

CHAPTER I

Royal Marines Officers' Mess, Eastney, Portsmouth

Among the twenty-eight officers of the Royal Marines in full mess uniform, resplendent with shining brass buttons, gold braid and medals, I was the only person wearing black tie – and so was a curiosity to many of the guests.

It was the evening of 31 October 1975, and the occasion was the inaugural dinner of the 1664 Club. The Royal Marines were leaving Portsmouth, and the club had been created not so much to commemorate the year in which Charles II established the corps, as to raise support for a Royal Marines museum in the Victorian building in which we stood. I had been granted honorary membership in recognition of the support I had been able to give that cause in my capacity as leader of Portsmouth City Council.

There was a buzz of excitement as we drank champagne and waited for the guest of honour in the opulent dining room, with its intricate gold-leaf ceilings, two splendid Italian marble fireplaces, glittering chandeliers and impressive paintings. Finally, he arrived: Lord Louis Mountbatten, life colonel-commandant of the Royal Marines, former chief of the Defence Staff, the last viceroy of India, who had overseen the granting of independence to India and Pakistan, and former commander-in-chief, Allied Forces South-East Asia (1943–45). As a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, he was related to generations of royalty, and had been closely associated with the greatest figures in political life – Churchill, Gandhi, Nehru, Roosevelt and Eisenhower among them.

The conversation became hushed as a tall figure with patrician features and erect bearing entered the room in glittering uniform mess dress, the aiguillettes shining with gold. He was introduced to

the assembly by General Sir Peter Whitely, the presiding officer and commandant general of the Royal Marines.

Summoned to dinner, we moved up the grand staircase to the Minstrels' Gallery. The table was dazzlingly set with the corps' silver and glassware. The dinner proceeded through its courses, each accompanied by fine wines. I was sitting just four places away from Lord Mountbatten, and when the small talk gave way for a moment I caught his eye for long enough to put a question. How confident was he, I asked, that Anna Anderson, who claimed to be the Russian grand-duchess Anastasia and so heir to the Romanov fortune, was in fact an impostor?

Lord Mountbatten seemed delighted to talk about this part of his family history, which was in the news at that time. He looked me in the eye and answered with complete certainty: 'Absolutely no doubt. I have spent a great deal of time and not a little money on the legal case against this impostor. In my childhood, before the Great War, I was sent over to play with my cousins in the Tsar's summer residence in Russia. I knew them all very well. Anastasia was murdered in Ekaterinburg with the others.' (He was proved correct when the family's bodies were found in a mineshaft close to Ekaterinburg in 1991 and identified through DNA.) Warming to his subject, Lord Mountbatten jabbed his finger at me and said, 'You have to remember that, in my youth, European affairs were family business.'

At the time, I thought this statement rather arrogant. But as I researched this book, I realised that he was speaking the literal truth. In the early twentieth century, the Tsarina of Russia, the Kaiser of Germany, the monarchs of Greece, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Sweden, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and, of course, Great Britain were all his relations.

How had this monopoly of monarchical power and influence been accumulated by one family – and one that ruled a fairly obscure German principality, without fortune or political influence – in such a short space of time? Like Lord Mountbatten himself, almost all the heirs to the European monarchies were the offspring of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. Their marriage was pivotal to the spread of the family's influence.

Was it by chance or design? Who among the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha

family (it was only in 1917, in the wake of anti-German feeling, that the British royal family changed their name to 'Windsor') had had such monarchical ambitions? What contributions did they make to the economic, political and cultural life of the palatinates and principalities of Germany? And what influence did they have on the unification of Germany in 1871?

In 1837, at the start of Victoria's reign, Britain was pre-eminent among nations. It was the most experienced and balanced of the democratic countries, particularly since the widening of the franchise in the Reform Act of 1832, giving many more people the right to vote, and the first to embrace industrialisation on a large scale. Its public-school system – in fact, private and expensive – and excellent universities guaranteed an educated leadership class for the administration of both Britain's burgeoning empire and her international trading interests. Although polite society still disdained 'trade' in principle, it could be overlooked if it happened outside Britain – so a director of the East India Company could move in the highest circles, whereas a Lancashire mill owner could not. Since the Royal Navy's victories in the Napoleonic Wars, culminating in the Battle of Trafalgar, few countries had dared challenge its role in protecting Britain's global trade routes and foreign policy.

France had not recovered from the trauma of Napoleon's defeat and its subsequent occupation by the Allies: Prussia, Russia and Britain. Germany, despite its growing nationalism, remained divided into fiercely traditional palatinates and principalities. Russia was still a feudal autocracy, and the Italian lands were a collection of warring states.

There was social unrest in England, too, as industrialisation gathered pace. Poverty, the radical political movement known as Chartism and the plight of the growing urban underclass all held dangers for both government and monarchy. But after the excesses and scandals of the Hanoverian dynasty, the British welcomed their young queen with pride. The country, despite its transitional problems, was substantially at peace with itself.

In this context, Victoria's marriage to Albert seems surprising. She was queen of a great empire, he the second son of a small German dukedom, who brought little to the union in terms of prestige or

finance – in fact, he would have to be ‘kept’ financially for the rest of his life. Moreover, Albert’s parents had been divorced, publicly, at a time when divorce was rare and, in Britain, frowned upon. There was even some question about his legitimacy. But, extraordinarily, none of these issues seems to have been considered at the time. Certainly this apparent omission needs to be examined more fully, since the integrity of bloodline to royalty is paramount.

Evidence from contemporary journals, letters and reports shows that the arrangements for this marriage were made exclusively by the family: the state merely observed the formalities on being informed of Victoria’s decision. Was this marriage – which brought no obvious advantages to Britain, and might actually have weakened Victoria’s position – a love match? Or could Albert’s close blood relationship to Victoria have been part of a Coburg conspiracy to spread the family’s sphere of influence across Europe? This book will attempt to answer these questions.