

II—THE CZARINA

IT is a big step from the position of a girlish Princess, of comparatively humble means, and brought up in an essentially quiet, domesticated household in Darmstadt, to that of Empress of Russia, with its heavy responsibilities, dazzling brilliance, wealth, and perils, and it is small wonder that Princess Alix of Hesse hesitated before accepting the suit that, if favoured, would necessarily bring with it the harassing life that is inseparable from the exalted position of a Czarina.

Although Nicholas II was only heir-apparent when he wooed Princess Alix, it was an Emperor, not a Czarewitch, that she wedded, his accession taking place a few months after his engagement.

The Czarina is the youngest child of the late Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse, the Duchess being, of course, the ever-lamented Princess Alice of England, whose beautiful character the Czarina inherits in a marked degree.

Perhaps no Princess in modern history has known the pinch of poverty so well as did Princess Alice, whose pathetic letters tell many a tale of economy and contrivance practised. It is easy to believe, therefore, that the Czarina's youth was passed in the most frugal home, and that she led the quiet life of the ordinary German or English girl of the middle-class. A shilling a week was all that she was allowed for pocket-money until after her confirmation, when the allowance was doubled. She was brought up more after the fashion of an English girl than a German girl. Her nurse, Mrs. Orchard, was English, and she also had an English governess, Miss Jackson.

Princess Alix combined the true English love of outdoor sports and pastimes with the musical talent of the German nation, and early developed a gift for art in various forms, being particularly clever with her pencil and brush. At the same time she was instructed in many of the domestic arts, such as cooking, cake-making, plain and fancy

sewing, and used to execute the most delicate embroideries. She was born at Darmstadt on June 6, 1872.

Princess Alice made frequent allusions to her youngest daughter in after-letters—"Alicky," she used to call her. "She is a sweet, merry little person," she once wrote, "always laughing, and with a deep dimple in one cheek, just like Ernie" [the present Grand Duke of Hesse]. And on another occasion Princess Alice remarked: "She is quite the personification of her nickname, 'Sunny.'" The little Princess was so bright and joyous that she was called "Princess Sonnenschein."

Princess Alix was only six years old when she lost her mother, and, as her elder sisters grew up and married, she became more and more the companion of her father. When he died she stayed a good deal with her sisters, and at the house of the Grand Duchess Serge she was thrown into the company of the present Czar, then the Czarewitch. He had been fond of Princess Alix for years. Indeed, it is said that his affection for her dated back to the time when she was a child of twelve, and they met at the Grand Duchess Serge's wedding.

The late Czar, it seems, favoured one of the Montenegrin princesses as a future Empress of Russia, and when he found the Czarewitch was setting his affections in another direction he sent him on a tour round the world, in the hope that fresh scenes would bring fresh thoughts.

But the Czarewitch was not to be turned from his purpose, and on returning to Russia won over the Grand Duchess Serge and the Duchess of Saxe Coburg-Gotha to plead his cause with the Czar and Queen Victoria, who eventually gave their consent to the engagement. The Queen had never been an actual opponent of the marriage, but Princess Alix was delicate and young, and the perils of a Russian throne were great, and for these reasons Her Majesty would have preferred that her granddaughter, of