

Paul Belien

A Throne in Brussels

Britain, the Saxe-Coburgs and the Belgianisation of Europe



Flanders

Wallonia

**"Belgium has served its purpose.
A praline divorce is in order."**
The Economist
This book explains why
Belgium is falling apart
and the implications
for the EU

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Originally published in the UK by
Imprint Academic, PO Box 200, Exeter EX5 5YX, UK

Originally published in the USA by
Imprint Academic, Philosophy Documentation Center,
PO Box 7147, Charlottesville, VA 22906-7147, USA

Prologue

A Nation Under Construction

On 6 November 1817, the 21-year-old British Crown Princess Charlotte died in childbirth. If she had lived, the course of history would have been different. Charlotte and her husband Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, a shrewd and ambitious German prince, would have succeeded to the British throne in 1830 and would have left their mark on a significant part of 19th-century British history. What happened instead was that in 1831 the International Powers installed Leopold on a throne in Brussels. He was appointed King of Belgium, a newly created state one-and-a-half times the size of Wales or New Jersey.

Belgium – its name referred to *Belgica*, the Latin word for the Netherlands – was an artificial state. It was inhabited by two different peoples: Catholic Dutchmen, referred to as Flemings (after Flanders, one of their historical regions) in the North, and French-speaking Walloons in the South (Wallonia). The country was the result of an international compromise. The Powers, however, were sceptical about the viability of their artefact.

The French diplomat Talleyrand described the new country as ‘an artificial construction, consisting of different peoples.’¹ According to his Austrian colleague Dietrichstein, the Belgian nationality was ‘a political attempt rather than an observable political reality.’² Nevertheless, Britain decided to give Belgium a chance. Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, liked the prospect of a weak and internally divided bogus state on his doorstep. But the grand old men of 19th-century European continental diplomacy, from Metternich to Napoleon III to

[1] Quoted in Stengers 1, pp. 90–2

[2] Quoted in De Ridder, Alfred 3, p. 114.

Bismarck, all thought that Belgium could not last longer than one or two generations. Leopold surprised them all by cleverly holding together his new state. He even vindicated his own Saxe-Coburg family by helping Albert, officially the son of his brother Ernst, but more likely Leopold's own, onto the throne of Great Britain. Thus Britain became an even stauncher defender of Belgium's independence and territorial integrity.

Leopold I and the five descendants of his House that have succeeded him since 1831 acknowledged the artificial nature of Belgium and the fact that it was unloved by the large majority of its citizens. They have been constantly in search of unifying elements to compensate for the lack of nationhood and the absence of genuine and generous patriotic feelings in their country. Belgium's history is a dramatic search for the civic glue that bonds 'normal,' i.e. non-artificial, countries.

Unlike normal states, artificial states have been *constructed* (in Friedrich Hayek's sense of constructivism: according to more or less specific plans or rationalist schemes) in places where no similar state had ever existed and where the people had no common identity that would enable them to acquire a national consciousness and, hence, become a genuine nation. Artificial states are either established through violence or drawn up at conference tables. They unite peoples of different cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic backgrounds and are by definition multinational. Until the late 1980s, Europe had four of these artificial states: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. Today, only Belgium remains.

Belgium is sometimes compared to multilingual Switzerland. While Belgium is an artificial and multinational state, Switzerland is not. Switzerland was not constructed but grew organically, thereby gradually creating a Swiss national consciousness. In this respect Switzerland is more akin to the United Kingdom where historic accident brought together two of Europe's oldest nations, the English and the Scots, but where their subsequent common history fostered a British national consciousness, thereby creating

a British nation encompassing both the English and the Scottish nations in a common home. Belgium is a state in which two peoples were forced to live together and where no common Belgian national consciousness developed.

Nevertheless, if there is no national consciousness binding Belgium, what has managed to keep it together for 175 years? The answer to this question has an importance beyond Belgium, because European politicians are at the moment trying to create, through constructivist planning at conference tables, a pan-European super-state. The European State currently in the making will resemble a 'Greater-Belgium' in that 'Europe' is also going to be an artificial, multinational construct, but it will hardly be a 'Greater-Switzerland.' Those who want to learn what the future of the European Union as a single state might be should study Belgium. Based in Brussels, and sharing its capital with Belgium, the European Union is greatly influenced – even infected – by Belgian political attitudes and habits. But, more importantly, Belgium acts as a model for the EU in the latter's efforts to 'construct a nation' out of different peoples with separate languages, cultures and traditions. Contemporary Belgium foreshadows Europe as a federal state.

Interestingly, the Belgian establishment realised one hundred years ago that Belgium could only survive if it were to become the nucleus of a European state. In this sense, *Belgicism* and *Europeanism* are the same thing. 'Have we not been called the laboratory of Europe,' the Belgicist ideologue Léon Hennebicq wrote in 1904. 'Indeed, we are a nation under construction. The problem of economic expansion is duplicated perfectly here by the problem of constructing a nationality. Two different languages, different classes without cohesion, a parochial mentality, an adherence to local communities that borders on the most harmful egotism, these are all elements of disunion. Luckily they can be reconciled. The solution is economic expansion, which can make us stronger by uniting us.'³

[3] Hennebicq, p. 278.

People like Hennebicq inspired the third King of the Belgians, Albert I, in the first half of the 20th century, to turn a peculiar mix of socialism and corporatism into the foundation of the Belgian state, thereby assuring the loyalty to Belgium of all those at the receiving end of an ever-expanding welfare mechanism. Belgium was built on a principle that was later, in the 1960s, described by Public Choice theorists as *rent-seeking*: ‘the resource-wasting activities of individuals in seeking transfers of wealth through the aegis of the state.’⁴ Belgium became basically a system of financial redistribution.

According to Mancur Olson ‘distributional coalitions slow down a society’s capacity to adapt to changing conditions, and thereby reduce the rate of economic growth.’⁵ Belgium’s history during the past decades confirms this. Economic stagflation and social rigidities have turned the ‘national’ conflict between Flemings and Walloons, which was until the 1960s mainly a linguistic conflict, into the ever-deepening socio-economic conflict that it is today. In other words: an artificial state, based on rent-seeking, can survive as long as the economy performs reasonably well. Once the economy stagnates, tensions grow. The Belgian establishment is hoping that the transplantation of the Belgian model to a larger-scale European level will boost the economy, thereby averting the danger of the model imploding.

Meanwhile, however, the rent-seeking mentality of the Belgian establishment has led to corruption. In the case of ‘normal’ states, one can argue that these states have managed to become voluntary organisations resulting from generous motives of mutual concern and co-operation. They are based on a virtue called *patriotism*. In the artificially constructed state of Belgium, the absence of any patriotic feelings has forced the Belgian monarchs to make hard-headed calculated self-interest the foundation of the state.

[4] Buchanan, Tollison and Tullock, p. IX.

[5] Olson 2, pp. 61–5.

They have literally had to *buy* the adherence of the citizens (or a substantial group of them) to the state.

Belgium is sometimes considered to be a boring country – not the kind one would want to read a book about. How wrong can one be. *Boring Belgium* alliterates well, but *Baffling Belgium* does, too, and is nearer to the truth. Belgium is ‘the land of a thousand scandals.’⁶ It is striking to see how all the present characteristics were there from the very beginning. It is equally striking to notice how these characteristics were encapsulated in the Saxe-Coburg dynasty. Belgium’s kings created their artificial country in their own image. Belgium’s history is the Saxe-Coburg family tale. Belgium is their tragedy. The Belgian crown is their livelihood, but at the same time they all came to loathe Belgium with the ‘decadence of its administration’ and ‘the ruinous abuses.’⁷

Corruption is, indeed, one of the basic characteristics of an artificial state. A second characteristic is the absence of the rule of law. If the latter were not absent and the state were able to survive while respecting democratic majority rights, it would no longer be an artificial state, but would have become a genuine nation-state. The third characteristic is its unreliability in international relations. The lack of sincere patriotic feelings has made the Belgians unwilling to make sacrifices for the common good. It has also made Belgium extremely unreliable to its allies.

Today there is a real danger that these three characteristics will infect the whole of Europe. In an Open Letter in 1998, a group of neo-Belgicist intellectuals wrote that they cherish the Belgian flag ‘because the latter does not represent anything,’ and that Belgium, precisely because it has no national consciousness, is ‘an antidote against nationalism’ much needed by the postmodern world.⁸ According to the Belgian historian Louis Vos, ‘a non-ideological postmodernism has become the predominant fashion

[6] Rachel Johnson in *The Spectator*, 30 Oct. 1999.

[7] Albert I in *Willequet* 4, p. 254.

[8] *De Standaard*, 3 Mar. 1998.

in intellectual life, more eager to deconstruct the national identity than to make a contribution to it. Some go so far as to deny that the “invented” concept of national identity and community refers to anything real.⁹

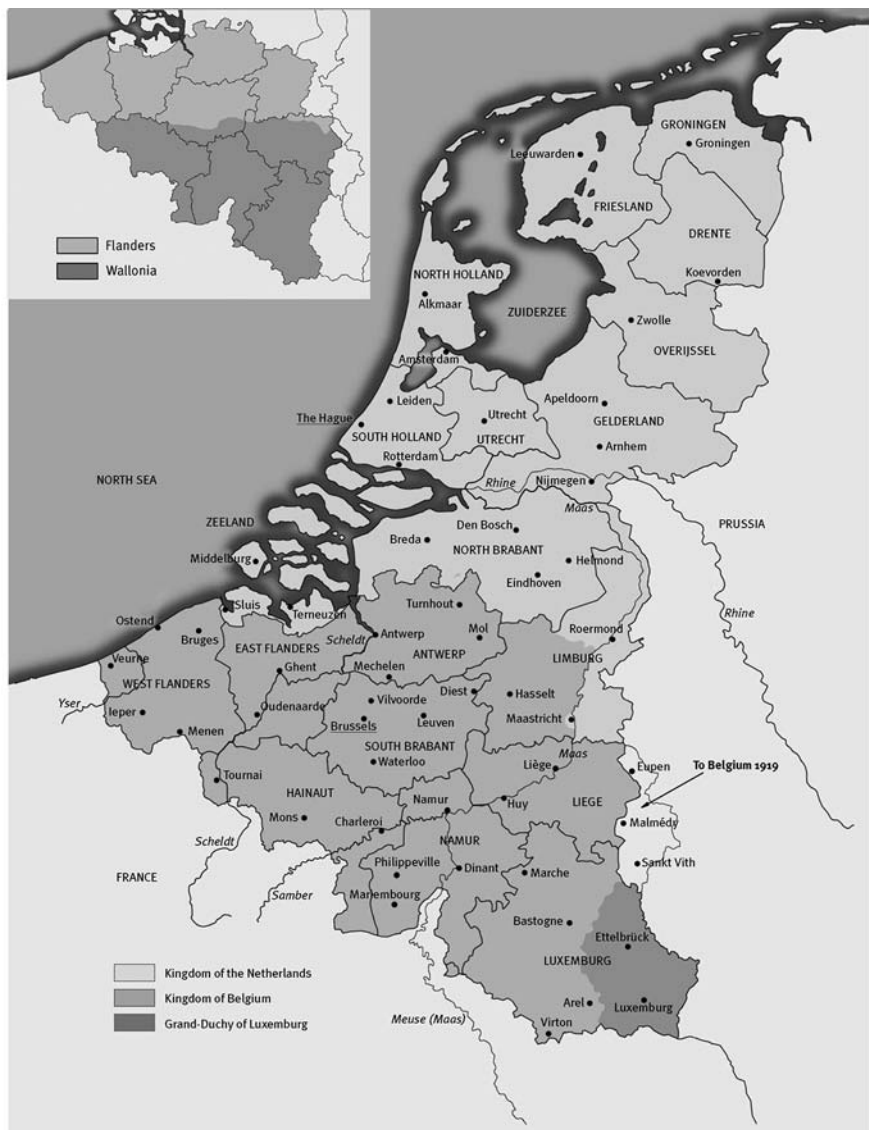
These ‘postmodernists’ claim that Belgium’s lack of identity constitutes a supreme morality. This was also the opinion of Belgian King Baudouin who in 1993 stressed the importance of ‘the European construction,’ which, in following Belgium’s lead, ‘can best help us resist the temptation of egotism and narrow and disastrous nationalisms.’¹⁰ The question must be asked, however, whether states that were established as artificial ‘constructions,’ according to rational constructivist schemes, can really be morally superior. This is a question that should be at the heart of the debate about the future European super-state.

The importance of this question goes even beyond Europe. Indeed, Belgium belongs to the category of the ‘failed states’ because it has never succeeded in generating a Belgian national consciousness that could become a genuine ‘civic glue’ binding the nation. Though failed states are exceptional in Europe and the Western world, where nation-states are the normal pattern of statehood, they are not exceptional on a global scale. Like Belgium, many of these states have fallen victim to mafia clans that colonise the state for their own purposes.

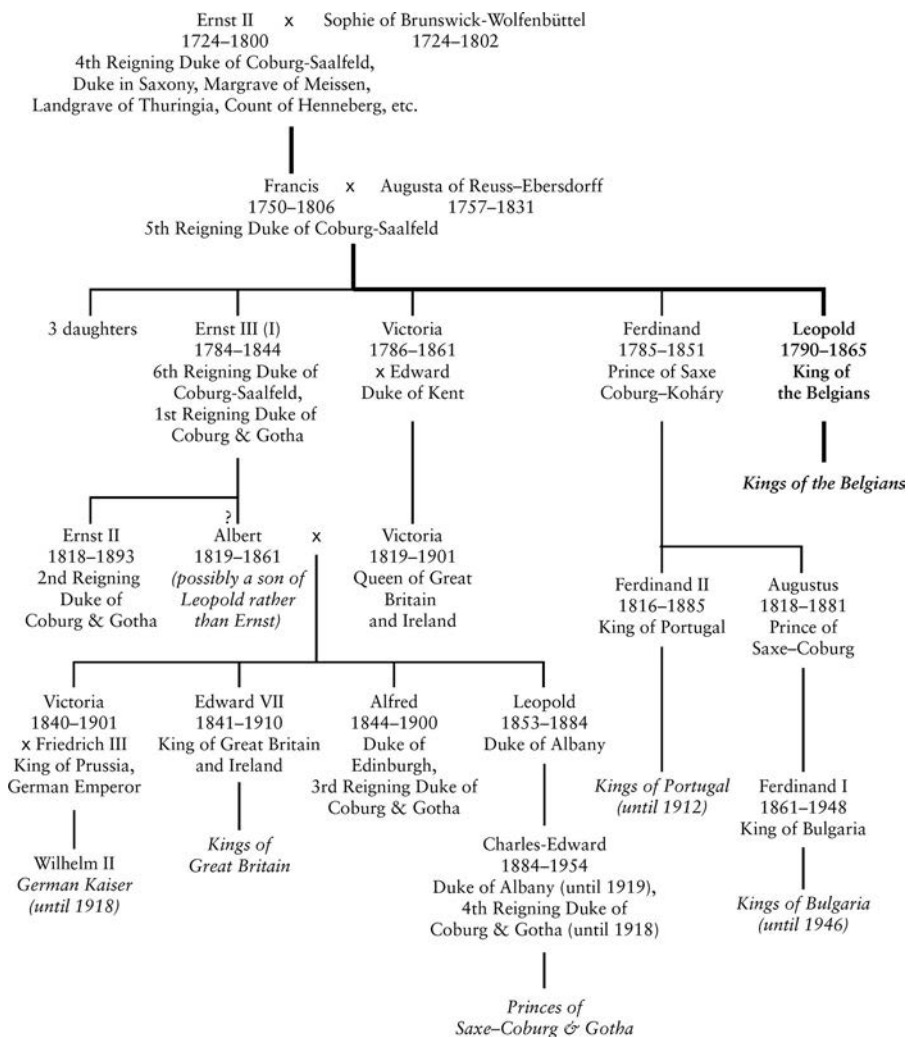
Hence, this book, while its primary purpose is to entertain the reader with a good story, is a work on several levels. It is a book about a royal family that is more closely related to the British monarchs than most people think, but also a political analysis of baffling Belgium. One cannot unravel these two stories, because they are connected as closely as Siamese twins. Finally, it serves as a warning concerning the European super-state currently in the making. Will Belgium’s past be Europe’s future?

[9] Vos, p. 201.

[10] Baudouin, vol. II, p. 1465.

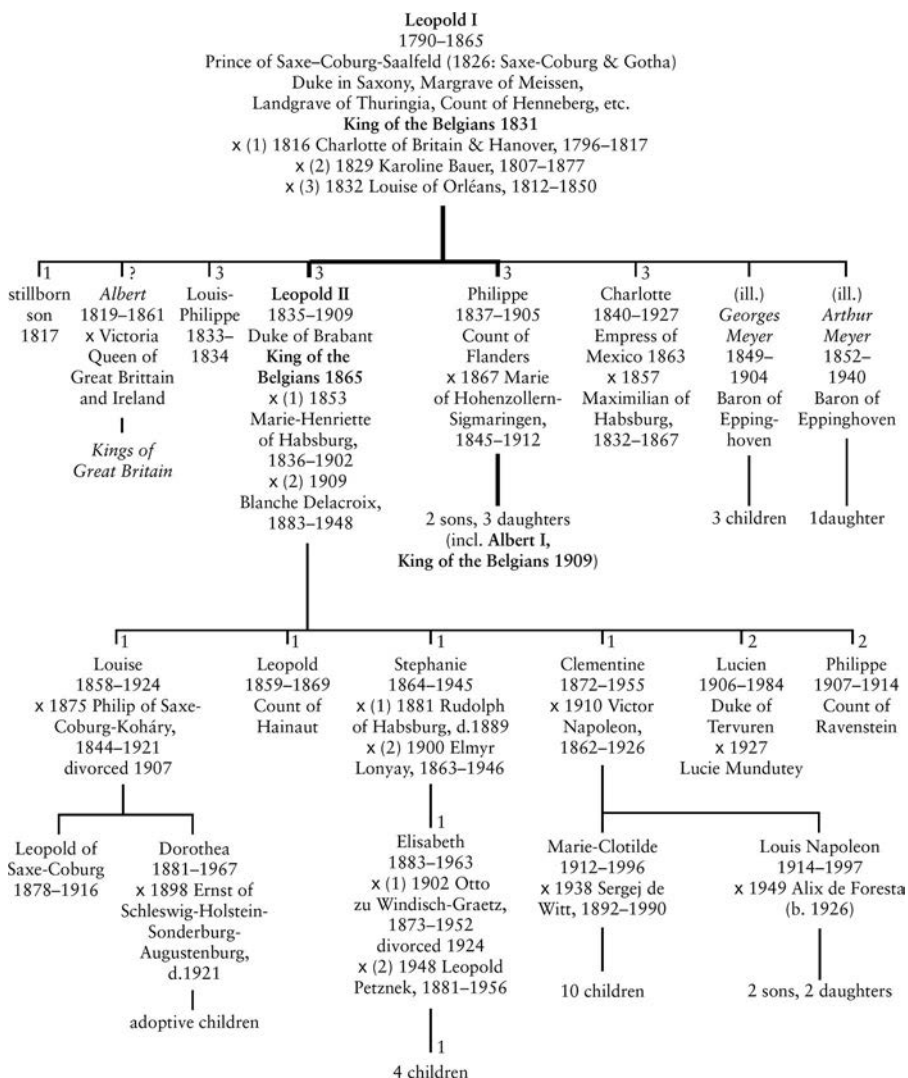


Map 2
The Low Countries after 1830



The House of Saxe-Coburg

Reigning Dukes of Coburg & Gotha (1826–1918); Kings of the Belgians (1831–present); Kings of Great-Britain (1837/1901–present); Kings of Portugal (1837–1912); Kings of Bulgaria (1887–1946)



The House of Belgium 1831–1901
Legitimate, and illegitimate so far as known



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Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Crown Princess Charlotte of Britain

1. In Search of a Kingdom (1790–1831)

The Poorest Prince in Germany

The royal houses of contemporary Belgium and Britain were founded by Leopold (1790–1865), a prince from Coburg, a sleepy town in the middle of Germany. Leopold became the first King of the Belgians in 1831. Recent research indicates that he was probably also the biological father of Albert (1819–1861), the British Prince Consort, who in 1840 married Queen Victoria (1819–1901). Leopold, whom his family used to call *Poldi*, was as German as could be, without a trace of non-German blood in his veins. His father, Prince Francis of Saxe-Coburg, was the son and heir of Ernst Friedrich, the reigning duke of Coburg-Saalfeld, one of the smaller independent German states. It consisted of two unconnected pieces and some minor exclaves, in all barely 400 square miles (one-and-a-half times the Isle of Wight), with a population of barely 50,000, of which 6,000 in the town of Coburg itself.

Coburg is a little town in Upper-Franconia, the northern part of the present German state of Bavaria. It lies 548 feet below one of Germany's largest castles, the *Veste Coburg*, an impressive bulwark built by the counts of Henneberg in the 13th century on the southern edge of the dark Thuringian forests. In the late 16th century the lords of Coburg built a new residence within the city walls, on the site of a Franciscan monastery that had been dissolved in the Reformation. By the time of Leopold's birth in 1790, this residence, the *Ehrenburg Palace*, had become so dilapidated and the reigning ducal family so poor that they lived in a town house, directly behind the palace. In 1772 the duchy was declared bankrupt. With over 1 million thalers in debts, and an

annual income of only 70,000 thalers, complete ruin with famine and foreclosures threatened the entire state. Fortunately, the Emperor came to the rescue by installing a Debt Commission that took over the administration of the duchy, assigning the reigning duke a meagre 12,000 thalers to run his household.

Poldi's father was a simple man, content with being an unambitious artist. Prince Francis loved to sing and play music and was good at drawing. He had two passions, one for copper etchings and engravings, of which he acquired the largest collection in Germany, another for birds, flowers and mineral stones, which he also collected. Francis died in 1806, at the early age of 56, six years after succeeding his father and inheriting a debt-ridden duchy, which was still under the charge of the Imperial Debt Commission. Little could he know that by the end of the century, the kings of Belgium, Great Britain, Portugal and Bulgaria would all be Saxe-Coburg descendants of his.

A tourist visiting Coburg today can only wonder how its ruling family escaped from this rustic backwater. This was, however, the achievement of two women. Unambitious Francis, content with collecting his etchings, plants and minerals, was a placid man. The ambition he lacked, his mother and his wife had in abundance. Francis' wife, Augusta von Reuss, the daughter of the Count of Reuss-Ebersdorff, has been described, by her granddaughter, Queen Victoria of Great Britain, as a woman 'with a most powerful, energetic, almost masculine mind.'¹ Her marriage with Francis was blessed with nine children. Two of them died young, but seven survived. The first three were girls: Sophie (born in 1778), Antoinette (1779) and Juliana (1781). The first son, Ernst, was born in 1784. He was followed by Ferdinand, born in 1785, Victoria (1786) and Marianne (1788–1794). Finally, there were Leopold, born on 16 December 1790, and Maximilian (1792–1793).

The children of Francis and Augusta came from a relatively modest family, but such was not the case for Francis' mother,

[1] Grey, p. 16.

Sophie of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. *Poldi's* paternal grandmother was the Duchess of tiny Coburg-Saalfeld through her marriage, but she was also a sister of queens, an aunt of kings, a cousin of one Russian Tsar and the aunt of another. Indeed, while Sophie had married the penniless princeling from Coburg, far better matches had been made for her sisters. Sophie's eldest sister Elisabeth had married Friedrich the Great, King of Prussia. Another elder sister, Louise, had married the Crown Prince of Prussia, Friedrich's brother, and became the mother of the next Prussian king. And her youngest sister Julia was the wife of King Fredrik V of Denmark. Via his mother unambitious Francis was a first cousin of the kings of Prussia and Denmark.

For the future career of Francis' children, however, the Russian connections of grandmama's family proved far more important. In 1711 Sophie's aunt, Charlotte of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, had married Alexis Romanov, only son of Tsar Peter I. Aunt Charlotte's son, Tsar Peter II, ruled for only three years, dying of smallpox at the age of 15 in 1730. The boy was the last male descendant of the Romanovs. After Peter II's death, the tsarist crown was grabbed by Anna Romanov, daughter of Peter I's brother. Anna had no children, but in 1739 she arranged for her sister's daughter to be married to Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, the brother of Duchess Sophie of Coburg-Saalfeld. His son Ivan was born in August 1740 and was proclaimed Crown Prince of Russia. Two months later, when the Tsarina Anna died, the baby proceeded to the Russian throne as Tsar Ivan VI.

It is generally not a good thing for a baby to hold a throne. In November 1741, little Ivan was deposed by Elizabeth Romanov, daughter of Tsar Peter I. The child was locked up in a dungeon on the fortress island of Schlüsselburg, with no sunlight, nor people to talk to. Dressed in rags, he never matured and became a human vegetable. Many years passed. The House of Holstein-Gottorp succeeded to the Russian throne, Tsar Peter III was murdered by his wife, and in 1764 the new tsarina, Catherine the Great, visited Schlüsselburg. There she discovered poor Ivan VI, now 24 years

old, still alive in his dungeon. She concluded that apart from his painful and almost unintelligible stammering, he was bereft of understanding and human intelligence, and had him murdered. One could consider it an act of pity.

What does all this Russian family business, where the women devour the men as some species of grasshoppers do after mating, have to do with the Saxe-Coburgs? In the early 1790s Catherine the Great was scouting Germany for brides for her grandsons, the sons of her only son, Paul. In 1793 the eldest, Alexander, had been married to Louise of Baden-Durlach. Now, in 1795, the time had come to find a suitable wife for the second son, the 16-year-old Constantine.

Grand-Duke Constantine was only three heartbeats away from the Russian imperial throne. This was a once in a lifetime chance for family fortune. In Coburg, two ambitious women, envious of their more fortunate family members and experts in the affairs of the Russian imperial family, were aware of the unique opportunity. They had three handsome eligible girls available. True, the girls were poor, but they were of noble birth and the Tsarina had to take what she could get, as many German princely families were not too keen on having their children marry Russians, after their barbarous treatment of two German princes, the tsars Ivan VI and Peter III.

On 7 September 1795, Francis' wife Augusta, with the blessing and encouragement of her mother-in-law, packed her three eldest daughters off in the carriage of the reigning duke, and departed for a six week voyage to St. Petersburg, determined to leave either the 17-year-old Sophie, the 16-year-old Antoinette or the little Juliana behind in Russia. For Leopold, not yet five years old, it was goodbye to a sister he hardly knew. For unambitious Francis, it looked as if it was going to be a life-long goodbye to one of his children – but he did not know which of the three, though he had a premonition. His wife and daughters arrived in the Russian capital on 18 October. 'It has happened, and as you expected, *Julchen* is the one whom Fortune has picked,' Augusta wrote to her

husband from St. Petersburg on 24 October.² For it was Juliana, whom they called *Julchen* and who had turned fourteen during the voyage, who was chosen by the Tsarina. The next day, a huge party was held in St. Petersburg to announce the engagement. On 7 November, Augusta bade her child adieu and returned to Coburg. Before she set off, she was lavishly bestowed with jewels and gifts by the Russian Empress. She also received the sum of 60,000 rubles, while Sophie and Antoinette each got 50,000 rubles.

It was a triumph for Augusta when she arrived back in Coburg, covered in gold. It was a triumph for her mother-in-law, Duchess Sophie. With a bit of luck, they were going to be (great) grandmothers of a future Tsar of Russia. But for *Julchen*, it was the beginning of a nightmare. What her mother and grandmother did not know, or did not care to know, was that the Grand-Duke Constantine, like his father, the Crown Prince Paul, was a sadist and a pervert. On 25 February 1796, Juliana was baptised in the Russian-Orthodox faith, renamed *Anna Feodorovna* and married to the Grand-Duke. From then on, she was the Grand-Duchess Anna Feodorovna, and was forced to live through daily humiliations. She had to endure a husband who came to bed in riding boots and spurs, brought his friends into her bedroom, held orgies in his palace and gave her a venereal disease.

In November 1796, Catherine the Great died and was succeeded by her son. The Grand-Duke Constantine was now only two heartbeats away from the imperial throne of Russia, because the marriage of his elder brother Alexander was still childless. Every day the prospect of unambitious Francis becoming grandfather to a future Tsar of Russia looked more likely.

In Coburg, some of Anna Feodorovna's siblings benefited directly from their Russian family connection. In 1798, Antoinette married Duke Alexander of Württemberg, brother of the new Russian empress Maria Feodorovna (born Sophie of Württemberg), wife of Tsar Paul. It made Antoinette a sister-in-law of the Tsar, and an aunt of Grand-Duke Constantine, the husband

[2] SAC A I 28 b 12 nr. 71, Augusta to Francis, 24 Oct. 1795.

of her sister. For Leopold, the Russian connection meant the certainty of a career in the Russian imperial army. Before the boy's sixth birthday the Russians made him a Captain in the imperial Izmajlovski regiment. One year later he was made a Colonel of the same regiment, and in 1803, when he turned 12, he became a General of the Russian cavalry. At first, however, apart from the right to parade around town in a beautiful uniform, this Russian military career did not mean much, for *Poldi* was still in Coburg, where his ambitious grandmother Sophie had taken his education in hand. Grandmama instilled in Leopold her own obsession with royal and imperial grandeur. From his grandmother he received the aloofness and conceitedness that became one of the main characteristics of his personality.

Then, in March 1801, dramatic events occurred. Tsar Paul was a madman. He had a paranoid suspicion towards everyone, including his sons, who lived in constant fear of their father's wrath. His behaviour had become so appalling that a group of noblemen entered his palace at night and strangled him in his bed. Paul was succeeded by his eldest son, Alexander. Constantine was now only one heartbeat away from the throne.

To an ambitious mother and grandmother in Coburg this should have been a cause for joy. Alas, they were put to shame by the very daughter they had brought so near to an imperial crown. Anna Feodorovna took advantage of the turmoil surrounding the murder of the Tsar to flee Russia. The 20-year-old Grand-Duchess could no longer bear the humiliations and torture inflicted on her by her husband. She had run away once before, to Karlsbad in Bohemia, but Tsar Paul had her brought back. This time she stood a better chance. With a large group of servants she arrived in Coburg, determined never to return to Russia. Her family greeted her with mixed feelings. Unambitious Francis, who had become reigning duke of Coburg-Saalfeld by now, was happy to see his daughter, but others were thinking about the possible repercussions. In a letter to the Coburg Finance Minister, her mother referred to the unfortunate events as 'the northern

catastrophe.³ Her sister Antoinette, aunt to the new Tsar and his imperial brother, was equally angry. She reproached her: a wife should remain with her husband, even if he was an insane pervert, especially if he was the heir to an Empire.

But the new tsar, Alexander I, was more understanding than 'aunt Antoinette.' He knew his brother to be a wicked man and he liked Anna Feodorovna. There were even rumours that he had had an affair with her. He took pity on his sister-in-law and allowed her to settle in Switzerland, retaining her court, her subsidies and her status. Moreover, the Tsar had other preoccupations. In France, a Corsican upstart, Napoleon Bonaparte, had crowned himself Emperor, and this new 'emperor' was bringing war to every corner of Europe.

The Most Handsome Prince in France

In the summer of 1806, the Corsican invaded Germany. On 14 October 1806, Napoleon crushed the Prussian army at Jena, near Saalfeld. The fifteen-year-old *Poldi*, nominally a Russian artillery general, but one who had never seen a Russian canon, hid himself in an attic when the French arrived in town. His father, unambitious Francis, only 56 years old, died on 9 December, shortly after the French confiscated all his property and terminated his duchy's independence. On 15 December, his lands were integrated into the Confederation of the Rhine, a French vassal state. The Coburg heir, Leopold's eldest brother Ernst, suffered a nervous breakdown and spent several months in a Bohemian spa to recover. Fortunately, their mother Augusta knew what to do. She contacted her son-in-law, the Grand-Duke Constantine, and his brother, the Tsar.

After his victorious march through Germany, Napoleon was planning to invade England. To have his hands free in the East, he was eager for peace with Russia. Augusta convinced the Russians to make Coburg part of their deal with the Corsican.

[3] SAC A I 28 b 13 nr. 2, Augusta to Kretschmann, July 1800.

She pointed out that it would be a disgrace to imperial Russia for the in-laws of a future tsar to be a landless German family. As Tsar Alexander had only daughters, Constantine would some day be his successor, and after him – Augusta promised to make the Grand-Duchess return to her husband soon – his sons. Hence, it was imperative that the territories of Coburg and Saalfeld be returned to Constantine's brother-in-law.

On 25 June 1807, Napoleon and Tsar Alexander met at Tilsit. Napoleon got his peace with the Russians, and the Saxe-Coburgs got their duchy back. After personally taking an oath of allegiance to Napoleon in Leipzig on 18 July, Ernst became the next reigning Duke of Coburg-Saalfeld. At Tilsit Napoleon had also promised to enlarge Ernst's duchy with parts of the adjacent principality of Bayreuth. Though he had not fulfilled his promise yet, Ernst and Leopold considered that the interests of the House of Saxe-Coburg were best served through collaboration with France. The Saxe-Coburg family motto was *Treue und Fest* (Loyal and Constant), and, as the most advantageous thing to be loyal to was the dominating force of the day, they decided to go to Paris, ask Napoleon to grant Leopold the privilege of serving at the Imperial Court and remind the French Emperor of his promise.

On 14 October, exactly one year after the Prussian defeat at Jena, the two brothers arrived in the French capital. It proved more difficult than expected to gain access to the Corsican. Nevertheless, the brothers had a good time. Ernst, who at 23 had already had plenty of experience with the fair sex, introduced his younger brother to the pleasures of life. Soon Ernst fell in love with Pauline Panam, an 18-year-old Greek girl who was a dancer in Paris, where she was known as *la belle Grecque*. Ernst decided that he had found in Paris all that there was to be found and returned home to govern his duchy, taking *la belle Grecque* along. *Poldi* regretted this, because, if one may believe Pauline's autobiography, he had got into the habit of enjoying her himself.

Leopold tried in vain to get his appointment with Napoleon. But the good-looking German prince, with his beautiful green

eyes and delicate features, made many other appointments. The ladies at Court all fell for this handsome boy in his Russian general's uniform, and not yet seventeen. Leopold learned to use his charms. Napoleonic Paris was a decadent city where young noblemen could get all the ladies they wanted. 'Here, if you ask a lady to be seated, she goes to bed. That is the habit here,' he wrote from Paris to his eldest sister Sophie.⁴

Soon, the dashing prince caught the eye of Napoleon's promiscuous empress, Joséphine de Beauharnais. She was 44 but was considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Joséphine promised Leopold that she would arrange a meeting with the Emperor for him, if he returned to her often. According to Mademoiselle Ducrest, the Empress's lady-in-waiting, he saw her every day. He also attracted Joséphine's daughter, 24-year-old Hortense de Beauharnais, the wife of Napoleon's brother, Louis, whom the Corsican had made King of Holland. Hortense was as promiscuous as her mother. 'I am a ship and you are the captain sailing it,' she told Leopold while she painted his portrait. He soon learned that he was not the only seaman to load this boat. In March 1808, Leopold finally had his appointment with Napoleon. He asked for permission to serve him as aide-de-camp. The French Emperor refused. Understandably, Napoleon, and his brother Louis, did not want Leopold around their women. Many years later, however, during his exile at Saint Helena, the Corsican would remember the young German: 'He was the most beautiful man that I ever saw at the Tuileries palace.'⁵

Poldi returned to Germany. A regiment of 400 Coburg soldiers served in Napoleon's *Grande Armée* in the wars in Tyrol and in Spain, but Leopold was not among them. He remained in Coburg where he assisted his brother. Ernst had decided to stop paying back the duchy's debts, which were still considerable, despite the efforts of the Debt Commission during the past 30 years. His

[4] SAP MP, Leopold to Sophie, 25 Apr. 1814, in Leopold I 2, p. 93.

[5] Napoleon, 10 Nov. 1816, in Las Cases, vol. II, p. 298.

decision brought him in conflict with the economist Theodor Conrad von Kretschmann, a former professor of the University of Jena and for many years the Coburg Finance and Justice minister. Kretschmann resigned and published a damning critique of the Coburg state finances. Leopold travelled to Munich and contrived to have the publication banned by the King of Bavaria. The latter did not want to upset the *protégés* of the French Emperor.

In the summer of 1809, Leopold visited his sister Victoria, who in 1803 had married Prince Emich Karl of Leiningen, 23 years her elder, to do her mother a favour. Leiningen was the widower of Augusta's youngest sister. Victoria gave him a son, Karl, and a daughter, Feodora. The Leiningens lived at Amorbach, a former Benedictine abbey which Napoleon had granted them. For Leopold, the place was aptly named. In Amorbach (which means 'Love Brook'), he fell in love with Polixena, the daughter of the Baron von Tubeuf, a courtier of Prince Leiningen. Polixena, whom he called Pauline, made him forget Hortense and the other Parisian women. He even asked her parents for permission to court and eventually marry their daughter. The Tubeuvs refused. Her mother replied to Leopold that it was 'not done' for a girl of modest country nobility to marry the brother of a reigning duke.

Between 1809 and 1812, while his brother started extensive restoration of Coburg's Ehrenburg Palace, Leopold led an idle life. He resigned from the Russian army in 1810. He travelled around, visited Switzerland, Austria and Italy, and made several trips to Paris to safeguard the Saxe-Coburg interests. Napoleon's efforts to subdue England had failed and his greedy eyes turned East. On 24 June 1812, the *Grande Armée* invaded Russia. Nearly 500 conscripts from Coburg were sent along. The Corsican, however, was not prepared for what awaited him. Thousands of young men perished in the Russian winter. Of the 600,000 men that Napoleon had forced to follow him into Russia, fewer than 50,000 survived. Of the 476 soldiers from Coburg, only 13 returned home. As soon as the news of the French defeat in Russia reached them, the Saxe-Coburgs changed sides and turned against the French.

In March 1813 Leopold was the first German prince to present himself to Tsar Alexander at his headquarters in Poland. He was promptly reinstated to his former rank and became a General of the Russian Cuirassiers. This time he was not a 15-year-old boy with only a general's uniform, but a 22-year-old man with real Russian soldiers around him. On 29 August 1813, he participated in a victory over the French at Chlumec in Bohemia, one of the skirmishes preceding the decisive battle of Leipzig (16–19 October), where the French were crushingly defeated. Pursued by the Austrians, the Prussians and the Russians, the Corsican ran for France.

Leopold was absent at the battle of Leipzig, because the Tsar had needed General *Poldi* for something other than warfare. There remained an important family matter to be settled between the Saxe-Coburgs and the Romanovs. Alexander had ordered Leopold to persuade his sister to return to her husband. As wife of the heir to the Russian crown, she had to secure a next generation to the Romanov dynasty. After the skirmish at Chlumec, Leopold was sent to Switzerland, where the Grand-Duchess Anna Feodorovna had been living near Berne since 1801. During the past twelve years, she had had a number of liaisons, including one with her chamberlain, Jules de Seigneux, which resulted in the birth of an illegitimate son in 1808. This liaison had not been a happy one. Exit Monsieur de Seigneux. He was replaced as chamberlain by Dr. Rudolf Schiferli, a gynaecologist of the University of Berne. Anna Feodorovna seduced him too. In May 1812, he became the father of their illegitimate daughter. Schiferli was a married man and the father of two little sons. Nobody seemed to mind. To the nephews and nieces of the lustful Grand-Duchess, the adulterous Bernese gynaecologist was known as 'Uncle Schiferli'.

On 13 January 1814, 28,000 Russian troops marched through Basle, led by the Tsar and his brothers, the Grand-Dukes Constantine and Nicholas. The Tsar told Constantine to reconcile with his wife. He made it clear that without this reconciliation, Constantine would have to renounce his right to the throne in

favour of his younger brother Nicholas. From Basle Alexander sent a message to Anna Feodorovna in Berne, saying that he was coming to visit her the next day. Instead of the Tsar, however, Anna Feodorovna saw her husband arrive at her château. During the next few days, Constantine and Leopold tried in vain to convince the Grand-Duchess to return to Russia. She refused. It made Constantine mad with rage, which in turn strengthened his wife's resolve not to give in.⁶

Leopold rejoined the Tsar at Vesoul on 19 January. The invasion of France had begun. On 31 March 1814, the Russian army marched into Paris, with Leopold in its ranks. 'I cannot remember a more beautiful moment than when, as a conqueror, I marched into the town where I had led such a miserable existence,' he wrote to his sister Victoria.⁷

* * *

In Paris, the first negotiations started between England, Austria, Prussia and Russia to redraw the map of Europe. Leopold approached his Russian master in an attempt to persuade the Tsar to speak for the interests of Coburg. But, as Leopold's sister would not reconcile with the Grand-Duke, and, hence, never be the mother to a future tsar, Alexander was not interested. Leopold concluded that the Russians would not mind Prussia annexing Coburg. It dawned on him that Austria was Coburg's only friend, because Austria was Prussia's rival in Germany. Although he personally disliked Prince Klemenz von Metternich, the chief negotiator for Austria, Leopold became a strong partisan of the Austrian position and his feelings were reinforced by his correspondence with the 'Austrian' members of his family, his

[6] For Constantine, the failure to convince his wife meant his hopes of becoming tsar were over. He officially divorced Anna Feodorovna in 1820 and renounced his rights to the Russian throne. The Grand-Duchess remained in Switzerland until her death in 1860, at the age of 79.

[7] Leopold to Victoria, 11 Apr. 1814, in Buffin, p. 83.

brother Ferdinand, who had become an Austrian Field Marshal, and his sister Sophie, who in 1804 had married the Austrian diplomat Count Emmanuel von Mensdorff-Pouilly.

Metternich wanted the borders of Europe to remain largely as they had been before the French had set Europe ablaze in the 1790s. Austria would not let Prussia become too powerful. The only change to the pre-1790 borders Metternich insisted on was to surround France with strong buffer states. In order to achieve this, the Habsburgs were prepared to give up their claim to the Netherlands; the Catholic Southern Netherlands which the Habsburgs had, at great cost, succeeded in keeping after the Dutch revolution in the 1560s, were allowed to reunite with the northern provinces of the Netherlands. Of course, Austria could not let these united Netherlands become a confederation of sovereign republics, as the Northern Netherlands had been from 1579 until 1806. One good thing the Corsican upstart had accomplished, in Metternich's view, was to have done with republics. The United Netherlands would have to be a centralised, unified and autocratic kingdom, like all other civilised countries. Only the peasants in Switzerland and the colonists in America had confederal or federal republics, but these were regarded as uncivilised nations of marginal importance.

To reunite the Netherlands as a strong bulwark against France was a brilliant idea. Tsar Alexander and the Kings of Britain and Prussia all agreed on that. That the Netherlands should become a monarchy under the House of Nassau-Orange-Dietz – commonly referred to as Orange – was equally evident. It had provided the oligarchic Dutch Republic, a confederation of seven nominally independent provinces of which Holland was the most prominent, with six *stadholders*, one of whom had also been King of Great Britain. The Allies decided to make Willem Frederik, the son of the sixth and last *stadholder*, the first King of the Netherlands. The new king assumed the name of Willem I.

There was, however, one drawback. The eldest son and heir of the new king, the 22-year-old Prince Willem of Orange, was

betrothed to the 18-year-old Princess Charlotte of Hanover, heiress to the British throne. The prospect of having a powerful state in the Low Countries united with Britain was not at all attractive to Austria, Prussia or Russia. As a consequence, they would have to thwart the engagement between Charlotte and young Willem. Tsar Alexander provided the Allies with a secret weapon for this mission: the most dashing prince in Europe, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg.

In May 1814, Alexander summoned Leopold for a private and personal conversation. Leopold was worried. He thought this could only mean that the Tsar wanted to see him about Coburg – and that news would certainly not be good. To Leopold's surprise, the Tsar had a totally different message: 'We will soon leave for England,' he said. 'I intend for you to marry Princess Charlotte, the future Queen of England.' Leopold was stunned. 'She is betrothed to someone else,' he objected. 'But you are so beautiful, no woman can resist you,' the Tsar replied. Leopold also learned that the Emperor of Austria favoured the idea and that the Habsburgs would grant him the wealthy lordship of Holzkirchen near Würzburg in Lower-Franconia if he succeeded. And he learned that the Tsar had already sent ahead his own sister, Catherine, the widow of the Duke of Oldenburg, to befriend Charlotte and to speak to her of the attractive prince from Coburg.

In June, Alexander and Leopold arrived in London. Leopold liked the challenge. To his sister Sophie, he had written: 'I am going to London with the Tsar. I must honestly confess that I regard this journey as a kind of battle.'⁸ He did really look forward to the contest between Orange and Coburg. The Tsar took his handsome 23-year-old protégé along whenever he visited the British royal family.

As King George III was plagued by severe bouts of madness, his son, the fat Prince of Wales, acted as Prince Regent. The future George IV was a pitiful figure. In 1785, as a young man of 23, he had married his one and true love, the 30-year-old widow Maria

[8] SAP MP, Leopold to Sophie, 31 May 1814, in Leopold I 2, p. 101.

Fitzherbert. She was not only a commoner, but also a Catholic. Since 1701, however, English princes had been banned from ascending the throne if they married Catholics, so the marriage had been performed in secret. When he discovered what his son had done, an angry King George III – still sane at that time – forced his son to have the marriage annulled. He ordered the Prince to marry his cousin, Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. She was the daughter of Augusta, sister of George III. Her paternal grandfather was a brother of Leopold's grandmother Sophie.

The Prince of Wales married the 27-year-old Caroline on 8 April 1795, six days after her arrival in England. Caroline was no beauty and a bit on the plump side, though she possessed a certain blowsy blonde attraction. Prince George disliked her from the minute he saw her. His repulsion was such that he could not even force himself to come to his marriage bed and fulfil his 'dynastic duties'. He had to encourage himself by getting drunk. Their sad sexual encounter was blessed with a child exactly nine months later, on 7 January 1796. This was Charlotte, the girl the emperors of Russia and Austria wanted Leopold to seduce and marry.

After their wedding night, George and his wife did not sleep together again. The embittered Princess of Wales lived in a palace of her own, where she took many lovers, while he lived openly with his Catholic former wife. Little Charlotte was raised in George's palace, Carlton House, neglected by her father and away from her mother, whom she was allowed to see for only two hours a week. In 1814, she had become a plump and tall 18-year-old princess, 'a fine piece of flesh and blood,' very likely to have a weight problem soon, 'her bosom full, her shoulders large, and her whole person voluptuous,' according to Lady Charlotte Bury. She had, as one of her friends described it, 'blue eyes and that peculiar blonde hair which was characteristic rather of her German than her English descent.' However, 'when excited she stuttered painfully.' She was also very much her father's child, 'capricious, self-willed

and obstinate.’ Lady Glenbervie observed that she was ‘full of exclamations very like swearing.’⁹

The fat Prince Regent had decided to marry his daughter off to Willem, the Prince of Orange. He was young, foreign and rich. He was also a courageous soldier who had fought with the Duke of Wellington against Napoleon in Spain. Wellington, however, did not have a high opinion of the Dutch Prince. ‘He is very young, he is very shy and diffident. Too much is not to be expected from him,’ he said.¹⁰ But Charlotte did not dislike him. She found him amiable and kind, a bit shy and boyish, but ‘by no means as disagreeable as I expected.’¹¹

The trouble started when Charlotte discovered that because Orange’s father was about to become the King of the United Netherlands, he, as the eldest son and Crown Prince, would have to live in the Netherlands – and so would his wife! Charlotte was afraid her father would use the opportunity of her absence to divorce her mother. She felt she had to protect her mother, who was, according to Charlotte, a ‘very unfortunate woman, really oppressed and cruelly used.’ As a consequence, the Princess almost overnight came to vehemently oppose marrying Orange. Instead of being an ‘amiable boy,’ he became ‘that detested Dutchman.’ Young Willem proposed a compromise whereby the couple could live alternately in the Netherlands and in England, but Charlotte did not accept that either. She was convinced that her father’s only purpose in marrying her off to Orange was to get her out of the country.

At the end of May 1814, a new row started between the Prince Regent and his daughter, when Charlotte learned that her mother was not invited to the festivities in honour of the Russian guests who were arriving in London. The Regent intended to be present himself and he remained fixed in his resolution never to meet his

[9] Quoted in Plowden, pp. 89 and 93, and Fraser, p. 223.

[10] Wellington to Bathurst, 18 May 1813, in Colenbrander 3, p. 17.

[11] Charlotte to Cornelia Knight, in Knight, p. 152.

estranged wife upon any occasion. Charlotte, who greatly resented this, must have been pleased when the absence of the Princess of Wales from a dinner held by her father in honour of the Tsar in Carlton House on 7 June led to an incident: a handsome Russian general, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, caused the incident by requesting the Prince Regent's permission to visit his wife. The request was refused. Was this really a blunder by a naive Leopold, who did not know of the hatred between the Prince Regent and his wife and simply wanted to pay a family visit to his father's cousin? Or was it an ingenious plot to steal the heart of a girl who adored her mother, by showing consideration for this mother – a thing the Prince of Orange had never even thought of? The idea might have been conceived by the Tsar's sister, Catherine, who accompanied Charlotte daily and kept Leopold duly informed of Charlotte's state of mind. Catherine met Leopold at night, when, in his arms, she reported how much nearer she had brought him to the heart of Charlotte and to the throne of England.

But Charlotte was not impressed with Leopold. She fell in love with another German in the Tsar's delegation: Friedrich Augustus of Prussia, a 35-year-old notorious womaniser and the black sheep of the Prussian royal family. He led her on and did not tell her that he had a wife in Germany. Charlotte contrived to have several secret meetings with the Prussian, whom she referred to as 'F' in her letters. When 'F' left for Germany, she was devastated because of 'things having gone so far'.¹²

The Richest Prince in Britain

The whole situation surrounding Charlotte's engagement to Orange came to a crisis on 16 June. Exactly one week after the Russian delegation had arrived in town, Charlotte unilaterally broke off her engagement in a short letter to Prince Willem. Her father was furious. As a punishment, he kept her locked up for

[12] Charlotte to Mercer Elphinstone, 8 Nov. 1814, in *Charlotte*, p. 163.

most of the time. But Charlotte remained determined. 'No threats shall ever bend me to marry this detested Dutchman,' she wrote.

Meanwhile, Leopold had become very active. He had written the Prince Regent a polite letter fully explaining his conduct. The Regent had graciously accepted Leopold's apologies and had even come to consider him a most honourable young man. Leopold had also been trying to catch Charlotte's attention. When she drove out in the Park he would ride up to her and endeavour to be noticed. He had called at her house, but she had not invited him in to drink tea with her. Charlotte was still in love with F and hoped that the latter, to whom she wrote ardent love letters, would return to England for her.

As it happened, Leopold spent barely a month in London. He cut short his stay because on 4 July 1814, the Prince of Leiningen, the husband of Leopold's sister Victoria, died. He returned home as soon as he heard the news. Although Leopold and Charlotte had hardly seen each other and had scarcely spoken, by early 1815 he had succeeded in becoming Charlotte's favourite. The reason why Charlotte picked 'the Leo' (as she called him) was a very prosaic one. She needed another man, as an alternative to Willem of Orange, to confront her father with. Since her first choice, F, had 'betrayed' her, the dashing Russian general from Coburg simply was the first one that came to mind. Charlotte made a last desperate attempt to contact F on 11 November 1814, while at the same time she schemed to have Leopold suggested to the Regent as a possible husband. 'What odd mortals we are,' she remarked. 'That I should be as wholly occupied and devoted as I am to *one*, and yet think and talk and even provide for another would appear unnatural in the highest degree were it written in a novel, and yet it is *true*.' She wrote that she would still think of her Prussian Prince often, but with Leopold she would be less unhappy than if she were to remain alone.¹³

The affair with F was finally over on 18 January, when she got a letter from the Prussian. It left no further room for hope and broke

[13] Charlotte to Mercer Elphinstone, 11 Nov. 1814, in Charlotte, p. 165.

her heart. Although she confided in her aunt, Princess Mary, that she was 'not the least in the world' in love with Leopold, she had a very good opinion of him, and for that reason would rather marry him than any other prince. She was encouraged by Princess Frederica, the Duchess of York, who praised Leopold abundantly. Frederica was in constant correspondence with Leopold and kept pressuring him to ask the Prince of Wales formally for the hand of his daughter. But Leopold kept putting this off. This procrastination even earned him the nicknames '*le Marquis peu-à-peu*' and '*Monsieur Doucement*' (Mister Softly-Softly) by the Regent, who seemed rather amused by the matter.

Leopold did not appeal to everyone, though. Lady Charlotte Bury, who had encountered him on her travels on the Continent in the autumn of 1814, disliked him. She had noticed that he never looked at the person he was speaking to. She thought him sly and was instinctively disinclined to trust him. Lord Frederick Fitzclarence, a bastard son of the Duke of Clarence, found him too smooth-spoken by half – 'a damned humbug.' According to Alison Plowden, the modern biographer of Princess Charlotte, there is no doubt that behind Leopold's 'suavely ingratiating façade lurked a shrewd, coldly calculating brain and a driving ambition.' He was, Plowden says, 'prepared to be agreeable while elbowing his way upwards.'¹⁴ Leopold did not over hurry, he never said one word too many and took no initiatives unless he was certain of a successful outcome. Hence, Charlotte had to wait for over a year. Leopold was on the Continent and Charlotte remained virtually imprisoned by her father. Her letters to Leopold were smuggled out by the Duke of York, while Leopold corresponded with her via her friend Mercer Elphinstone. Meanwhile, Charlotte's relationship with her father gradually improved. She felt deceived by her mother, who had left England to live on the Continent, mainly in Italy. There the Princess of Wales caused much scandal

[14] Plowden, p. 188.

by organising balls where, as Charlotte Bury wrote, she appeared 'dressed *en Vénus*, or rather not dressed further than the waist.'¹⁵

In the winter of 1814–1815, Leopold was in Austria as his family's official delegate to the international diplomatic Congress of Vienna, where the negotiations over the new borders of Europe continued, and where Duke Ernst of Coburg-Saalfeld, as a reward for his share in the victory over Napoleon, was assigned the territory of Sankt-Wendel in the Lower-Palatinate (today's Saarland) with its 22,000 inhabitants. When in the spring the news reached Vienna that Napoleon had escaped from Elba and had rallied the French in Paris, the delegates rushed home to raise their armies and prepare for battle. In Coburg, Duke Ernst and his family decided to lie low and await the outcome. None of the Saxe-Coburg princes participated in the battle at Waterloo, where the Allies crushed Napoleon on 18 June 1815 and Prince Willem of Orange was wounded by a musketball in the shoulder.

Meanwhile, in England, Charlotte was growing impatient. She urged 'the Leo' to ask the Regent for her hand, but he wrote to Mercer that it would be impossible for him to come to England that summer. Mr. Softly-Softly kept all options open, and as he was not certain whether the Regent would approve of his marrying Charlotte, he was reluctant to commit himself openly to her. Maybe he should marry someone else. While in Vienna, he had flirted with many girls. One of them was the beautiful and wealthy 31-year-old widow, Catherine Bagration, nicknamed 'the naked angel' because of her low necklines. Charlotte experienced moments of deep despondency. 'The more I really wish and think of this marriage for me, the more I begin to be in despair,' she told Mercer.

Autumn came and Leopold was still dithering. He was in Paris with his brother Ernst, but he did not cross the Channel. 'Oh why should he not come over. It is but a run over of a few hours. I quite languish for his arrival,' Charlotte wrote desperately. At the end of October, when a couple of other German princes visited London

[15] Quoted in Plowden, p. 179.

with the thinly-veiled hope of winning themselves a British crown princess, Charlotte wryly told Mercer: 'I think the best thing I can do to make *all easy and equally* pleased is to *marry them all at once in the lump*.'

Again it was the Russian Emperor who paved the way for Leopold. When Tsar Alexander offered the Prince of Orange the hand of his youngest sister Anna, the Dutchman grasped this chance to become an in-law of the Russian imperial family. With his scheme of an Orange match definitely thwarted, the Prince Regent finally gave in to his daughter. She gained his permission to marry Leopold. Now, 'the Leo' hastened to London, where, on 26 February 1816, he saw Charlotte after a separation of 18 months.

For the Saxe-Coburg family 1816 was a year of glory. Imagine the triumph of Augusta, the Dowager-Duchess of Coburg-Saalfeld. In Vienna, on 2 January, Leopold's brother Ferdinand had married Antonia von Kohary, the only daughter of the immensely rich Hungarian Prince Kohary and the richest heiress of the Austrian Empire. Never before had Vienna seen such a wedding. The festivities, where an orchestra of 790 gypsies played Hungarian songs, lasted for nine whole days. And an even more glorious match was going to take place in London, between *Poldi* and the heiress of the Prince Regent. After the debacle in Russia, where *Julchen* had botched it, at last Augusta was sure that one of her grandchildren would some day wear a royal crown. This time nothing could go wrong, could it?

Leopold and Charlotte's engagement was announced in February. Leopold acquired British nationality and the rank of Field Marshal in the British army. He received a large sum of money from the Tsar and the Lordship of Holzkirchen from the Austrian Emperor. The poorest prince in Germany had become a wealthy man. While waiting for the wedding, Leopold remained at Brighton, recovering from neuralgia. Like his brother Ernst, the 25-year-old prince often complained of health problems. Hypochondria is a condition that apparently often occurs in

highly-sexed men. His family sent him a doctor, Christian Stockmar, who arrived in Brighton on 3 April. The 28-year-old Stockmar was the official surgeon of the city of Coburg. Leopold and Stockmar became friends. Leopold asked him to stay and engaged him as his personal secretary.

Leopold's marriage took place on 2 May. Parliament settled upon him a stipend of £50,000 (the equivalent of £3.75 million or \$6.25 million today), while his wife received an extra annual allocation of £10,000 pin money for her private expenses. It was agreed that if Charlotte died first, Leopold would enjoy the same income of £50,000 for the rest of his life. Furthermore, Parliament voted the couple a sum of £60,000 to be spent on furniture, jewellery and personal belongings necessary for setting up house for the first time. Charlotte also received a trousseau, consisting of thirty gowns, many embroidered in gold and trimmed with silver lace, dresses of satin decorated with Brussels point and flounces of Mechlin, and a wedding dress, also trimmed with Brussels point lace, which had cost more than £10,000.

The couple went to live at Marlborough House near St. James's Park in London and at Claremont House near Esher in Surrey. The latter was a huge Palladian mansion built in the late 1760s by the landscape gardener Lancelot 'Capability' Brown; a rare example of his work as an architect. The Prince Regent donated it as a personal gift to Leopold.

In the spring of 1817, the whole of England rejoiced in the news everyone had been waiting for: Princess Charlotte was pregnant. On 5 November, however, tragedy struck. Charlotte gave birth to a stillborn boy, after 52 hours of labour. The next day she died, only 21 years old. Leopold was shattered. 'It is true that I loved her for her physical beauty, but I can vow that what I loved *more* and came to appreciate more every day was her *noble heart*,' he wrote to his sister Sophie.¹⁶

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[16] SAP MP, Leopold to Sophie, 22 December 1817, in Leopold I 2, p. 169.

After Charlotte's death, Leopold continued to live at Marlborough House and at Claremont. The provisions in the marriage contract had been extremely generous. No one had expected a tragedy like this – Charlotte dying without leaving the kingdom a successor to the throne, whom her surviving husband would then have had to raise in style. The inheritance Leopold received from his wife was large. There were some verbal protestations from his father-in-law and there was a painful squabble over a recently-painted portrait of Charlotte, but ultimately everything went to the German. Leopold lived frugally on his huge yearly allowance of £50,000, cleverly investing the fortune. He soon became the richest royal prince in England. Indeed, his stipend greatly exceeded the £25,000 which the Duke of York, the heir to the throne, annually received, or the £24,000 of the Duke of Kent.

Though officially Leopold remained in England until 1831, he spent most of his time on the continent. In 1819 he bought the castle of Niederfüllbach near Coburg. He often attended meetings of European freemasons and had a busy love life. He is said to have had children in Niederfüllbach and Coburg. His affairs with Countess Dorothee (Dolly) de Ficquelmont and with Jane Digby, Lady Ellenborough, did not go unnoticed; his relatives even thought that he was about to get married. Dolly he had to share with her husband, however, and Jane Digby, who was a nymphomaniac, with the whole of London. In Coburg, where Leopold had his own apartment in the Ehrenburg Palace, he frequently stood in for his brother Ernst, the reigning duke, when the latter went abroad for business or pleasure.

Duke Ernst had finally married in 1817. The bride was a relative, 16-year-old Louise of Saxe-Gotha. It was a marriage for dynastic purposes. She was the only child of Prince Augustus, the reigning Duke of Gotha-Altenburg. Her father's younger brother, Friedrich, was a childless homosexual, which made her the ultimate heir to Gotha-Altenburg. Louise, whose mother had died when she was but two weeks old, was a small, vivacious and intelligent girl. 'With long thick chestnut hair, and large blue

eyes, though severely cross-eyed,' one of her nieces wrote, 'but when she smiles and talks, one assumes it to be a freshness in her expression, which suits her rather well.'¹⁷ Because of her pleasant character, Louise was dearly loved by the people of Coburg. But the marriage was an unhappy one, owing to Ernst's continuing extramarital affairs. In the very year of his marriage, Ernst became the father of an illegitimate daughter by his 19-year-old Parisian mistress Sophie Fermepin. His reputation was further harmed by the publication, in 1823, of the saucy memoirs of *la belle Grecque*, his former mistress Pauline Panam, the mother of another of his many bastards. Out of revenge or out of loneliness, Louise soon started to take lovers of her own.

Ernst's first legitimate son, also called Ernst, was born in June 1818. A second son, Albert, was born on 26 August 1819. Theories abound over who Albert's real father might have been. According to Harald Sandner, the modern historian of the House of Saxe-Coburg, it probably was Leopold, who apparently stood in for his brother in the marital bed as well. Leopold was living in the Ehrenburg Palace from September 1818 to May 1819.¹⁸ He took a keen interest in the education of his nephews, especially of the youngest. The child grew very fond of Uncle. 'Albert adores his uncle Leopold, never leaves his side, ogles him, is constantly hugging him, and doesn't feel comfortable unless he can be near him,' Louise wrote when the boy was two years old.¹⁹

Duke Ernst, a promiscuous as well as a sanctimonious hypocrite and highly suspicious of his wife, began to hate her. After Louise's father died, he and his mother Augusta started scheming to rid themselves of her. On 29 August 1824, Ernst expelled Louise from Coburg, while Augusta confiscated her jewellery. The people of Coburg immediately went after their beloved Duchess, stopped

[17] Mary of Württemberg to Grand-Duchess Alexandra Feodorovna of Russia, 7 Oct. 1819, in Bachmann 2, p. 28.

[18] Sandner, p. 56.

[19] Quoted in Grey, p. 15. Also in Rhodes James, p. 24.

her carriage, stormed the Ehrenburg Palace and forced the Duke to take her back. Ernst appealed to the Austrian Chancellor Metternich for help, but Metternich refused to send Austrian troops to settle a marital dispute. Nevertheless, on 2 September 'at the stroke of midnight,' so as to avoid popular demonstrations, Louise left Coburg for Sankt-Wendel, the distant Coburg exclave near the Franco-German border. 'There nobody will see or hear anything from her, and she will soon be forgotten,' Augusta reckoned.²⁰

Prior to her departure, Louise had signed all her possessions and rights away, leaving Ernst everything and herself nothing. The fact that she agreed to this may indicate that Ernst knew something he could blackmail her with. At about the same time, the otherwise miserly Leopold helped his brother out financially by giving him £40,000. Louise wrote many sad letters to members of the family, including Leopold and Stockmar, to be kept informed about her sons, but she was never allowed to see the two little boys again.

As soon as Louise had been discarded, Augusta began to plan a new marriage for Ernst, looking once more to the imperial family of Russia, the major superpower of the day. For lack of a sister of the Tsar, Augusta considered that a cousin of his would do. Her choice fell on her own granddaughter Marie, the daughter of the late Antoinette of Saxe-Coburg and of Duke Alexander of Württemberg, the Russian Minister of Roadworks and a maternal uncle of the Tsar. As early as December 1824, Augusta was speculating that a marriage with Marie would be financially rewarding, given that 'when she marries, the Emperor of Russia will make a pecuniary effort for the sake of her late mother.'²¹

Before Ernst could officially repudiate his wife, however, he had to wait until Duke Friedrich IV of Gotha-Altenburg had died and Louise's inheritance had safely passed into his own hands. The gay duke passed away in 1825. The following year, Ernst became

[20] SAC Kohary Archives 32, Augusta to Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Kohary, 6 Dec. 1824.

[21] *Idem*.

Duke of Gotha as well as Duke of Coburg. His territory doubled to 770 square miles (2,000 square kilometres) and the number of his subjects almost tripled. That same year, Ernst divorced Louise. Robbed of her inheritance, she married her *Rittmeister* but died shortly afterwards of a painful uterine cancer, only 30 years old. Ernst remarried his niece Marie of Württemberg. There were no children in that almost incestuous relationship. It was, once again, an unhappy marriage. 'Ernst is not made for marriage because he is extremely egotistical,' Leopold said.²² In September 1838, Ernst became the father of twins by Margaret Braun, a servant girl.

* * *

In England, the tragic death of Princess Charlotte on 6 November 1817 had left the Crown without an heir, apart from George III's own children. Mad King George had fathered seven sons, but only the eldest, George, the Prince Regent, had been able to produce a legitimate heir. Now that this heir had died, it seemed that the ruling dynasty of Brunswick-Hanover was failing to guarantee the royal succession. In order to resolve this problem, the House of Commons encouraged the remaining four unmarried royal sons, the Dukes of Clarence, Kent, Sussex and Cambridge, to find suitable brides and get legitimate offspring as quickly as possible. To stimulate the princes in their duty to procreate, Parliament promised that the first to marry and get a legitimate child would be handsomely rewarded by the grateful nation. In less than seven months three of the brothers had rushed to the altar. The fourth one, 44-year-old Sussex, confessed to the Commons that he had already married secretly in 1793, but he had no children.

As the royal sons could only marry Protestants, their choice was restricted to German princesses, whose number was limited and whose child-bearing qualities, due to generations of inbreeding, were not always optimal. The youngest of the three brothers, the 43-year-old Duke of Cambridge, won the race to the altar.

[22] SAP MP, Leopold to Sophie, 20 Apr. 1833, in Leopold I 2, p. 239.

He married Augusta of Hesse and succeeded in having a son in 1819. Another brother, the 47-year-old Duke of Cumberland, also succeeded in getting a legitimate son in 1819 (the future King of Hanover). The 52-year-old Duke of Clarence discarded himself of his mistress, the actress Dorothea Jordan, the mother of ten of his bastards, and, as a sacrifice for Britain, married the ugly Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen. She bore Clarence two daughters, the elder in 1819, the second in 1820. The children were poor in health, however, and both died young. The 50-year-old Edward, Duke of Kent, also rid himself of his mistress of 27 years, Julie de St. Laurent, the mother of two of his bastard sons. Intent on doing his patriotic duty to impregnate a German, he went to see Leopold for advice. 'Try my sister,' Leopold said and sent him to Amorbach, to Victoria, the 31-year-old widow of the Prince of Leiningen, and the mother of two lively children. For the House of Saxe-Coburg, this was a new opportunity to succeed to a royal throne. Leopold wrote his sister a letter, urging her to accept the marriage proposal of the Duke of Kent. At Amorbach, however, Kent fell under the spell of the beautiful Polixena von Tubeuf, Leopold's old sweetheart. He forgot that he had travelled to Germany to marry a princess and first proposed to Polixena, but she declined.²³ The Duke then turned to Victoria and married her in May 1818.

Their daughter was born on 24 May 1819. The baby was named Victoria after her mother. Seven months later, on 23 January 1820, Kent suddenly died from a cold which he had not treated. By a curious chance, young Dr. Stockmar was staying in Kent's house at the time. Two years after having watched Princess Charlotte die, he now stood by the deathbed of the husband of Leopold's sister. If Kent had survived, he would eventually have succeeded to the British throne and Victoria of Saxe-Coburg would have become queen, but this, too, was not to be. At Stockmar's advice Kent

[23] Vermeir, vol. I, p. 36. Vermeir quotes a letter of Victoria, Duchess of Kent, to Polixena, in which she says: '*Dir danken wir unser Glück*' (We owe our happiness to you).

hastily prepared a will, ensuring the guardianship of his daughter to his wife.

Six days after Kent, his father, mad King George III, died. The Prince Regent became King George IV. He died in 1830 and was succeeded by his brother, King William IV, formerly the Duke of Clarence. When the latter died in 1837, Kent's 18-year-old daughter Victoria succeeded him and reigned for 64 years, the longest reign in British history. She married her cousin, Albert, officially the son of Leopold's brother but most likely Leopold's own. This marriage had been the last great ambition of her grandmother, the Dowager Duchess Augusta, who had destined the two children to marry each other from the moment that Albert was born, barely three months after Victoria. By marrying Albert, Victoria brought the House of Saxe-Coburg onto the British throne. In 1831, her uncle Leopold became the King of the Belgians. King Leopold and Queen Victoria collaborated in 1837 in bringing the eldest son of Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Kohary to the throne of Portugal, while in 1887, the son of Ferdinand's second son became the King of Bulgaria.

There is some irony in the fact that of the seven children of unambitious Francis, the four youngest (Ernst, Ferdinand, Victoria and Leopold) became either monarchs or parents to one, while the three eldest (Sophie, Antoinette and Juliana) did not succeed in this respect. It had been these latter three whom their mother Augusta had taken to St. Petersburg in September 1795, to ensure that one of them became the mother of the future Tsar of Russia. When Augusta died in November 1831, however, her son Leopold was the King of the Belgians and her granddaughter Victoria the Crown Princess of Great Britain and Ireland. For a woman who was herself the daughter of an unimportant count, and who in 1777 had married a bankrupt prince, this was quite an achievement.

A Throne for an Equilibrist

When Kent died, he left his widow and eight-month-old baby hugely in debt. Though the Dowager-Duchess, who lived at Kensington Palace, received an annual pension of £6,000, this was hardly enough to raise the heir to the British throne. It fell far below the £50,000 that Leopold received annually. To help his sister out, Leopold offered her money from his own fortune, all in all £16,000 by 1831 – a period during which he received £700,000 (the equivalent of more than £52 million or \$87 million today) out of the British Treasury. His sister and her child often came to stay for long periods with Leopold at Claremont. Here he could supervise little Victoria's education. Later, Victoria wrote that her childhood years at Claremont had been 'the brightest epoch of my otherwise rather melancholy childhood.' She grew very attached to her uncle. He was, she said, 'il mio secondo padre – or, rather, *solo* padre, for he is indeed like my real father, as I have none.'²⁴

The brothers of the late Duke of Kent, including George IV and his successor, William IV, did not like this Saxe-Coburg influence on the royal heir at all. Leopold was given no official functions in Britain and led an idle life. When he was not on one of his frequent travels to the continent, he occasionally attended parties of the English aristocracy, where he was generally despised. 'The shabbiest ass,' Lady Cowper called him. 'His pomposity fatigues, and his avarice disgusts,' Lord Greville said. The Duke of Wellington, a member of the Tory cabinet, sometimes felt constrained to invite the shifty German prince. 'We are here with a crowd of bores,' Princess de Lieven, the wife of the Russian ambassador, reported to Metternich in January 1821 about one of Wellington's parties. 'Leopold,' she said, 'was wearying me with his slow speech and his bad reasoning.' 'He is a Jesuit and a bore.'²⁵ Even Wellington confessed that he was often 'bored to death.'

[24] Queen Victoria, *Reminiscences*, 1872, in *Victoria* 1, vol. I, p. 14.

[25] Lieven to Metternich, 12 Jan. and 4 Feb. 1821, in *Lieven*, pp. 103 and 111.

At home, in his mansion at Claremont, Leopold's company consisted of his servants, 'four dogs and two parrots, one of which can sing the overture to Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*,'²⁶ and his secretary, Christian Stockmar, whom Leopold had raised to the rank of a Baron in 1821. Stockmar not only promoted the interests of the Saxe-Coburgs, but also those of his own family. He knew that his master was leading a restless sexual life. Leopold had mistresses in London and abroad. In his capacity as personal surgeon, Stockmar, fearing that his master's promiscuous life would 'ruin body and soul,' advised the prince to marry. He told him that he had a cousin who strikingly resembled the late Princess Charlotte. In September 1828, Leopold departed for Prussia to meet this 20-year-old cousin of Stockmar's.

Karoline Bauer was the daughter of Christine Stockmar, an aunt of Leopold's secretary. She lived with her widowed mother in Berlin, where she was an actress at the Opera. There are indications that Karoline was a virtuous young woman. She had refused the advances of Count Bismarck and Prince Friedrich Augustus of Prussia (the late Princess Charlotte's infamous F).

Leopold was infatuated from the moment he saw Karoline in the theatre of the *Neues Palast* in Potsdam. He surprised the actress with a visit and proposed that she should come and live with him in England. At first Karoline was not enthusiastic, but Leopold courted her insistently. 'It is very hard for me to give up my career as an actress, but my heart asks me to make this sad, afflicted man happy again,' she wrote to Stockmar. 'Always, when I have decided not to give in, I see his dark melancholic eyes begging me. I will have to renounce my beloved job in Berlin for the only possible future that he can offer me: to join him in his loneliness in England.'²⁷ She finally gave in when during a visit to his castle in Niederfüllbach he promised to marry her.

[26] Leopold to Marie-Amélie, Duchess of Orléans, 21 Apr. 1828, in Sabbe, p. 67.

[27] Bauer to Stockmar, Jan. 1829, in Wangenheim, p. 76.

In May 1829, Karoline and her mama moved to London. Leopold rented them a place near Regent's Park. Stockmar explained that the marriage had to be kept a secret, because Leopold might otherwise lose his British stipend. On 2 July, there was a small wedding party in Claremont House.²⁸ But Leopold's infatuation with Karoline was over as soon as he had conquered her. She became a burden to him. He was extremely angry when she spent too much money to his liking on a trip to Paris. Politically, too, she was a liability.

Since 1821, the people of Greece had been fighting a guerrilla war against their Turkish Ottoman overlords. In September 1829, the Turkish Sultan accepted the independence of Greece. The Greeks wanted a republic and had already chosen one of their leaders, Count Ioánnis Kapodístrias, as president. The Great Powers had decided, however, that Greece should become a kingdom. Hence, a kingdom it had to be. But who should be king? France supported Prince Johann of Saxony, while the candidate of King George IV of Britain was Prince Frederik of Orange, a younger brother of Prince Willem, who in 1814 had lost his fiancée to Leopold. Leopold decided to put himself forward as a better candidate. He knew he would easily get the backing of Russia. He visited France and persuaded Paris to accept him as second choice if Prince Johann was rejected. He went to Naples to meet Greek representatives. He sent the banker Karl Stockmar, the brother of his secretary, to Greece to meet Kapodístrias, who declared himself in favour of Leopold. He lobbied at the Foreign Office in London, where Lord Aberdeen was in charge, and he succeeded in obtaining the support of the Duke of Wellington, the British Prime Minister.

Their support for Leopold brought Aberdeen and Wellington into conflict with George IV. How could the Government be 'such fools as to think Prince Leopold could be any use?' the King exclaimed. George vetoed Leopold. This led to a government crisis.

[28] Sandner (p. 282) says that they were married in the chapel of Niederfüllbach Castle.

Wellington threatened to resign if Leopold was not accepted. The King 'grumpily' gave in. But having won his prize, Leopold was no longer interested and renounced the Greek crown. On thinking the matter over, he had begun to have doubts about the future stability of the Greek throne. 'It is a throne with only three legs,' Stockmar said, 'not fit for a King, but for an equilibrist.' His sister, too, wanted Leopold to remain in England. The Dowager-Duchess of Kent wished to have him nearby, so that he could remain the protector of the interests of the House of Saxe-Coburg, as they were embodied in her daughter. Then, the 67-year-old King George IV became seriously ill. It was clear that he was soon to die (he died on 26 June). The Duke of Clarence was next in line for the throne, and immediately after him the 11-year-old Victoria. Was Leopold tempted by a possible glorious career in England, perhaps as the Regent for his little niece?

Leopold went to see the British Foreign Secretary. He told him that his acceptance of the Greek throne had only been conditional. The territory of Greece should be enlarged with the province of Candia (Crete). Aberdeen became angry. 'Notwithstanding all that has been arranged already, you are free to withdraw, but your decision cannot be explained by the case of Candia alone,' he said.²⁹ Nevertheless, on 21 May, Leopold officially declared that he would not accept the throne of Greece after all. Wellington and Aberdeen felt personally affronted. Lieven, the Russian Ambassador, called Leopold's behaviour 'downright scandalous,' because he renounced all the responsibilities he had previously accepted. Even the Prussian Baron von Stein, a friend of Leopold, wrote to the Archbishop of Cologne: 'It is all in the style of *Prince peu à peu*, as King George calls him. In cowardly fashion he lets go of the plough even before he has drawn the first furrow, and is already calculating his chances upon the death of the King. A man of such small stature is not worthy of a high position.'³⁰

[29] Aberdeen to Leopold, 31 Jan. 1830, in Bauer, Karoline I, vol. III, p. 200.

[30] Quoted in Vermeir, vol. I, p. 46.

Leopold denied that his real ambition was to become Regent of Great Britain, but many years later in a letter to Archduke Johann of Austria he would confess: 'If I had taken over power in England in 1830, things would have been different.'³¹

The Greek episode convinced Leopold of the urgency of discarding himself of his wife. If he had become King of Greece, his marriage to a commoner would have been a severe handicap. The children born within such a morganatic marriage would be unable to inherit their father's rank. If he had become king – or if he wanted to become a king in future and establish a respectable dynasty – he would either have to divorce Karoline Bauer or simply declare his marriage non-existent, as if she had only been his mistress. Leopold opted for the second solution. He told her that he no longer considered himself married. It is striking to see how he used the same argument towards his wife as he used towards the European Powers with regard to the Greek throne. He claimed that his marriage had only been conditional and that he could renounce it whenever this pleased him.

The deceived woman left England at the end of May 1830, only a few days after Leopold had officially rejected the throne of Greece. Karoline never met Leopold again. She committed suicide after writing her memoirs, in which she depicted the Coburg prince as a pedantic hypochondriac egotist. Ernst Stockmar, the son of Leopold's secretary, in a reaction to the publication of the memoirs, did not deny the fact that his relative had been wronged. However, he considered the marriage of the prince to his father's cousin no more than 'a small mistake, which was soon mended.' The whole episode, he said, 'does not even deserve to be mentioned.'³² The official line is that the woman made everything up. Otherwise, one would have to concede that the founder of the royal dynasty of Belgium was a bigamist.

[31] Quoted in Bronne 1, p. 49.

[32] Quoted in Launay 2, p. 32.