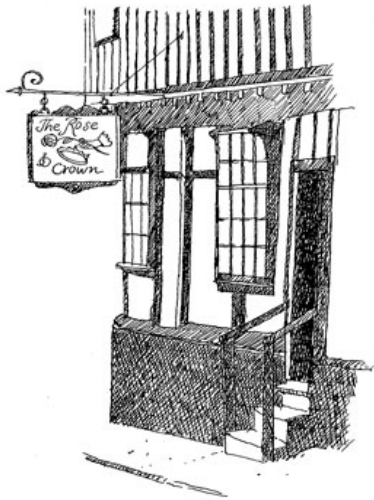


The Rose & Crown

by
Meriol Trevor

*Letzenstein Chronicles
Book IV*



BETHLEHEM BOOKS • IGNATIUS PRESS
BATHGATE, N.D. SAN FRANCISCO

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THE LETZENSTEIN CHRONICLES

The Crystal Snowstorm
Following the Phoenix
Angel and Dragon

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199 pages in the print book edition

First printing, October 1999

Bethlehem Books • Ignatius Press
10194 Garfield Street South
Bathgate, ND 58216
www.bethlehembooks.com

Cover and interior art © 1999, Mary Beth Owens

*To Tom Trevor, my nephew and his wife, Zoe
with much love now and always.*



FAMILY TREE OF THE GRAND DUKES OF LETZENSTEIN

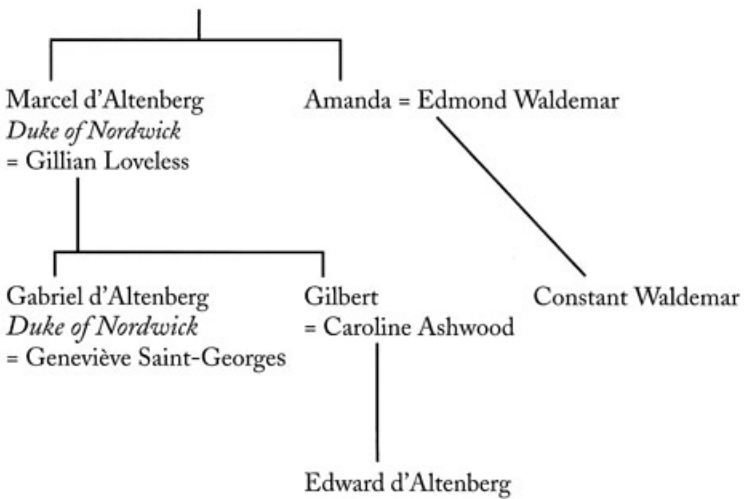
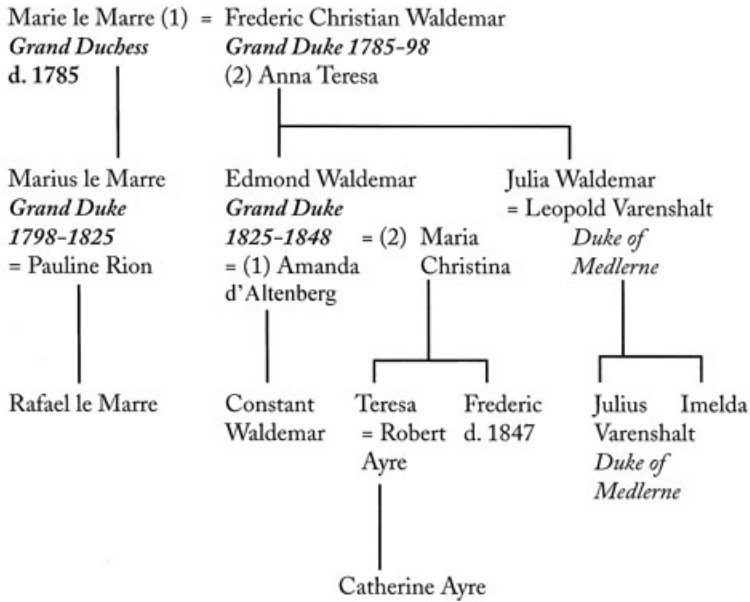


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1. Hallow E'en, 1849

CATHERINE AYRE and her governess Miss Lacey were walking down the Charing Cross Road, going home to tea. Miss Lacey was translating a book on Pond Life by her German friend, Professor Schwartzdorf, and she often searched the secondhand bookshops for books on biology and botany. Catherine used to poke around the shelves looking for stories, history and travels, and sometimes spent her pocket money on them. Her uncle and aunt, Sir Walter and Lady Hawthorne, with whom she now lived, gave her pocket money every week, something she had never had in the days when she lived with her great-aunt, old Miss Ayre, in Kent.

It was the last evening in October, fine at present, growing dark, with stars slowly appearing high up above the London roofs.

Everyone was hurrying home to tea, going back from work.

Up the pavement towards them came a girl walking, staring up at the sky. She was thin, with a pale face and a tangle of dark hair; she had on old shabby clothes too big for her, the coat shorter than the dress but with sleeves hanging in frayed cuffs almost to the ends of her thin red fingers. Underneath showed a dirty pinafore which flapped above wrinkled black stockings and worn black boots.

Because she was walking head in air a man in a hurry bumped into her so hard that he nearly knocked her down. He glanced round as he went on but only to say crossly, "Look where you're going, can't you?"

The girl, trying to get her balance, almost fell against Catherine, who quickly put out a hand to steady her.

"Sorry, miss, sorry," the girl said. "I was thinking of something else."

Her voice had not the cockney twang that Catherine expected. It was not perhaps perfect Queen's English, but was clear enough.

"Are you all right? He did crash into you!" Catherine said.

"Oh yes, thank you," said the girl, gazing at Catherine.

She had an odd little face, with a big forehead and a big mouth, but a tiny chin, not a runaway chin but a button of a thing.

Miss Lacey said, "Catherine, we really should be getting along."

Catherine felt she would like to do something for this poor girl with the funny face and clear voice, but she did not know what. She had just spent her pocket money on a book called *Travels in the Rhine Country and Along the Moselle*. So after a moment's hesitation she just said, "Goodbye," and went on with Miss Lacey.

The other girl walked in the opposite direction, head in air again, searching for the bright star she had been watching before. Was it the Evening Star? As she went she said to herself, "The Princess Melisande, realizing that her disguise was impenetrable, made her way towards the castle where her grandfather, the exiled king, had already lived so many years in hiding . . ."

She was making up for herself a life she thought more interesting than her own but she was not making up her name, for she had been christened Melisande, though most people called her Mel, and her stepfather, Jack Holt, who kept the *Rose and Crown* inn down by the river, called her Mellie.

Mel's inner story was interrupted by thoughts of the girl she had nearly run into, who had such an interesting face. Why? It was not pretty and she had ordinary brown eyes and straight brown hair. But her eyebrows went up at the ends, which gave her a slightly, a very faintly elvish look, Mel thought, as if she might possibly have had a fairy godmother. Another princess. . . . ? It would be interesting to have another in Melisande's secret life, of course from another country.

But here she was at the bookshop where her grandfather, in everyday life not an exiled king but an unsuccessful bookseller who had even failed to keep his own shop and was now working for someone else, was sitting among piles of old books in the dim light at the back of the shop. She could just see his white head over the books on the table where he was making up accounts.

Herbert Grayling was sixty-three but his hair, which was still thick and silky, was so white that people thought him older. He had a bulging forehead and a small but definite chin, like a goblin version of his granddaughter.

Mel began to look at the books which people had brought in to sell that day. They looked dull.

"No story books?" she said. "Granda? No stories?"

"Hullo, Mel my darling," said the old man, looking up and smiling, blinking through his thick spectacles. "What do you think?"

Another letter from that foreigner who found our little Toby in Venice. He's coming to England, he's bringing Toby to see us."

He held out to her a thin sheet of foreign paper with spiky black writing on it, in French.

"Granda, you know I can't read French," complained Mel. She had left school already, having learnt to read and write and do sums; the rest of her knowledge was picked up from books.

"Well, I can't make it all out myself," said her grandfather. "But when he writes English, it's worse! His idea of spelling is so odd. Here's a bit in English." He pointed out some lines with a thin yellow forefinger.

Mel read: "I am so glad you live at an inn bi cause so I can stay in your compaignie and keep wit me Toby, who is use to bin wit me since summer, till we settel vot is to be doing wit him."

"I see what he means," she said. "He writes as it sounds to him when he's saying it. When are they coming?"

"He doesn't say," said Mr. Grayling. "The rest is about how he asked someone called Sir Walter Hawthorne to find out about Toby's father, whom he knew to have been in the navy. I suppose Toby himself told him that, for he must be six or seven years old now. Poor child! I suppose he knows by now that his father is dead—died at sea."

Mel had another look at the letter. "*Peinture*," she said. "That means painting, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it seems he's an artist," said her grandfather. "I suppose that's why he was in Venice. He isn't a Belgian, as I thought at first, but comes from a little country called Letzenstein, between France and the German states west of the Rhine. He says he is bringing some paintings to sell in England."

Looking at the signature, Mel said, "Rafael le Marre is rather a romantic name, isn't it? What do you think he is like? I imagine him with a hooked nose, black eyes and black curly hair. Perhaps a beard too. Do you think a beard, Granda?"

Herbert Grayling did not laugh; he was very like his granddaughter in temperament. "Foreigners often do have beards," he said.

"So do Englishmen, especially young ones," Mel pointed out. "But in *Punch* Frenchmen have little pointed beards. I wouldn't care for that. But you said he wasn't French. Why does he write it, then?"

Her grandfather said he thought both French and German were spoken in those parts; some countries were too small to have languages of their own.

Mel said, "I can't think how he heard of us, if he wrote to the Reynolds family about Toby's father. You've always said they despised your daughter because she was an actress and were angry with Anthony Reynolds for marrying her—wouldn't meet her, wouldn't speak to him again, and all that."

"Yes," said Herbert Grayling, sighing. "Lady Hester Reynolds was very angry. She was an Earl's daughter, I believe, that's why she went on being Lady Hester even though the Admiral wasn't a Lord. Admiral Reynolds cut his son out of his will." He took the letter back. "She's still angry, you see. This Mr. le Marre says she wrote disclaiming any responsibility for a child of Anthony's and it was she, or her daughter, who gave him my name and address. Well! I'm glad, for I'd love to see dear Viola's little boy—especially after all my poor dear Mary went through, to help them."

Mary was his wife, who had gone out to Venice a year ago to nurse her sick daughter till she died, and then care for the little boy, whose father was in the navy. This summer Mary Grayling had died of cholera in Venice. They had only heard this after the fall of the city, retaken from Italian patriots by the Austrians, after months of siege, at the end of August. Toby could not be traced. Then had come the first letter from this foreigner, who had found Toby in Venice and taken him back to his home in Letzenstein.

"But as to keeping dear little Toby here, I don't know what Jack would say," said Herbert Grayling. "We're burden enough to him already, especially as his own family is increasing so rapidly."

Mel's mother, after her second marriage to the proprietor of the *Rose and Crown*, had had five children, ranging from Jacky, who was nine, to a baby. Mel, the only child of the first marriage with Mr. Grayling's son Roland, was nearly fourteen. Her birthday was in November, just coming up.

"Oh," said Mel, suddenly remembering, "Mother said, be sure and come home as soon as you can because she wants to go out to her sister's and we're to mind the children."

So they hastily put up the shutters of the shop and went away, down through the dark streets, across the Strand, down towards

London river and along it to the *Rose and Crown* inn, where Mel had lived most of her life.

Mel's mother, Mrs. Holt, was annoyed because they had not come back at once. She hurried out to visit her sister, leaving Mel to see the children into bed. Jack Holt was in the bar parlour serving beer and ale. Jacky, Georgie, Polly and Patsy were in a wild mood and wouldn't do what Mel told them, running about and giggling, waking the baby, who began to yell. Mr. Grayling was downstairs in the back parlour by the fire, reading, impervious to everything.

Mel picked up the baby and trailed round after the smaller children, but she could not manage Jacky. The noise got so bad that Mr. Holt came out of the bar parlour, his sleeves rolled up and his red face shining.

"Jacky!" he shouted up the stairs. "If you don't get into bed this minute I'll tan your bottom so's you won't sit down for a week!"

Jacky's sturdy bare legs vanished, into his bedroom, the tail of his nightshirt flapping with the speed of his going. He was the ringleader and Georgie, a plump rosy boy, followed him. Polly and Patsy, still giggling, packed themselves into their bed and Mel was at last able to quiet the baby and put him back in his cradle.

She felt very tired as she went downstairs but Jack Holt called out to her, "Mellie! Will you just go up to the Strand and get Mister here the latest sporting papers?" He gave her the coppers for them.

It never occurred to Mel to say she was too tired. Everybody worked at the inn all day and she was used to doing the odd jobs.

Out she went into the dark again, along the riverside. She did not cut up the nearer lanes to the Strand because they were unlighted; she knew one where there were lamps and made for that.

There was a different set of people in the streets now, people out for the evening in search of amusement, some going to the theatres, or the other way to the Ring at Blackfriars, some just walking about in gangs laughing and singing, in and out of gin palaces or to eating houses, peepshows, anything for interest and to pass the time.

Up in the Strand there were street sellers and entertainers about, trying to make something out of the amusement seekers. Mel knew

the newspaper men's pitch and made her way along the gas-lit pavements. She was too tired even to make up her story about Princess Melisande.

Perhaps because she was so tired she again bumped into someone and this time she was on the curbside and lost her balance, stumbling into the gutter. To her horror the pennies fell out of her grasp into the mud. The next moment a long-legged urchin seized them and made off across the road, dodging the cabs.

Mel cried out, "Oh, my pennies! Oh, come back! Oh, you wretch!" but she didn't have a loud voice and no one took any notice.

The next moment she was very nearly run down by a costermonger's barrow. He was wheeling it along and never saw her till he was almost on her. He shouted; Mel gasped and jumped aside; she hit her shoulder on his cart and fell down, but on to the pavement. The coster shouted, "Mind out, my gal!" and pushed on.

Mel lay on the dirty pavement and cried. She was so tired, her fall had hurt her, and she had lost the Mister's money for his papers. She lay and cried, sobbing miserably.

Suddenly somebody was there, on the pavement beside her, helping her to sit up. "*Pauvre enfant!*" he was saying. "Are you much hurt, my little girl?"

Mel choked and blinked. "I've lost my—pennies," she said "Can't—get—the papers!"

"But that cart hit you. Are you not hurt?"

Mel became aware that this stranger, who was certainly not English, was kneeling on the pavement beside her. He had dumped a leather satchel and a square flat parcel on the ground, and a small boy was standing guard over them.

Mel sniffed and scrubbed the wet tears from her face, leaving dirty smears instead. She stopped crying, because this was so interesting. The foreign man had on a wide-brimmed black hat and under it his face was long and narrow and bony looking.

"No, it's not hurting now," she said. "But I can't get the Mister's papers now and it was his money, not mine."

"Be not anxious for that—we will get it for you," he said. "Can you stand up? Toby, help her, please."

"Toby!" cried Mel. "Is he Toby?"

"I'm Anthony, but I'm called Toby," said the child.