

His brother's keeper

by Gretchen Haskin

part 1

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It was a day without beginning, it was a day without end. Gliding through the sky, the vagrant sun, trailing daylight in its wake, seemed neither to set nor to rise but to hang forever above St. Petersburg like a weary, one-eyed sentinel. Blue mist drifting from the Neva filled the streets where, on this Sunday dawn in 1908, lovers still strolled and revelers, desperate for rest, dozed in dusky gardens. “*Belyie nochi*”-White Nights-brief interludes in a cruel climate, offered a furtive glimpse of life everlasting to those awake enough to see its false promise. In a yellow palace facing the Moika Canal, a young man sat at his desk. While his family slept, Count Nicholas Felixovich Soumarkovkov-Elston, Prince Yusupov, writes to this mistress:

“My Dear Marina,

“By the time this letter reaches you I shall be dead.... I believe that you love me and my last thought will be of you. I hope you believe me, as I would not lie to you before my death. I loved you, my little Marina, because you are not like anybody else and never thought of behaving like others, always following the correct path set before you. Society does not like such people. They have mud and stones thrown at them. You, as a weak little woman, cannot prevail against them alone.

“Your life, as well as mine, is spoiled. We met at an unfortunate time which has ruined us both. You will never be happy since it is unlikely that another will appear who will understand you as I did. I understand you easily as we are so alike. How happy we could have been together.”

“Forgive me for the lack of style in this letter; it contains several phrases that fail to tie together. I write what is in my mind with little regard for style. I find it very hard that I cannot see you before my death and that I cannot say farewell and tell you how much I love you. Just think how terrible it is to die for you without even knowing whether you are thinking of me at that moment.”

“Marina, my dear Marina, you do not know how much I love you. It is now five o'clock.

In two hours my seconds will come to take me away and I will never see you again. Why are you so far away? You will not hear from me as I pronounce your name for the last time. I do not even have your photograph that I could kiss. I have only a small lock of hair that I hold sacred.

“That is all. I do not fear death, but it is hard for me to die far from you without seeing you for the last time. “Farewell forever. I love you.”(1)

The lady to whom Nicholas penned such passionate lines was Countess Marina Alexandrovna Manteuffel, the recent bride of Count Arvid Manteuffel. As Nicholas wrote this anguished farewell, Marina was indeed far away. Having left her husband after two hectic months of marriage, she passed these midsummer days with her mother at their estate in Yustila, Finland, waiting for Nicholas to claim her as he promised he would.

From Paris he had cabled:

“Plan to see you Monday. We will, both of us, have to leave Russia for some time. Nastia (her maid) should pack your things. Love you, my dear, *mon petite*. In great haste, Nicholas.(2)

A day later:

“Have arrived (from Paris). Will be in Yustila Monday. We shall leave immediately for Paris. Wait for telegram tomorrow. Marina tells us her heart beat with joy. Filled with new hope and new energy, she takes the family boat out onto the lake. Returning to the dacha she walks through the fragrant rose gardens under a twilight sky while the notes of Liebestraum drift from the drawing room. That night she sleeps deeply’, soon. her lover will come from Petersburg to take her away. In two days’ time he hasn’t come. For reasons she does not understand, her mother cries and lies about on a chaise with red eyes. She sends her young brother out on his bicycle to find the postman. He returns with the letters, one for her, but it is not from Nicholas. It is written in her father’s hand:

“Sunday

“Dear Marina,

“I have already told your mother the tragic news. This morning. Count Manteuffel killed Count Nicholas Soumarokof-Elston in a duel. May his soul rest in peace. Your husband believed himself to be profoundly outraged. We have no right to judge. “May merciful God help you in this tragedy which you have provoked.

“Your father,

“Alexander Feodorovich de Heyden.”(4)

At the time of the calamity of which her father writes so coldly, Marina Manteuffel (nee de Heyden) was nineteen, her life shattered. Nicholas, scion to the greatest fortune in Russia, perhaps in the world, was dead at twenty-five, and a disgraced and ostracized Arvid Manteuffel soon left the country. Untouched survivor of this debacle was Nicholas’s peculiar brother, Felix, who stood next in line to inherit the family riches and who would, eight years later, gun down Empress Alexandra’s “dear friend,” Gregory Rasputin. Had Count de Heyden been blessed with either the gift of hindsight or of foresight, he might have applied the term provocateur to Felix rather than to his daughter, who at her most guilty was a vain, impetuous adolescent and at her least, a victim of a hypocritical society.

Countess Marina Alexandrovna de Heyden, born in 1889, was by her own definition a mongrel. On both paternal and maternal sides of the family, there was-with one exception-not a social blemish. Her father’s noble ancestors fled Holland at the time of the Dutch revolution, seeking refuge in Russia where they served as admirals of the Imperial Navy. For services to the Throne, the de Heydens were granted the title of Count in Perpetuity by Nicholas I, and for



generations found their metier at sea and as administrators of the Emperor’s vast territories. On her mother’s side, things went awry. The Moussine-Pouchkines, well placed in society, were not made of the same stern stuff as the de Heydens. High strung, good to look at, and confused by an ineffable streak of mysticism, their tendency to flout social conventions reaches its ultimate flowering when Marina’s grandfather, Count Vladimir, married, at the age of thirty, a seventeen-

Marina de Hayden as a young woman, above
(Courtesy Jacques Ferrand)

peasant girl from Yaroslav province. The product of this scandalous union was Marina's mother, Alexandra. When she was three, the young wife ran off, saying, "Enough of counts and Princes!" and returned home to the Steppes.

Generously, Marina attributes the regeneration of her "too blue" blood and her vitality to this free spirit. However, she is quick to point out that this "salmagundis de races diverses," or mixture of conflicting blood, produced a certain disequilibrium and emotional excess in future generations.

One of four children, Marina was raised in grand style at the official residence in Helsinki where her grandfather was Governor-General and her father a young lieutenant with the Imperial Fleet. Tended by a flock of nannies and governesses, she was permitted to play on Sunday with other children of the local aristocracy in the gilt and marble ballroom, in an ornate dining room draped in purple velvet, and in the royal portrait gallery, which the youngsters called "The Tsar's Room." During the week attempts were made to give her a rudimentary education in music, drawing, and etiquette, but Marina was a lazy student given to daydreaming and scribbling bad verse. Constantly reminded of the importance of the house and of her grandfather's position, the little girl quickly acquired the elitist, impractical values of Russian nobility and an aversion to serious study.

A vain child, she did learn early the virtues and vices of beauty. Fawned over for her lustrous golden hair, sea-blue eyes and dewy skin, she came to expect compliments from visitors to the old house. Outspoken but neither quick nor clever, the little girl preened like a debutante hovered over by her Fraulein and her mother, whom she resembled. The greatest tragedy of the young Countess's life befell her when her nose was broken in a sledding accident. Over sixty years later, the aged Marina recalls, with horror, her mother crying, "Oh my God! Your nose! Your beautiful little nose!"

Her perfect nose, reduced to "marmalade," changed her classic profile forever, nonetheless, the resilient girl considered herself, "one of the prettiest women of the day, envied now for my retroussé nose." When she was eight, her father was given a promotion that took them from provincial Helsinki to St. Petersburg, "city of my destiny." Count de Heyden was named adjutant to Nicholas II and the family propelled into "the isolated world of the elite." Installed in a grand house in a fashionable part of town, Marina and her sisters found themselves in dancing class with daughters of the finest families, and it was here that she caught her first glimpse of Empress Alexandra who, from time to time, came to watch the progress of her two eldest girls, Grand Duchesses Olga and Tatiana.

Marina writes: "The first time I saw the Tsarina I was taken by her cold beauty and the sadness of her eyes. Distant, nervous, and blushing, she awkwardly held out her hand to be kissed. To us children she said nothing. With a fixed smile upon her lips...her presence was glacial."(5)

While Marina plodded away at her studies, her father - selfish and ambitious—was again promoted. This time his advancement was spectacular. Named Chief of the Imperial Military Chancellery, he retired ever further from his family. Rarely seen at home, he now became "a complete stranger," taking little part in the lives of his wife or his children and leaving Marina with "an immense need for love" which he did little to satisfy. Since he was rarely at her side, Countess Alexandra entertained occasionally, went out cautiously, and left the care and education of her children to a retinue of servants from abroad. Marina saw them as strangers who tried to graft good manners and self-control

onto an increasingly giddy, willful, and rapidly maturing young girl, While tutors droned, she dreamed of this “city of a Thousand and One Nights where, I was sure, there lived in a palace a Prince who Would dance attendance on me.”

Before her fantasy was realized, Marina had a number of false starts. Convinced of her own sophistication and charm, she fell into blind love with a baron who had come to Petersburg to complete his studies. Hidden behind the drawing room door, she heard the handsome young aristocrat in conversation with her mother. “Your little Marina,” he said, “has such long legs she reminds me of an ostrich.” Perhaps her mother’s laughter was more galling than her “prince’s” salon-repartee, for-after floods of tears and anger-her grand amour died on the vine. And perhaps it was, after this casual rejection, time for Marina to revisit, even briefly, her childhood. During the winter, she and her sisters were taken for daily walks along the frozen Neva. So badly did they behave that the Grand Duke Vladimir, unfortunate enough to meet them, cried out, “My God! Here they come again. The little Heydens running like the devil!”

During the summer, they retired to their villa in Yustila, across the Gulf of Finland where the children sailed, played tennis and croquet and forgot, for a few brief months, the restraints of growing up too-well connected. For Marina it was the happiest time of the year, and it was during those days that she became aware of the rebellious streak in her mother, who was known to receive “artists and Jews” in her home. One afternoon, shortly before the revolution of 1905 when dissent was in the air, servants came running, shouting that revolutionaries waving red flags had invaded the park. Taking her parasol, the Countess went calmly to meet the rabble while Marina’s governess, Miss Kent, lamented, “How very unreasonable to go off by herself to meet those horrid people!”

Servants crowded around the children, ready to protect them from violence; they all listened for pitiable cries from the bottom of the garden signaling the Countess’s murder. An hour later, Alexandra returned, smiling.

“How perfectly charming these people are,” she said. “They treasure our gardens and asked me to sit with them. They speak passionately, and I learned many things of which I was ignorant. There is nothing to fear from these brave men. My park is at their disposal.”(6)

Perhaps, Marina posits, it was that drop of common blood that inspired her mother’s egalitarianism and a bravery that was to see her through the horrific days ahead. It was also Alexandra’s determination that saw her daughter enrolled at the Lycée Tagantzeff to pursue a more serious education. For the first time in her life, Marina found herself faced with “excellent teachers with liberal tendencies and...bourgeois students, some Russian, some Jews.” Almost gleefully she reports that she would not study, feigned headaches, and was last in her class, thinking only of the fairy tales her head had been stuffed with since her days in the nursery. Fresh in her mind, as well, was a heady meeting the past summer with Olga, Queen of the Hellenes, who had come to visit her brother, Grand Duke Konstantin, at Pavlovsk. After spending a day with the Heydens at their dacha and having fallen victim to Marina’s cheeky charm, Olga, who was about to board the Imperial train at Vyborg, kissed her warmly.

“Little girl,” she said, “you have won the heart of a Queen. What will you do later to the heads of men?”

The last months of 1904 passed quickly. Trees along the canals and in the Summer Garden stood leafless and black in the streaming rainstorms from the Gulf. These winds of change cleansed deep and wide, for before the next year was out uprisings and carnage would sweep the country from the Black Sea to Petersburg challenging the old order and tearing away its foundations. But for sixteen-year-old Marina, “the fetes continued more brilliant and gayer than ever.” Among the parties given by the children of their set was a production of Molière’s **Les Femmes Savantes** organized by her mother. With the aid of diction coaches, a director from the Imperial Theatre, and a squadron of costumers and hairdressers. **Les Femmes** was presented at the de Heyden house in the winter of 1905. Marina writes deliriously describing her white satin costume, her performance, and the applause and flowers that rained down upon her. It was her first excursion into “the glory and the excitement of an artist’s life,” and one that also introduced her to a woman who would loom large in her life. She writes: “The Princess Zenaide Youssouppoff attended the premiere matinée and complimented me on my performance and on my costume. Who could know that, a few years later, this woman would

play a tragic role in my life?”(7) A tragedy of more immediate consequence followed that spring when Marina’s father, whose absences had become more frequent, was discovered in an affair with one of the Empress’s maids-of-honor.

Certainly such liaisons happened in Petersburg society, but in this case the errant husband was resolved to marry the lady; and in the summer of that year, he divorced his wife despite the enormous influence exerted upon him by the Dowager Empress Marie and the reigning Empress Alexandra. He was forced to resign his position from society where neither he nor his wife could be received. Although Marina had come to think of her father as a stranger, such scandal and humiliation in a Victorian era must have affected her deeply and placed the family in an unenviable position. To a smaller home they moved, with her mother pining for the old house on Zaharievskaya and with Marina becoming dangerously headstrong and impulsive.

At the time of her debut in 1907, she was an alarmingly beautiful young woman. “Tall and willowy, I had long, slender legs. With my golden hair and blue-green eyes I was uncontestedly beautiful. I was called the prettiest debutante of the year.” (8) Prince Serge Obolensky, cousin to the young Yusupov princes, agreed: She was “beautiful and much courted, extremely I d a great flirt.”(9) Even Prince Felix Yusupov, who later became her mortal enemy, grudgingly admitted that she was “both beautiful and attractive.” But, as Marina herself asks: What about character? “I was interested only in my beauty, my conquests, my gorgeous clothes, and rank in society. Devourer of chocolates and compliments, I was frivolous, passionate about theatre and dance, reckless and disdainful of convention ..and always in immense need of love.” (10)

And so this volatile, voracious young woman was launched into Petersburg society, to “all the glory and grandeur of a past time” with its sad-eyed Empress, sweet, weak Emperor, and their children dancing for Granny Victoria, all on their way to a voyage from which none would return. She recalls Elizabeth Barret Browning:

“How bad and mad and sad it was,
“But oh, how sweet it was.”

In 1907, while the newly presented Marina and her mother made their endless rounds of couturiers and modistes’, entertained and were entertained’, and greeted “*le tout Petersburg*” from their carriage each afternoon - Marina being especially struck by the grand limousine in which Princess Zenaide Yusupov rode—the two sons of the Princess were in Paris visiting brothels and opium dens. Nicholas, then twenty-four, a worldly and handsome man to whom women were drawn, immediately fell in love with Manon Loti, an infamous courtesan who lived a life of luxury and decadence. That she surrendered to the young Prince was not surprising. With his black hair and his brown eyes flecked with gold, his full, sensual mouth, and proud bearing, the nobleman seemed indifferent to the immense fortune he possessed. He spent it with a lavish hand and without thought. This was hardly Nicholas’s first affair, and he threw himself into it with all the abandon and excess that marked his liaisons with other women.

Nicholas Yusupov

(State Historical Archives, St Petersburg; Yusupov Collection)

Trailing in his wake and forgotten by the feverish lover, who spent his days and nights with Loti, was his brother, Felix, younger by five years. Felix



writes that Nicholas barely deigned to notice his existence, and in order to amuse himself or to compete with him, he too formed an alliance with a charming young girl, attractive but “less showy” than Loti. Seductive in his own way, Felix was tall, slender, pale-complexioned, and fey, his deep blue-gray eyes shadowed by dissipation, his manner somewhat disengaged, his manners impeccable when he chose. As Nicholas resembled their father, Felix did his mother and more particularly her grandmother, the great beauty, Princess Zenaide Ivanova Yusupov, later Countess de Chauveatl, who it was rumored had kept the skeleton of a lover in a secret chamber in her bedroom. Being dismissed by his older brother and left to find his own amusements was no surprise to Felix. Theirs had been an ambivalent relationship from the day of his birth, when Nicholas, finding him a scrawny, ugly baby, suggested to their mother that she throw him out the palace window. For years the brothers were at odds, finding their only connection in a perpetual rudeness and disdain for those who visited the family’s various estates in Petersburg, Moscow, or the Crimea. In adolescence, they seemed to grow closer, but Nicholas continued to treat Felix in a patronizing manner, dressing him up, inspired by his mistress-of-the-moment, Polia, in women’s clothing much as Felix costumed his beloved dog, Gugusse, in wigs and skirts, powders and rouge. As Nicholas became increasingly “overbearing and arrogant” and seemingly found no pursuit in life other than women, nights with the gypsies, and a love for the theatre, Zenaide worried about his time abroad with little discipline to guide him except his younger brother’s. Had she known that Felix had discovered the pleasures of opium, she might not have written, on the eve of his departure for Petersburg:

“9 October 1907

“Koreiz

“Dearest Felix,

“Thank you for the letter. At last I have received your news: it has been awful not having any word of our fugitives! In the past you used to write daily, but now have ceased to do so. I am very worried about your unavoidable departure for Petersburg. I am hoping to get your telegram soon telling me about your decision, as the matter is too serious to be ignored. If you have found evidence of the illness and are unable to last until the end of October...then come straight to Petersburg and settle your affairs.

“It is so delightful here. It would be a great pity if Nikolai lags behind since Papa is counting on having him here and is always talking about it. Anyhow, have Nikolai write Papa a letter-a nice letter-he is capable of being nice and amiable when he wants to be. I hope that you are living in peace and harmony, and that all misunderstandings have been forgotten. Agreement between you gives me great comfort. Think about this, both of you, and try not to upset things....

“Papa is by the sea, and I have stayed home to write to my Felyunka and to send him a big kiss. Without both of you Koreiz has been boring. A big kiss. Christ be with you.

“Mama” (11)

Zenaide and Felix often wrote in coded words and phrases, and it is unclear what her reference to an illness is. Whether it refers to Nicholas’s pernicious affair with Loti, Felix’s love affair with opium, or some physical sickness, is unknown, however, her concern for the fractious relationship between her sons and Nicholas’ irascibility is profound.

Within weeks, the two Princes were back in Petersburg sharing an idle, empty life, and within weeks Nicholas, a gifted actor, would rekindle his passion for the theatre. Within months he would fall in love again, this time with Countess Marina Heyden, the Petersburg darling, known for her *déclassé* father, and her giddy, impulsive ways. When Nicholas first met her she was engaged to marry Count Arvid Mantfeuffel, lieutenant in the Empress Marie’s Horse Guards Regiment, of which his father was Commander.



Princess Zenaide
(State Historical Archives, St Petersburg; Yusupov Collection)

As the two brothers severed their ties in Paris-Nicholas falling out of love as quickly as he had fallen into it-and sped back to Russia, Marina was entering her first “season,” one in which a young lady of Petersburg society was expected to make a good match. Aware of her charm, she enjoyed large and glamorous arenas, and it was at the glittering Imperial Ballet that, seated in the box of Baron de Freedericksz, “lightning struck.”

Presenting himself to the Baron and asking to be introduced to the exquisite Marina and her mother, Count Arvid Manteuffel moved quickly. Sure of himself, severely handsome and urbane, scion of a great Baltic family, and a Regimental Officer with a known taste for pretty women and cards, Manteuffel showered Marina with compliments, promised they would meet the next night at a charity, and kept his opera glasses fastened on her during the final act of *Esmarelda*. When the dazzled young girl reached home, she stopped her mother with a single question:

“What should you say if I married Count Manteuffel, Mama?”

“You must wait until he asks you,” answered the Countess. And Marina waited. Through endless balls, fêtes, and teas, she waited for the Count to “declare his love.” Their flirtation was flagrant enough to violate Petersburg’s strict if hypocritical rules of etiquette, bringing down the wrath of several noble hostesses on Marina’s blonde head. Manteuffel remained nonchalant, appearing in her life, the ardent suitor, then disappearing with his Horse Guard friends, leaving her to question his rather curt nature, episodic absences, and “his strong German accent.” She had also been close enough to the Count to find his mustache disagreeable. It was at a magnificent November party at the Tauride Palace that Marina was rewarded for her patience. In a sparkling garden hung with lanterns and filled with music, “*les elegants*” wrapped in mink, chinchilla and ermine skated gracefully beneath a starry sky.

Gliding along with Manteuffel at her side, Marina suddenly heard his determined voice.

“Will you marry me, Marina?”

Shocked at his brusque tone and the decided lack of romance in his proposal,

Count Arvid Manteuffel

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she asked him to give her eight days to consider it, but, she says, he soon took her in his arms and embraced her, saying, “One word, “*Oui*,” will decide my fate- ”

That night, as was her custom, Marina wrote in her journal:

“Arvid has asked me to be his wife. Count Manteuffel is not only handsome but fascinating as well. All my friends’ mothers want him for a son-in-law. I am proud and Mama will be so happy. Arvid belongs to one of the noblest families in the Baltic. He is rich. He has many castles. I will travel. I will go to Rome, to London, to Paris....

“But am I happy?”

“Pleased, flattered, proud, yes-but is what I feel truly happiness? My head is too clear, my head too calm, for this to be the bliss described in novels. I love Arvid well enough (*bien*), and this ‘*bien*’ scratches at me like a thorn.

“My joy dies and a vague fear takes its place. This proud man with his military manners, who has asked me to share his life, is nothing like the Prince Charming of my dreams.” (12)

Torn by indecision, this pampered child-woman who knew nothing of life except crinolines and powders went the next day to the Cathedral of St. Isaac where, surrounded by its Byzantine splendor, she knelt before the Icon of the Holy Virgin and implored Her not to abandon her.

On the 14th of December, Marina told her mother that Arvid had asked for her hand, and although the Countess was pleased with the match, it was necessary for her to go to her father, a man who had played almost no role in her life. Married now to Alexandra Olenine, his ties to Court severed, he immediately opposed the union and insisted it be deferred for a year, but after an interview with the persuasive and charming Manteuffel he agreed to a date only four months away, April 23, 1908. One further call had to be made. It was required that Marina and her mother call on Empress Alexandra who had selected her, in January, as a maid-of-honor. Taken to the Alexander Palace in a Court automobile, Marina met an empress who wore an expression of anguish, her sad eyes feverish with the distress they reflected, and who spoke nervously and rapidly, her face flushed. Like Marina’s father, she asked that the young couple would wait another year, but when the Countess said the date was fixed, Alexandra stood and waited for Marina to kiss her hand. She said only, “May good God protect you.”

Marina’s journal, February, 1908:

“This afternoon Maman took me to a gathering at Mme. Taneef.... A Baltic baroness expressed to Maman the joy my engagement has brought her and asked when I would marry. Her little darting eyes looked me up and down.

“ ‘I knew your fiancé when he was in diapers,’ she said, ‘and as for his dear parents, they are my old friends. You have won first prize, my beauty. Arvid is a treasure. One can only hope that you will also win the love of this wonderful family....’

“The words of the Baroness trouble me. Anxiously I ask myself if these “dear parents” are people with whom I can ever reach an understanding.” (13)

Theatre was in the Yusupov blood. Indeed, the history of the family might be said to be Grand Guignol drama since its ferocious emergence in the sixth century when Khan Aboubekir ben Raioc, a lineal descendent of the prophet Mahomet, was proclaimed Prince of Princes, Sultan of Sultans, and Khan of Khans. For centuries, this mighty clan spread not from the desert, amassing wealth and land, finding its seat in a vast territory in the southern regions of the Volga and eventually, through the good offices of Khan Youssouf, forging an alliance with Tsar Ivan IV. It was here in the court of the Terrible Ivan that high drama commenced when Youssouf’s only daughter, Soumbeca, Queen of Kazan, developed a taste for power and blood at the young age of fourteen. Quickly marrying, three times, khans who killed their predecessors, the beautiful Soumbeca was able to survive on the throne until she was captured by Russian forces and taken by lavish flotilla along the Volga to Ivan’s Kremlin palace. There she seemed to have cleverly transformed herself into a compliant princess who “conquered all heads at court...the Russian people adored her for in their eyes she was a fabulous princess out of a fairy tale.” She died, wisely, at thirty-seven, as her beauty faded, and as her beloved father lay dead, murdered by his brother, another casualty of the internecine wars the family had perfected.

Four hundred years later, Russian writers and composers still honored her haunting memory, the great Glinka creating music for **Soumbeca and the Conquests of Kazan**, an immensely popular Petersburg ballet of the time.

After the death of the flamboyant Soumbeca, the Yusupov clan fought among themselves and with others until the end of the seventeenth century, when Khan Abdoul Mirza embraced the Orthodox faith, and the family entered the employ of Tsars, serving them as diplomats, confidants, and warriors, receiving, in return, riches beyond calculation. Under the reign of Empress Anna, Prince Boris Gregorievich Yusupov, harkening back to some innate calling, formed a company of amateur actors whose talents so dazzled the next Empress, Elizabeth, that she signed a decree giving Petersburg its first public theatre. From 1756 until its flight from Russia in 1919, the Yusupov family was inextricably and fatefully a part of high and bloody drama in the capital city of Imperial Russia.

It was the great Prince Nicholas Borisovich who turned the family’s attention to private and magnificent theatricals, expending vast sums of money on a grand building at Arkhangelskoye, where his own company of actors, musicians, and dancers performed, trained by the finest directors, coaches, and choreographers in the country. As he grew older, however, profligate and imperious Nicholas’s aesthetic tastes changed from the sublime to the tasteless, and, with a wave of his cane, dancers, performing before a blue-blood audience, appeared naked on stage.

Love for the theatre ran long and deep but it had, perhaps, no more brilliant advocate than Princess Zenaide Yusupov, who was herself a talented actress, sponsoring performances at the Moika Palace and, when asked, acting and dancing with the flair and pleasure of a diva. Her husband, Felix, admiring of her talents, created a magnificent red and gilt theatre for her, a small architectural gem, where the world’s greatest artists performed for Petersburg society and for the Imperial Family. That her first living son, Nicholas, shared these talents, was no surprise to the Princess. The young man, who so closely resembled his virile, stalwart father, and who was brought up on a rigorous diet of physical activity, hunting, and regimental honor, continued to list toward acting and in 1905 established a troupe of amateur players. Curiously his mother would not allow them to perform in her theatre, but they easily found venues in other homes where audiences were of their own circle and their productions always well received. Countess Marina de Heyden, who had scored such a success as ingenue in **Les Savantes**, had been an occasional member of Nicholas’s elite “*Cercle des Artistes-Amateurs*,” and was at least a passing acquaintance of the young Prince. They traveled in the same set, lived for a time in the same fashionable street, and shared the same passion for the stage.

Marina’s fiancé did not share such passion. Manteuffel adhered to this declassé behavior and was quick to tell her that, in all decency, she must give it up. He, however, continued to play with her emotions, dancing attendance on her and her family one moment, flooding her with gifts, candies, and flowers from the city’s finest shops, then disappearing into the

boisterous company of his regimental friends. Too often she waited in vain for him at a dinner, a ball, a tea, only to be told that he was “*au cercle*,” a past-time which he promised to forego after their wedding. The engaged couple clearly met at Manteuffel’s convenience and wandering sense of obligation.

Marina writes in her journal:

“Arvid promised me that after our marriage he would give up his gambling. In the meantime, faithful to his habits, he continues to spend time in “*le cercle*” of his friends. Gaming tables draw him, but he continues to impress, sending gifts and taking long walks with me along the Neva. The season is in full swing, but balls and receptions to which he refuses to accompany me have lost all their interest. The telephone is ringing. I close my diary.” (14)

While Manteuffel spent his time gambling and being seen, occasionally, deep in conversation with other lovely women, Marina returned with a vengeance to the scene of her past triumph, the theatre, and Prince Nicholas’s “amateurs.” It was at a supper following one of these lavish productions that the restless Countess formally met its director, Nicholas Yusupov, and his brother, Felix, “sons of the richest woman in the Empire, the Princess Zenaide Yusupov.”

If her meeting with the starchy Manteuffel had struck her like a thunderbolt, leading her to think immediately of marriage, her introduction to Nicholas left her dumbstruck by his complete indifference. After the long, admiring glance that she expected, he wandered off across the room and said nothing else to the bewildered girl for the rest of the evening.

The Prince’s practiced nonchalance had its desired effect; she was overcome, smitten by a man who did not drown her in stale compliments or raise her gloved hand to his mustachioed lips and speak nonsense. Her fascination soon became an obsession.

Sixty years later, Marina still wrote about Yusupov as if he stood before her, a man of great breeding, charm and sensuality, his warm brown eyes alternately tender and mocking, his full mouth alluringly *triste*. His disregard for the world of society and manners, his passion for the theatre, intrigued and drew her like a sorcerer’s sparkling wand. If she could not see the danger in such a man, she did in Felix, who looked nothing like his brother. Of him she wrote: “The perverse curve of his lips gave to his angelic features a peculiar hardness. I cannot recall, in all my life, a creature so superbly and perfectly insolent.” (15)

To a frivolous young woman still living in the land of make-believe, her prince had arrived “en scene” somewhat belatedly, bringing with him incalculable wealth, not one but many palaces, beauty, and mystery. To his mother and to his brother she failed to pay sufficient attention.

The unfortunate fact that she was engaged to marry was not lost on this willful girl. Even as her fascination with Nicholas grew, she marched doggedly ahead in the nuptial parade accepting congratulations, and receiving splendid gifts. But even those from her family brought her no comfort – her Paris trousseau a present from her Aunt Countess Sheremetev, a sapphire as large as a pigeon’s egg, suspended on a platinum chain from her uncle. Parties consumed her evenings leading the bride-to-be to ask that although “I was feted, adored, and loved...why, deep in my soul, where love should be, did I shiver with cold?”

For this young mystic, who saw omens in the smallest mishap, her engagement ring frightened her even more. An enormous ruby held in place by carved gold classier than it had been designed by Faberge, “the Cartier of Petersburg,” or, as Marina quipped, “of petersbourgeois.”

When she showed the ring to her faithful and equally superstitious maid, Nastia, the woman shrank back, saying, “It’s said they taste like blood. Rubies bring tragedy!”

“I adore rubies.”

“Blood and tears,” Nastia lamented. “In your place, Mademoiselle la Countess, I would have chosen an emerald.”(16)

As Lent approached and the season faded, Marina, beleaguered by doubt returned more frequently to her friends In Nicholas’s “*Cercle des Artistes*.” Although he paid her little attention, humiliating to the vain young woman, she noticed that his glances became more languorous and lingering, his gypsy songs sung only for her, champagne drunk to her blue eyes. At a late supper following one performance given by “les amateurs” she found herself seated next to Felix, who entertained her with his usual chatter and compliments.

Suddenly, in a whisper, he said, “My brother finds you very beautiful. Unfortunately, the theatre takes all his time and women don’t interest him now. Do you see those two young ladies next to Nicholas? Each wants to marry him. Such women are beasts!”



“The brightest flower of a decadent society” (17) Prince Felix was twenty years old. In those twenty years he had accomplished little other than graduating from the Gourevich Secondary School, spending one “revolting” night among the poor, practicing yoga, and becoming a master of cross-dressing, his closets filled impartially with impeccably tailored suits and tulle gowns and tiaras.

A delicate, shy boy who developed every disease known to childhood, Felix was hovered over by his anxious mother who had lost three infants before lusty Nicholas was born and thrived. Gracious and kind to a fault, Princess Zenaide was “alas, a tragic mother who spoiled her children far too much” (18) who could deny them nothing. Hoping for a daughter, she adorned Felix in pink dresses and lace until he was five, and in them he preened, crying out to passers-by, “Look! isn’t Baby pretty?” In his own words, he grew up as a wayward, lazy, undisciplined child so uncontrollable that he refused to learn from his governesses, nurses, and tutors, savagely biting the hand of his piano teacher. In a desperate effort to instill some self-control in the boy, his parents sent him out of the house to Gourevich School, where Felix again demonstrated his own brand of self-control when he decided to fail the entrance examination. Unfortunately, the directors waived the test and he passed on into the hands of less indulgent teachers to whom he paid no attention.

Felix Yusupov

(State Historical Archives, St Petersburg; Yusupov Collection)

By that time he had already begun to find immense pleasure in wearing his mother’s things and dominating subservients. Fascinated with the voluptuous, exotic atmosphere in his father’s Moorish Room, the young boy would “assemble all the oriental servants and disguise myself as a sultan...wearing my mother’s jewels. I fancied myself a satrap surrounded by his slaves. One day I staged a scene to represent the punishment of a disobedient slave (who) lay prone at my feet pretending to beg for mercy and, just as I raised a dagger to stab the culprit, the door flew open and my father appeared...he flew into a violent rage.” (19)

The elder Yusupov’s rage and attempts to control the boy with Spartan training and cold baths did nothing to quell Felix’s taste for the bizarre. Several years later, at the age of twelve, he and his cousin ventured forth dressed in

Zenaide's gowns, jewelry, and fur-lined cloaks. Through the streets of Petersburg they sauntered until they reached The Bear, a restaurant frequented by society and officers of the guard. Drinking champagne and rebuking advances a bejeweled and drunken Felix made a lasso of his mother's fine pearls and sailed it across the room, breaking the strand. Pursued by the owner and unused to having to pay for anything, Felix scampered home where again his father's wrath descended and he was confined to his room for ten days. But he had only just begun his double life of "school boy" by day and elegant woman by night.

For years it continued, at first in Petersburg and later only abroad. Felix, often with his brother's encouragement, appeared at the opera, at cafe-concerts, masked balls, and at chic restaurants dressed in blue tulle embroidered with silver, ostrich feathers in his wig and his mother's jewels at his throat and wrist. As delighted as a debutante, he reveled in the envious glances of society women and in the admiring stares of bewitched men, including King Edward VII of England, who sent a servant to determine the identity of this "lovely young woman." The gap, which had always existed between father and son, widened as Felix grew more distinctly different. He detested the elder Felix's friends and they, in turn, ridiculed him. He found the bloody fall hunts in which he was forced to participate hideous and eventually refused to shoot down bear, elk, and wild game that roamed the vast reaches of the family's estate at Rakitnoye. He shunned the military in which, as General-Major in His Majesty's Suite and Officer in the Horse Guards, his father proudly served. A young man of "great charm and considerable selfishness, capable of flamboyant queen-like behavior with a tendency to get into trouble," (20) his release from secondary school, the last discipline in

his life, threw him out into society where he prowled its perimeters like "a naughty grey wolf" (21) with "God in one eye and the Devil in the other" (22)

The final rupture came after a costume ball where Felix, in sequined gown, diamonds, and sable, was almost unmasked by a Guards' officer. Creating a near riot, Felix escaped across the city in an open sleigh, but news of his "prank" quickly reached his father, who summoned him to his rooms. Livid, his voice shaking with rage, the elder man denounced his son as a "guttersnipe and a scoundrel," condemning him as a person who was not fit to breathe the same air as honest folk and as a disgrace to the family. His place was in a Siberian convict settlement, the father stormed, not in the centuries old Moika Palace! Although the words homosexual or transvestite were not, according to Felix, used, it



The Yusupov family when its sons were teenagers, with a sailor-suited Felix and Nicholas in Naval uniform.

is clear that Prince Yusupov recognized in his son those very tendencies which, although they existed in large numbers in Petersburg society, were loathed but never named.

As seemed his way, Felix placed the blame for the incidents on Nicholas, reminding him that it was he and his mistress Polia who had begun dressing him as a woman for their own amusement. Loyally Nicholas shouldered the responsibility as he had in the past when, after a singing engagement at The Aquarium, a bejeweled and lavishly outfitted Felix was recognized by friends who rushed to report the outrage to his furious and humiliated parents. When Nicholas insisted that he had led his brother into the demi-monde and introduced him to this bizarre behavior, the friends who had witnessed it were sworn to secrecy and the affair hastily covered up. That his brother became the villain of the piece and he, “a horrible little beast,”(23) exonerated as an eccentric young aristocrat seemed not to bother him at all.

Self-absorbed, capricious and sexually disoriented, Felix appeared to have loved only his dog, Gugusse, his mother Zenaide, and later the Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich (to whom he devotes more pages in his book than he does to the death of his brother) more than he loved himself. Caught in the vacuum of ennui, jaded, protected by his adoring mother and reviled by his father, Prince Felix, in the early months of 1908, had experienced all the pleasures the world of the rich had to offer and most of its vices. By the time he was seated at dinner to the right of the enchanting and thoroughly affianced Marina de Heyden, he had run out of toys to play with and break.

Of course Nicholas Yusupov, collector of beautiful women, thought Marina desirable, but this young lady was neither a woman “of humble circumstances” as was the bohemian Polia, nor a notorious courtesan like Manon Loti. Nor was she a single woman with whom he could openly flirt. Despite her father’s divorce and remarriage, Marina moved in the highest circles of Petersburg society, and although Princess Zenaide found her and her mother too worldly, no whisper of shame had ever been attached to them by gossipmongers of the upper classes. The attraction, instantaneous between the Prince and the Countess, was from the beginning a volatile exercise in seduction, Marina’s gleaming ruby ring making the liaison even more titillating. That wintry night in March, while Count Manteuffel gambled his fortune away with friends, both Nicholas and Felix Yusupov began a game with higher stakes.

Intrigued by Felix’s provocative, disarming banter, a troubled Marina waited through the evening for Nicholas to approach her and, although he sang gypsy love songs with his dark eyes fixed on her, he seemed indifferent and said nothing until it was time for her to go. Arvid, who had finally come to fetch her, was impatiently waiting downstairs with his carriage.

As she slipped into her furs, Nicholas approached. “Poor little Cinderella, who must obey her master,” he mocked. “What would you say if I promised to free you from your tyrant?”

Confused, like Cinderella, she fled down the steps. The night air was bitterly cold. The servant helped them into the carriage where she nestled against Arvid’s unforgiving shoulder for warmth. When his arm “imprisoned” her, she felt only that she was being crushed by ice.

As the wedding approached, Marina and Manteuffel dutifully followed protocol, she meeting his parents and accepting their gift of diamonds and their decision that the young couple would live in a palace in Livonia with them, attending church together, being presented to society at a series of parties as an engaged couple should. Gifts flowed in. Attendants were chosen, the Imperial Family informed, invitations sent, gowns stitched and restituted, flowers ordered from the Crimea. It was to be the wedding of the year, with three hundred guests and a glorious honeymoon in Paris.

Marina's mother and sisters were transported', the de Heyden household was completely given over to preparations for the April celebration.

Marina writes only that she "was completely obsessed with the idea of seeing Nicholas again."

In March, a month before her marriage, Marina was asked to take part in a play that would benefit one of Empress Alexandra's charities. Despite Arvid's opposition, she accepted without hesitation, knowing that Nicholas was to play the lead.

One of the last events before Lent, the performance was to be given at Tsarskoye Selo with members of the Court and all of the Imperial Family, even the reclusive Empress, in attendance. Directed by a member of the Imperial Theatre, provided with sumptuous sets and costumes, Nicholas's little "*cercle des amateurs*" promised a true spectacle with which to ring down the curtain on the season of 1908. Cannily, Marina refused the role of ingenue, Matrena. Surrounded by a dozen pretty young girls, she would not shine. Instead she chose to play the mother, and submitted to make up that would transform her into a doddering old woman. Delighted by the escapade, Nicholas told her that all the paints and powders in the world would not turn her into a matron, and indeed Marina had no intention of looking drab. Old perhaps, but gloriously old. For her costume she chose the magnificent ensemble worn by her aunt Countess Sheremetev at the famous Winter Palace Ball of 1903, a silver lame gown encrusted with pearls and sapphires and trimmed with mink. In her hair she wore a tiara of diamonds; her face was framed in six strands of pearls. As she was determined to do, she stole the show. So funny was she that even the Empress laughed!

Across the stage from her strode Nicholas, dressed in white velvet and a silver hat studded with diamonds. Here, she writes giddily, was the Prince of her childhood dreams, the Prince from an enchanted land.

When the curtain rang down and the actors drifted in to the dinner given for them by the Emperor and Empress, Nicholas pulled her aside.

"You are as beautiful as an icon," he told her. He told her that again. Then he said, "I love you Marina."

She reports that her heart was filled with the sound of ringing bells.

The next day, Arvid paid a call. The whole town was talking about her performance, he railed. He was aghast at these public displays and after their marriage he would see that such ridiculous exhibitions stopped.

For several days, Marina behaved, but then, hoping to "revive her soul which death had gripped," she returned to the "cercle," the center of her life, where she was again tormented by Nicholas's inexplicable indifference. Felix also played a role in her torture. He seemed "to take a strange pleasure in his brother's intrigue and in my feelings for him. It seemed to amuse him extravagantly. Whenever I saw him he couldn't tell me enough that his brother found me beautiful and was in love with me. I drank his words like champagne.: (24)

At home, surrounded by the trappings of her wedding day, she wrote:

"In a month I am going to marry Arvid, and I find myself more and more in love-madly in love-with Nicholas. And what is more terrible is that he doesn't seem to love me. I know that he is attracted to me. The other day he smiled at me tenderly and, to my great happiness embraced me. '

'Only the threat of scandal keeps me from acting according to my conscience and breaking my engagement. If only I could talk to Maman. But it is too hard. I don't dare. I am afraid. The marriage date is set. Members of the Imperial Family have been told. All of Petersburg is invited to the wedding. Gifts continue to pour in.

"A break right before the wedding would be an indignity without parallel. What would the two Empresses think? What would Papa say? Maman could never endure such humiliation. And Arvid? He is partly responsible for what has happened to me. He should not have left me alone all those nights. It's sad but we don't share the same tastes. Things

that are my passion-theatre, music, literature-don't interest him at all. To him the Officers of the Guard are in a class above all others. I am not attracted to uniforms.

"That is all of importance. I don't want to think any more. I give up life and hope. I hear Nicholas say, 'Beautiful as an icon.' Will he love me some day?"

"Merciful God, You who can do all, make a miracle." (25)

Keepers of diaries and authors of autobiographies are often cited for their self-serving memories. Marina de Heyden, who wrote her **Rubis Portent Malheur** in her eighties and Felix, whose **Lost Splendor** was written by a very old Prince, cannot be faulted for inaccuracies or effusiveness. Marina's book drowns in suspect detail. Seventy-year-old conversations are recalled verbatim; Princess Belosselsky wore green at a tea in 1905 and walked a white borzoi two years later; the family took three dogs, two birds, and three maids to their summer house, she wore a blue tulle to the Kermesse ball. Felix also remembers wearing blue tulle and mis-states the month of his brother's death. But, if Marina failed to keep the journals from which she speaks, she has been able to recapture the voice and desperation of a young girl dancing into disaster. In them there appears no intentional prevarication, only extreme folly and an ultimate reluctance to confront the inescapable fact of a physical intimacy with her prince of the fairy-tales.

When Marina and Nicholas became lovers in unknown. Felix skirts the issue nicely, referring only to "their meetings" both before and after Marina's marriage. She is even more abstruse, but the affair must have been of sufficient intensity that Nicholas appealed to his parents for permission to marry her. Princess Zenaide and her husband "thoroughly disapproved" of the match and this was probably one of Felix's greatest understatements. The de Heydens were too much in the world, entertaining at parties that were too gay. There was a recent divorce in the family, and the young Countess's behavior was unpredictably giddy. The fact that Marina de Heyden was engaged to be married could hardly have been lost on father and mother, who represented the very pinnacle of Petersburg society, although it seems not to have been part of Nicholas's rational thought.

Absolutely forbidden by his parents to pursue this latest indiscretion, Nicholas, torn by conflicting emotions, appeared to Marina indifferent one moment and impetuously ardent the next. Felix, of course, had the solution.

A city devoutly Orthodox, Petersburg was nonetheless steeped in mysticism. Its streets teemed with prophets, holy men, clairvoyants, and magicians, all of whom promised their rich and aristocratic patrons views of "l'autre monde" and the future. Felix, too, had mysticism "in his blood" perhaps inheriting it from his mother who also claimed the gift of clairvoyance. Before he was sixteen, the young Prince had a prophetic dream of a train wreck that might have killed his parents. He was immediately embraced as a prophet which, he adds, "I naturally exploited for my personal needs." Throughout his life, Felix writes, he experienced abnormal sights and sounds including an apparition of a ghostly train filled with passengers racing through a snowy forest where there were no tracks, whispered voices in his mother's empty apartments calling his name, and a vision of his brother after his death.

To the distraught Marina he urged a meeting with the noted Polish mystic Czinski; to her further distress, Arvid insisted on accompanying her.

A few days before her marriage, this clairvoyant, known to Felix but presumably a disinterested party, met with them in his modest rooms and passed his hands over Marina's temples.

"Your future takes two roads...one leads to disaster. You will return to me for counsel and sooner than you think." Looking at the giant ruby on her finger, he continued, "Those stones will bring you tragedy!"

To Arvid he asked, "Do you intend to marry this lady?"

Arvid replied, "We are engaged."

“To avoid disaster. break this engagement as soon as possible!”

“I am not here to follow your advice,” Arvid said. “I am merely accompanying my fiancée. I believe all voyants are charlatans!”

The seer refused payment and showed them to the door, murmuring, “Blood, blood”

On the street, Arvid shrugged his shoulders. “You see? This prophet is a humbug. Your Orthodoxy is steeped in mysticism, but fortunately my Protestantism will protect us of these absurdities!” (26)

Manteuffel had yet to encounter the final machinations of that quintessential mystic and puppeteer, Felix Yusupov. With only days remaining before the wedding of Marina de Heyden and her Count the ingenious Prince had begun to spin a web from which no one but himself would emerge unscathed.

To be continued.....

Source Notes

- 1 State Historical Archives, Yusupov Collection, St. Petersburg, Russia.
2. de Heyden, 162.
3. *ibid.* 162.
4. *ibid.* 165.
5. *ibid.* 28.
6. *ibid.* 37.
7. *ibid.* 43.
8. *ibid.* 49.
9. Serge Obolensky, 65.
10. de Heyden, 49.
11. State Historical Archives, Yusupov Collection, St. Petersburg, Russia.
12. de Heyden, 66.
13. *ibid.* 78.
14. *ibid.* 84.
15. *ibid.* 85.
16. *ibid.* 73.
17. Salisbury, 293.
18. Vorres, 91 .
19. Yusupov, 61.
20. de Jonge, 182.
21. Serge Obolensky, 85.
22. King, “The Man Who Killed Rasputin,” 192.
23. Yusupov, 61 .
24. de Heyden, 98.
25. *ibid.* 99.
26. *ibid.* 100-101

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c. Gretchen Haskin 2000