

An excerpt from
The Crystal Snowstorm
by Meriol Trevor

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 snowflakes. 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 facade 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.

"Oh, for a cup of tea!" said the governess, and she thought better of Agnes when she promptly went off and brought them tea on a tray, setting it in their sitting room.

Agnes was not old but looked as if she had never been young. She had knowing brown eyes and a wide humorous mouth. She was not a bit like old Sibby, but Catherine liked her at once and was glad she was there, in this big strange place.

Refreshed by the tea, Catherine went to look out of the window. She could see little, for it was dark night now, and the snow was swirling faster and faster out of the sky, patting against the glass. A lamp below illuminated part of a paved terrace, with steps descending into darkness.

"My mother grew up here," thought Catherine suddenly.

It was strange to think of it; she had no picture of her mother and could not imagine her.

The door opened in the room behind her and she heard the rustle of a silk skirt. She turned and saw a beautiful young lady dressed in lilac colour, with dark hair and a very white skin. She spoke to Miss Lacey in French, which Catherine had learned, but which she found difficult to follow. She was looking at Catherine as she spoke, and finally nodded to her and then went away.

"Who was that?"

"She says she is the Grand Duke's niece, Countess Imelda something or other," said Miss Lacey. "The Grand Duke wishes to see you in the drawing room before dinner. A servant will fetch you."

"Miss Lacey! Aren't you coming too?"

But Miss Lacey had not been told to come, and so Catherine, in great fear and trembling, had to go downstairs alone. She was wearing her best brown velvet frock with a lace collar, but she knew she was not a pretty child and felt herself to be dull and plain. She longed for golden curls and blue eyes; but her eyes, an unremarkable soft brown, were just a little shortsighted and as Miss Ayre would never dream of allowing a girl to wear spectacles, she moved always in a world slightly out of focus, which increased her shyness. She was unaware that her finely marked eyebrows, turning slightly up at the ends, gave her small rather colourless face a certain quaint distinction.

Silently Catherine followed the footman along the passages, down the grand staircase, across the entrance hall, through the anteroom, growing more and more nervous all the time, until they came to large double doors. Here she was handed over to a resplendant butler, who announced her in stentorian tones: "Mademoiselle Katerin Ehre."

She found herself standing on the threshold of an immense room, brilliantly lit and crowded with elegant people, who all turned and stared at her, suddenly silent. Far away, across an expanse of polished floor which seemed to stretch for miles, she could see a tall man in black, silver-haired, and the star of some order flashed out brilliantly from his breast as he turned towards her.

"*Catherine, mon enfant, viens-ici,*" said the Grand Duke in measured tones.

Catherine stood still, paralysed with nervous dread.

After a moment that seemed to last for centuries he spoke again. "*Je t'attends, Catherine.*" And then, in slow English, with heavy emphasis: "I am waiting."

Catherine knew she must go to him, must walk across all that shiny floor between those staring people, must approach that distant black figure, so rigid, so grand. But she simply could not move. It was like a nightmare.

Then suddenly somebody came to her side, somebody so tall he had to bend down to say in her ear, in English, "Come, I will take you. Don't be afraid."

He took her hand and then she was able to move and walk beside him all the way up to the silent figure of the Grand Duke.

"So, Constant! You must, as ever, interfere," he said coldly. He spoke in French but Catherine understood it and caught the name.

So her rescuer was that Prince Constant, whose mother had run away from the Grand Duke long ago, as Agnes had told her. She could not look at him because he was still beside her. She could not look at the Grand Duke either, overpowered by his presence. Then he put his hand under her chin and raised her face to look at her.

Catherine saw a man who did not look old, for all his silver hair and sixty years. He was tall, strongly built, with fine regular features and a mouth that closed in a straight line. It was an uncompromising face, a face of authority. Letzenstein might be a small state but its ruler was clearly one who ruled. She could not imagine what it would be like to disobey the Grand Duke.

Their conversation did not last long, for Grand Duke Edmond spoke little English and Catherine, though she could understand some French, was much too nervous to answer in it. Prince Constant helped her out, though it was plain that his father did not welcome aid from him. The Prince's English was idiomatic and easy. Soon, much to her relief, she was dismissed. The Grand Duke turned away and a buzz of talk broke out once more.

The Prince took Catherine's hand and led her out into the hall. "Poor child! What an ordeal for you," he said kindly. "Well, now run along to bed, for you look a very tired little girl."

Catherine said, "But I don't know how to find my room."

He smiled. "We will find it together, then, for I think it is on the same floor as mine."

As they went upstairs she said, "You do talk English well."

"I ought to," he replied, "for I've been living in Canada for some years. And when I was twenty or so, I went to Oxford."

"Why didn't you come and see me?" Catherine asked.

"My dear child, you were not born," he said. "Your mother Teresa, my half-sister, was hardly older than you are now, I suppose. How old are you?"

"I shall be thirteen on New Year's day," said Catherine. She liked having her birthday on that day, it seemed so special.

"The day after tomorrow," said her uncle. "Well, we must do something about that."

They had climbed up to the second floor and Miss Lacey appeared in the doorway of their sitting room. The Prince delivered Catherine to her and went off saying, "I will see you tomorrow, *ma petite*."

"Who was that man?" asked Miss Lacey, staring after him.

"It's my uncle, Prince Constant," said Catherine.

"Not a bit like a Prince to look at, is he?" was Miss Lacey's disappointed comment. "So big and rough looking—more like a mountainer or a forester."

Constant Waldemar did have an outdoor look, Catherine thought. He was big and burly, with a rugged face and thick dark hair; but she could only think of his kindness and his deep voice, so friendly.

"I like him," she said.

Catherine had her supper by the fire and was glad to snuggle down in her foreign bed with Bunjie, her velvet rabbit, made and stuffed for her long ago by Sibby. When she was very small she used to suck Bunjie's ears. They had been skilfully repaired but he was the same comforting little animal and Catherine would have missed him badly, had he disappeared.

"Oh Bunjie," she whispered, as she settled to sleep. "Fancy coming to live in a palace in the middle of a snowstorm . . . a Winter Palace."