

# *The Crystal Snowstorm*

by  
**Meriol Trevor**

*Letzenstein Chronicles*  
*Book I*



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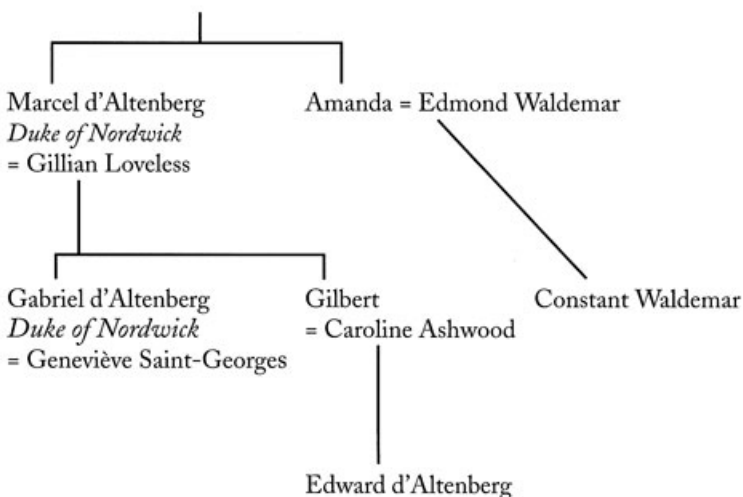
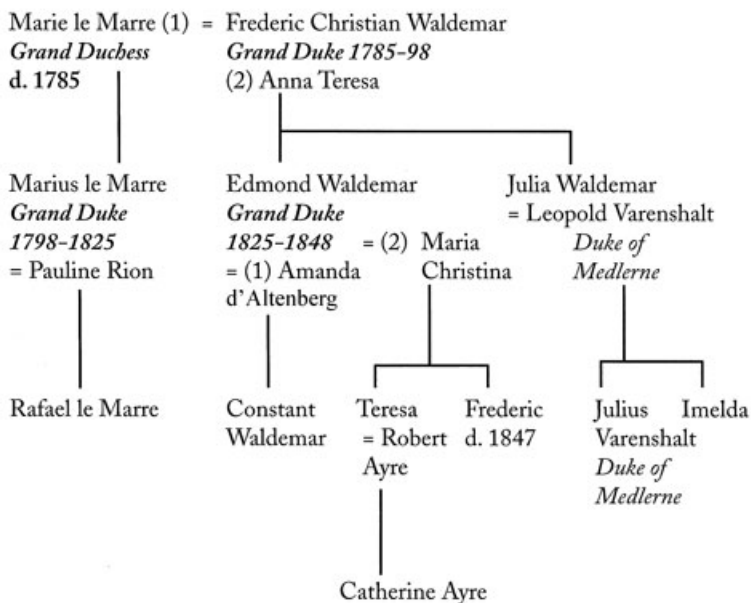
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*For my nieces  
Henrietta and Georgina Trevor  
and  
The Caldecotts in Oxford*



# FAMILY TREE OF THE GRAND DUKES OF LETZENSTEIN



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# 1. To the Winter Palace

THE TRAIN swung round a long curve between high wooded hills and a wide river; dusk was falling, thickened by flurries of snow-flakes. Catherine Ayre stared out at those swirling flakes, spinning down like dark flies against the lighter sky and then, as they hit the glass, showing white before they melted.

"Thousands and thousands," murmured Catherine, staring upwards. "Thousands and millions."

Then her eye was caught by lights ahead, a beehive of yellow lights, and she saw spires and steep roofs, the smoky cut-out of a city piled high above the bending steely river.

"Miss Lacey, look," Catherine said. "We're coming to a town."

Her governess woke with a start and then jumped up and began to marshal their luggage. "It must be Felsenbourg," she said. "Dear me, it seems no time since we crossed the frontier. But then it is a small state—Letzenstein is very small."

The train began to slow down. It was an express which had carried them from Belgium and was going down to Strasbourg and more important places than the little country of Letzenstein, an independent state in this year of 1847, soon to become 1848, for they had reached the last days of December. Ever since the momentous letter from the Grand Duke had arrived in Kent, Miss Lacey had been reading about Letzenstein and telling Catherine about it. And she was interested, because it was her mother's country.

The letter was written in French and great-aunt Ann Ayre said she had forgotten all her French, so Miss Lacey had read it for them, translating as she went. She became quite pink with excitement and her spectacles misted over.

"The Grand Duke wishes to see his granddaughter Catherine," Miss Lacey had announced. "He has lost his son and heir and wishes to see his daughter's child. One might almost say he commands her presence."

Catherine looked over her governess's shoulder and saw the black firm signature: Edmond Waldemar.

Miss Ayre gave a little snort. "He has never taken any notice of Catherine's existence till now. I do not know whether she should be allowed to go."

Miss Lacey looked far more disappointed than Catherine who, though she had often wished something interesting would happen, did not much care for the idea of going to visit a grandfather who was a Grand Duke and wrote letters in French.

Catherine's mother Teresa had been the only daughter of this Grand Duke of Letzenstein, and he had been so angry when she ran away with a young English officer that he had refused to have anything more to do with her. Captain Ayre was posted to India and in India Catherine herself had been born, almost exactly thirteen years ago, for her birthday was on the first of January. Then the Captain and his princess had both died of cholera and Catherine was brought back to England and taken to live with the Captain's aunt, Miss Ann Ayre, who had a small Georgian house in Kent, about ten miles from Canterbury.

Catherine could not remember her parents. All her life had been lived in Kent, a quiet life, cared for by Sibby, a comfortable countrywoman, and later taught by Miss Lacey, the clever but poor daughter of a clergyman. Catherine was unused to company, and shy, but she was quite happy, making up stories and drawing illustrations for them, or playing with Pins, her cat. Pins had a twin, Needles, who had gone to live at the village inn with Sibby's married sister; Catherine invented stories about their contrasting lives: Needles, the cockney stable cat, and Pins, the gentleman of leisure.

In the end Miss Ayre had decided that Catherine ought to visit her grandfather, since he was, after all, a Grand Duke, even if his country was so small that few people had heard of it. Once Letzenstein had been part of the Holy Roman Empire, and it was still more closely connected with the German states than with France. Miss Ayre felt too old to travel, but she had every confidence in Miss Lacey, and so there had been a great bustle of packing, and as soon as Christmas was over they crossed the channel and took the express from Ostend. And now here they were, running into the station at Felsenbourg, the capital city—indeed, the only city—of Letzenstein.

They were met by official gentlemen, packed into a carriage with fur rugs and driven off, up steep streets to the Palace. Peering out into lamplit dusk, Catherine saw high gabled roofs, windows with wooden shutters and people who looked somehow different from people at home.



The Palace lay behind a screen of iron railings taking up all one side of a wide square. It was a rambling building on which a classical façade had been arbitrarily imposed early in the eighteenth century. Up the steps they went into a great entrance hall with a grand staircase, and up these red carpeted stairs and along the passages of the left-hand wing till they reached the suite of rooms assigned to them.

Here they were greeted by a formidable lady's maid who spoke in French and an odd little gnome of a chambermaid, who turned out to be a cockney, specially detailed to wait on them because she was English. As she helped Catherine off with her cloak and bonnet she told her that years ago she had married a man from Letzenstein who was working as a waiter in an inn, in London. They had returned to his homeland to run an inn of their own, but it had failed, and they had got employment at the Palace.

"My, but it's nice to have a young English lady to look after again," said Agnes, unpacking Catherine's house slippers. "Not but what the great families here don't have English connections—they do, especially the Altenbergs. The Prince's mother was an Altenberg and I often think he's more like them than like his father."

"I thought the Prince was dead," said Catherine, combing out her straight brown hair in front of the looking glass.

"Oh, it was Prince Frederic who was killed," said Agnes. "Didn't you know there was two of them? Two princes?"

"I hardly know anything about it," said Catherine.

Agnes was delighted to tell her the gossip.

"Your grandfather, Grand Dook Edmond, was married twice," she said. "His first wife was Amanda d'Altenberg, and she ran away from him and left her little boy behind. That's Prince Constant, and he's the eldest, but his father has never thought much of him. It was Prince Frederic who was his favourite, and he made him his heir, so it was dreadful for him when he died—and in such a shocking way too, killed in a duel by a jealous husband. Yet for all that he was engaged to marry the Princess of Valmay. Now, they say, she'll be married to the Grand Dook's nephew—he's the favourite now."

Catherine thought this a strange way to arrange a marriage but she could not ask Agnes any more because Miss Lacey came in and looked at the little woman suspiciously.