitting in my room," recalled Princess Marie Louise of England. "I was quietly getting ready for a luncheon party when Alix stormed into my room, threw her arms around my neck and said, 'I'm going to marry Nicky!'"

Nicholas awoke the next morning to the clatter of horses' hoofs on cobblestones and the hoarse shout of military commands. Under his window, Queen Victoria's Dragoons were executing a drill in his honor. "At ten o'clock," he wrote in his diary, "my superb Alix

* Grand Duchess Marie Pavlovna, the wife of Nicholas's eldest uncle, Grand Duke Vladimir.

came to me and we went together to have coffee with the Queen." While they remained in Coburg, every day began with "coffee with Granny." Victoria was delighted with the young couple. An incurable romantic and an indefatigable royal matchmaker, she loved to surround herself with soft-eyed young people in love. Alix was her special pet, and now that the match was made, she wanted to revel in it.

The weather was cold and gray that day, Nicholas wrote, "but everything in my heart was bright." Uncle Bertie suggested that since so large a part of the family was present, there ought to be a photograph. The thirty members of the family trooped down to the garden, and the result was a remarkable panorama of royalty. The old Queen, tiny and indomitable, sat in the middle of the front row, holding her cane. The Kaiser was there, the only man seated, dressed in a uniform and his fierce mustache. Nicholas, small and mild in a bowler hat, stood next to Alix, who appeared pretty but unsmiling.

From everywhere came congratulatory telegrams. "We answered all day," Nicholas complained, "but the pile grew rather than diminished. It seems that everybody in Russia has sent flowers to my fiancée."

Whatever their opposition to the match, Tsar Alexander III and his wife responded gallantly, once it was made. Alix wrote the Empress calling her "Aunty-Mama," and Marie wrote back to Nicholas: "Your dear Alix already is quite like a daughter to me. . . . Do tell Alix that her . . . [letter] has touched me so deeply—only—I don't want her to call me 'Aunty-Mama'; 'Mother dear' that's what I am to her now. . . . Ask Alix which stones she likes most, sapphires or emeralds? I would like to know for the future." As a start, Marie sent Alix an emerald bracelet and a superb Easter egg encrusted with jewels.

Spring came suddenly to Darmstadt, and the park was filled with flowers, the air perfumed and warm. Nicholas couldn't believe what had happened. "She has changed so much these last days in her relationship with me, that I am brimming with pleasure. This morning she wrote two sentences in Russian without error." When the family went for drives in carriages, Nicholas and Alix followed behind in a pony cart, taking turns at the reins. They walked, gathered flowers and rested beside the fishponds. They dined together at every meal. "It isn't easy to talk with strangers present, one has to give up talking about so many things," Nicholas complained. In the evenings they went to concerts in the local theatre. At Nicholas's request, the choir of the Preobrajensky Regiment of the Imperial Guard arrived by

train from Russia to sing for his fiancée and the other assembled guests.

Nicholas began spending the end of each day with Alix in her room. "We were together a long time, she was remarkably tender with me. . . . It is so strange to be able to come and go like this without the least restraint. . . . What a sorrow to part from her even for one night."

Finally, after ten days of bliss, the time came for Nicholas to say goodbye. He spent the last evening in Alix's room while warm spring rain fell on the trees outside her window. "What sadness to be obliged to part from her for a long time," he wrote. "How good we were together—a paradise."

The following day, as he traveled eastward to Russia, Nicholas's heart was suffused with love and sadness, and he wore a new ring on his finger. "For the first time in my life, I put a ring on my finger. It makes me feel funny," he said. At Gatchina, he found his family gathered to meet him, Tsar Alexander III still wearing the knickers in which he had just returned from shooting ducks. There were telegrams waiting from Alix and Queen Victoria to be answered. Then Nicholas took a long walk in the park with his mother and told her everything that had happened.

The month of May seemed interminable to the Tsarevich. He spent his days pacing among the lilacs in the park, then rushing off to write another letter to Alix. At last, in June, he boarded the Imperial yacht *Polar Star*, which carried him down the Baltic and across the North Sea to Alix in England. At the end of the four-day trip, nearing the English coast, he wrote, "Tomorrow I shall see my beloved again. . . . I'll go mad with joy." He landed at Gravesend and hurried by train to London's Waterloo Station "into the arms of my betrothed who looked lovely and more beautiful than ever."

Together, the pair went to a cottage at Walton-on-Thames belonging to Alix's eldest sister, Princess Victoria of Battenberg. For three memorable days, they relaxed on the banks of the gently flowing river. They walked on the bright green lawns and gathered fruit and flowers from nearby fields. Under an old chestnut tree in the cottage garden, they sat in the grass and Alix embroidered while Nicholas read to her. "We were out all day long in beautiful weather, boating up and down the river, picnicking on the shore. A veritable idyll," Nicholas wrote his mother. Years later, both Nicholas and Alix remembered every detail of those three shining days in the English countryside, and the mere mention of the name Walton was enough to bring tears of happiness to Alix's eyes.

When the three days were over, the young couple emerged from their private cocoon of happiness. "Granny" waited to greet them at Windsor Castle. Tsar Alexander III had sent his personal confessor, Father Yanishev, and the priest was anxious to begin Alix's religious instruction. At Windsor, Nicholas presented his formal engagement gifts: a pink pearl ring, a necklace of large pink pearls, a chain bracelet bearing a massive emerald, and a sapphire-and-diamond brooch. Grandest of all was a *sautoir* of pearls, a gift to his new daughter-in-law from the Tsar. Created by Fabergé, the famed Russian court jeweler, it was worth 250,000 gold roubles and was the largest single transaction Fabergé ever had with the Imperial family. Staring at this dazzling display of gems, Queen Victoria smilingly shook her head and said, "Now, Alix, do not get too proud."

The heat was stifling in England that summer. Nicholas began riding out from Windsor Castle in the morning while it still was cool. He liked to trot down Queen Anne's Way, a popular horse path bordered by magnificent trees, then come back home through open fields, "galloping like a fool." He was always back by ten to join Alix and the Queen for coffee. Lunch was at two, and afterward everybody rested and tried to ward off the heat. Before tea, Nicholas and Alix drove under the great oaks of Windsor Park and admired the blooming rhododendron. Nicholas admitted to his mother, "I can't complain. Granny has been very friendly and even allowed us to go for drives without a chaperone." In the evening, when the air had cooled, they dined with guests on a balcony or terrace and listened to music being played in the castle courtyard. Once when a violinist came up from London, Alix accompanied him on the piano.

Despite her lessons with Father Yanishev, Alix frequently popped into Nicholas's rooms. He apologized to his mother for not writing home more often. "Every moment," he pleaded, "I simply had to get up and embrace her." During one of these visits, apparently, Alix discovered that Nicholas was keeping a diary. She began to write in it herself. These entries, most of them in English, began with short notes—"Many loving kisses," "God bless you, my angel," "forever, forever"—and progressed to lines of verse and prayers:

"I dreamed that I was loved, I woke and found it true and thanked God on my knees for it. True love is the gift which God has given, daily, stronger, deeper, fuller, purer."

As the object of such overwhelming devotion, Nicholas felt that he had to speak about certain episodes in his past. He told her at this point about Kschessinska. Although she was only twenty-two, Alix rose to the occasion like a true granddaughter of Queen Victoria.

She forgave him handsomely, even gushingly, but she also delivered a brief little lecture which cast Nicholas in the role of the male redeemed by the purity of love:

"What is past is past and will never return. We all are tempted in this world and when we are young we cannot always fight and hold our own against the temptation, but as long as we repent, God will forgive us. . . . Forgive my writing so much, but I want you to be quite sure of my love for you and that I love you even more since you told me that little story, your confidence in me touched me oh so deeply. . . . [May] I always show myself worthy of it. . . . God bless you, beloved Nicky. . . ."

Knowing Nicholas's love of military pageantry, the Queen arranged a succession of displays. At Windsor he watched a thousand cadets from the naval academy at Greenwich perform gymnastics to music. He reviewed six companies of the Coldstream Guards, and the officers invited him to dinner. Normally, Nicholas would have jumped at this invitation, "But . . . Granny loves me so and doesn't like me missing dinner, nor does Alix," he wrote, explaining to his mother why he refused. At Aldershot, the huge British military camp, they watched a torchlight retreat ceremony and listened to a massed choir of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish voices. Next day, Nicholas, dressed in his uniform of the Imperial Hussars, took the salute of columns of British infantry, cavalry and horse artillery. He liked especially the pleated kilts and the skirling pipes of the Highland regiments.

While Nicholas was in England, a baby was born into the British royal family. "Yesterday, at 10 o'clock a son was born to Georgie and May to the general joy," he wrote. The baby, named Prince Edward, would become King Edward VIII, and later the Duke of Windsor. Nicholas and Alix were chosen as godparents of the little Prince. "Instead of plunging the infant into the water," noted the Tsarevich, "the archbishop sprinkled water on his head. . . . What a nice, healthy child." Afterward the baby's father dropped in on the engaged couple at Windsor. Even in his diary Nicholas showed a quaint touch of prudery as he described the visit: "Georgie came for lunch. Alix and he stayed in my room with me. I add these words 'with me' because otherwise it would sound a bit odd."

Before he left England, the Tsarevich and his fiancée went with the Queen to Osborne, the seaside royal residence on the Isle of Wight. From the palace lawns they could watch flotillas of sailboats scudding before the wind. Like a small boy, Nicholas took off his shoes and walked through the waves rolling up on the sand.

As the end of July approached, the six-week idyll came to an end. Alix had filled the diary with messages: "Love is caught, I have bound his wings. No longer will he roam or fly away. Within our two hearts forever, love sings." As the *Polar Star* slipped past Dover, north-bound for the Baltic, Nicholas read her prayer, "Sleep gently, and let the gentle waves rock you to sleep. Your Guardian Angel is keeping watch over you. A tender kiss."

Next day, Nicholas stood at the rail watching a fiery sunset off the coast of Jutland and gazing across the water as twenty ships of the Imperial German Navy dipped their flags in salute. Entering the Baltic through the Skaggerak, the *Polar Star* steamed slowly down the Danish coastline within sight of the ancient castle of Elsinore. But Nicholas's thoughts were far away.

"I am yours," Alix had written, "you are mine, of that be sure. You are locked in my heart, the little key is lost and now you must stay there forever."

There was another entry, too—a strangely prophetic line from Marie Corelli: "For the past is past and will never return, the future we know not, and only the present can be called our own."

CHAPTER FOUR

Marriage

AT GATCHINA, Nicholas found his family in a state of alarm over his father's health. Troubled by headaches, insomnia and weakness in the legs, the Tsar had consulted doctors, who recommended that he rest, preferably in the warm climate of the Crimea. But Alexander III was not a man to disrupt his schedule simply because he was not feeling well. The family entrained in September, not for the Crimea, but for the Imperial hunting lodge at Spala in Poland.

There, the Tsar continued to feel ill, and a specialist, Professor Leyden, was summoned from Vienna. Leyden carefully looked over the bearlike frame and diagnosed nephritis. He insisted that his patient be moved to the Crimea immediately and forced to rest. This time, Alexander III agreed. Nicholas, meanwhile, found himself caught in a struggle between "my duty to remain here with my dear parents and follow them to the Crimea and the keen desire to hurry to Wolfsgarten to be near my dear Alix." Eventually, he suppressed his ardor and went with the family to the summer palace at Livadia in the Crimea.

There, amid warm breezes scented with grapes, the Tsar began to improve. He ate well, took sunbaths in the garden and even went down to walk on the beach. But this improvement was only temporary. After a few days, he again began to have trouble sleeping, his legs gave way and he took to his bed. His diet was rigidly restricted and, to his distress, he was forbidden ice cream. Sitting alone by his bedside, his sixteen-year-old daughter, Olga, suddenly heard her father whisper, "Baby, dear, I know there is some ice cream in the next room. Bring it here—but make sure nobody sees you." She smuggled him a plate and he enjoyed it immensely. A St. Petersburg priest, Father John of Kronstadt, whose followers believed him ca-