

# ***THE ALMANACH de GOTHA***

## **A Brief History of Europe's Nobility Reference Book**

Excerpted from *Secrets of the Gotha* by Ghislain de Diesbach  
(translated from the French by Margaret Crosland)  
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*Secrets of the Gotha:*  
*Private Lives of the Royal Families of Europe*

Edited with additional commentary in [Brackets] by The Duke of Maxalla

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### **Introduction by the Duke of Maxalla**

[This is one of the best histories of the *Almanach de Gotha* that one is likely to find anywhere. With historical accuracy and considerable wit, the author, Ghislain de Diesbach, himself a nobleman listed in the *Almanach*, puts the famous reference series into perspective by aptly describing its major purpose--to allow certain Houses to look down upon other Houses or to even deny their right to the status which is properly theirs. The *Almanach* catalogues the risings and fallings of many royal and noble houses, especially those whose heads dared to marry "beneath their station" (i.e., for love instead of for dynasty). While the *Almanach* itself refused to participate in political intrigues, this effort at integrity was moot because it merely reported political intrigues that were already accomplished or in progress. Thus, the appeal to one or another of the *Almanach* editions to determine who's royal/noble and who isn't (especially by the modern Order Assassins) is a misapplication of the book's value. The *Almanach* did not set or establish precedence, it only listed what had already been done.

Finally, the *Almanach* itself suffered interference from the House of Napoleon (who didn't?). The nature of the interference is plainly described in the article which follows. The *Almanach's* "infallibility" was also severely compromised because (a) some royal and noble families simply did not participate, and (b) the book did not pay much attention to noble and royal Houses of the Byzantine Holy Roman Empire--why should it? Its very title shows

the focus: *Almanach de Gotha*...The Almanac of the Gotha, i.e., the mostly German/Prussian Houses.

For one whose objectivity is unimpaired and who has sufficient historical training, the *Almanach* is a fascinating and useful reference work.]

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## *The Almanach de Gotha* by Ghislain de Diesbach

"For me, mankind begins with barons," Prince Metternich used to remark benevolently.

This aristocratic viewpoint was shared by Justus Perthes, a *Gotha* publisher. Once his genealogical publications constituted the most important Nobiliary in Europe, for they ranged from the simple **Taschenbuch der Freiherrlichen Hauser**, lists of the barons, to the famous *Almanach de Gotha* whose prestige outlived its disappearance.

For the same reasons as the Jesuits, the Suez Canal and the [Western] Holy Roman Empire, whose memory it preserved, the *Almanach de Gotha* has entered into the mythology of Europe, and this consecration has allowed it to gain in wonderland all that it has lost in the real world, for in 1944 its publication was suspended.

Born in a little German court where precedence was an obsession and French culture a light veneer, it gradually saw its size increase from the twenty pages of the first number to over a thousand during its last years. *Gotha's* prestige continued to grow until it eclipsed the other genealogical reference books and became a kind of Bible of earthly vanity. While the texts of the Holy Scriptures proclaim the greatness, the majesty and the omnipotence of God, those of the *Gotha* only existed to exalt the origin, fame and splendour of earthly princes. To do this it established in this new

paradise a strict order which assigned to everyone, from the most illustrious monarch to the most modest princeling, the place to which he was entitled. It was the application of the famous words of Christ: "In my Father's house there are many mansions."

The *Gotha*, a true book of revelations, hardly ever made a mistake and never lent itself to schemes or flatteries which might have harmed its reputation for integrity. Its judgements tolerated no appeal. For those excommunicated by the *Gotha*, there was no salvation: the first part listed royal families, those exiled from it as the result of an unfortunate marriage were condemned to appear in the third part, or, worse, to figure in another of Justus Perthes' year-books, for example the book of counts, and there they would remain until they died, lamenting lost honours. In vain would their descendants claim for themselves illustrious origins in order to be addressed as Imperial or Royal Highness by nostalgic courtiers: the *Gotha*, source of justice, would always be there to reduce their pretensions to nothing! [The author here writes sarcastically, of course.] On the other hand it officially recorded and sanctioned unusual alliances, downfalls, or the beginnings of ascents to dizzy heights as in the case of the Tecks and the Battenbergs. Between the lines, beneath the dry catalogue of names, titles and dates, are hints of endless tales of mystery, tragedy and scandal, which throw new light on the Olympus where these demi-gods reigned, and prove that they were far less conventional than the court painters let us think.

This immense forest of genealogical trees into which the *Gotha* had developed had at first been no more than a sparse wood. In it grew a few old royal trunks, notably the tree of the house of Saxony, one of whose branches reigned in *Gotha*. The court of Gotha was in fact very small and its only claim to fame was precisely the fact that it had given its name to the *Almanach*. While many German princes rivalled each other in luxury or extravagance in order to imitate the court of Versailles, the sovereigns of Gotha led a peaceable, virtuous and mathematical existence. James Boswell, the young Scot who was as attractive as

he was vain, visited Germany in 1764, during his "Grand Tour," and confessed he was disappointed, indeed almost shocked by the simple life led by the court of Gotha:

"The Duke and Duchess," he wrote in his Journal ( from *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland 1764*, p. 138. ed. F. A. Potde, Yale and London, 1928-53) on October 17th, 1764, "were plain old people. The Duke talked of "ma soeur," (the Princess of Wales) just like a good Scots nobleman. The Hereditary Prince was mild and quiet.... The Princess was ugly, but easy and comical." At table, following a sign from the grand marshal of the court, a page would recite the *benedicite*. The atmosphere was patriarchal but the library was remarkably well stocked, which was rare for the period and for the country. The dukes of Gotha had a taste for literature and the sciences. The crown prince, who ascended the throne in 1777, concerned himself with mathematics and astronomy, while his brother was the patron of writers, among them Wieland, who dedicated his *Oberon* to him. The Duchess Luise Dorothea was in correspondence with Voltaire, whom she received after he had been driven out of Potsdam by Frederick II. The Grand Mistress of Ceremonies, Juliana Franziska von Buchwald, was a famous bluestocking who counted among her friends, in addition to Frederick II and Voltaire, Wieland, Herder and Goethe. French was spoken at court and it was for this reason that in 1763 Wilhelm de Rothberg, one of the most distinguished gentlemen of Gotha, had printed in French for the year 1764 an almanack of about twenty pages. It contained an astronomical calendar, engraved tablets for recording gains or losses at gambling and a timetable of the collections and deliveries of the mails to which the epistolary exchanges of these great minds were entrusted.

The following year Emmanuel-Christoph Klupfel, former tutor to the duke's household, introduced into the almanack an essay on the genealogy of the ruling houses, a genealogical table of the house of Saxony and a chronological table of the emperors of Germany, the elected sovereigns of the Holy Roman Empire.

In 1765 the *Almanach de Gotha* was augmented by further genealogical items, but its editors abandoned the use of French and christened it *Gothaischer Hofkalender zum Nutzen und Vergnugen*, that is to say a court almanack "for utility and entertainment". In fact, to amuse readers, the *Almanach* published stories and anecdotes for many years, and for their instruction it also supplied them with much diverse information. Some of it was intensely prosaic; in addition to articles on ancient or modern history, appeared prices for single or double beds and a list of the most famous confectioners in Paris. Also to be found in the *Almanach de Gotha* at this period, were all the details supplied today by diaries, for example, the areas of the principal countries of the world, population figures, the list of the largest towns as well as information on their military strength and their national income. At the beginning of the nineteenth century it became customary to give the names of the ambassadors or ministers plenipotentiary of the great powers. [Thus, the purpose and content of the *Almanach* changed radically.]

From 1768 the *Almanach de Gotha* was adorned with allegorical or mythological engravings which were later replaced by artistic compositions taken from fashionable works, such as Gil Blas Oberon, Beaumarchais' The Marriage of Figaro, or [the novel] Caroline de Lichtfield (Caroline de Lichtfield (1786) remained the best known novel of Isabelle or Elizabeth, baroness of Montolieu (1751-1832), a prolific writer whose chief works were translations or imitations of German and English. She made a "free" translation of Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility.) and, later, the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Most of these illustrations were drawn and engraved by the great artist Daniel Chodowiecki. He was known at that time as "the delicious Chodowiecki," painter of the intimate life of eighteenth-century Germany. He was a Pole who lived in Dresden, having married a Frenchwoman, the daughter of a gold embroiderer in Berlin. His art has much in common with that of Chardin or La Tour He was the illustrator of all the famous contemporary writers and the portrait-painter most sought-after by all the minor German courts. His contributions to the *Almanach de*

*Gotha* should be regarded as one of the principal causes of its success.

Within a few years, the *Almanach* had become the favourite book at court. Everyone read it with the self-satisfaction of a coquette admiring herself in a mirror. There was no more lively and narcissistic pleasure for these bored monarchs in their baroque residences, or for their courtiers, who were eager for titles and honours, than to pore over the pages which reassured the monarchs of their importance. The courtiers also gained. They were proud to be in the service of such powerful personages. The Germans had always shown a marked taste for this kind of pastime, and in one of her letters the Marquise de Sevigne tells how the princess of Tarento, who was related by birth to the entire Holy Roman Empire, scrupulously wore mourning whenever a death occurred in one of the innumerable courts which composed it. One day, however, the marquise caught sight of her in a light-coloured gown and said to her kindly: "I am pleased to see, Madame, that Europe is in good health...."

The *Almanach de Gotha*, by giving everyone his due, could settle quarrels over precedence. At that time precedence was very important and could even start wars. At the coronation of the emperor Charles VI, an old count of Nassau was heard stating dryly to a petty sovereign, who claimed that he had precedence over him: "You should know, sir, that a prince like you comes after counts like me!"

At another court, problems of etiquette appeared sufficiently serious to be submitted to Leibniz himself. These anecdotes enable us to understand the rapid success of the *Almanach de Gotha* which provided pleasure as well as information.

In 1780 the *Almanach* was translated into Italian in Venice, and it was soon seen in the United States of America where the quasiroyalty of George Washington caused the atmosphere, the manners, and customs of the old monarchies to prevail. These monarchies, moreover, were soon to be shaken by the

repercussions of the French Revolution, and many a monarch lost, if not his head, like the unfortunate Louis XVI, at least his crown.

At the first breath of revolution the fine forest of genealogical trees, watched over piously by the editors of the *Gotha*, shook and tried to withstand the hurricane. But the Revolution uprooted several venerable trunks growing on the left bank of the Rhine. This caused the others to bow beneath its violence and opened a triumphal way for Napoleon's armies across a Germany that had been subdued. Through this forest of ancient trees - many houses priding themselves on tracing their origins to the reign of Charlemagne - the emperor of the French walked in lordly fashion and made some dismal clearances. Not content with changing the landscape by confiscating territories in order to distribute them among his family or his allies, he aimed at changing the nature of the trees by grafting new species on to certain old trunks. With a single stroke of the pen he wiped out the eight hundred or so little States, fiefs or free cities which composed "the Germanies". He tried to unify this jig-saw puzzle of principalities thus breaking away most rashly from the wise policy of the French kings: divide and rule.

On August 6th, 1806, from the steps of the Church of the Nine Choirs of Angels in Vienna, one of the emperor's commissioners announced the dissolution of the [Western] Holy Roman Empire. Most of the major or minor German rulers saw in this the sanctioning of the despoilment which had made them its victims. In order to safeguard their titles and territories, their only alternative was to implore Napoleon for mercy and lend themselves to his plans. These you can read about in the chapters on the German courts.

Pursuing his marriage policy, Napoleon made Princess Marie Elizabeth of Bavaria-Birkenfeld marry Marshal Berthier. He even forced a mere major in his Guard to marry the countess of Lamarck, the natural daughter of King Frederick William II of Prussia. Perhaps he thought that he should neglect no entry, even

the side-doors, into royal houses. One of Murat's nieces was taken away from her dreary life in the country in order to link her fate with that of a prince of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. The faded remains of the queen of Etruria were even offered to Lucien Bonaparte - who had the good taste to refuse them. These matrimonial conquests, which Napoleon conducted, like his military campaigns, with drums beating, terrified all the little German courts. They were under the painful obligation of renewing the sacrifice of Iphigenia in order to save the dynasty. The fate of the princes or princesses on whom Napoleon had designs was decided from Paris without the interested parties even being consulted. A Sevres porcelain cup, decorated with the portrait of the future spouse, was sent to the man or woman whom the emperor wished to marry off for his own political purposes. This fatal draught, often compared by the victims to the fate of Socrates, had to be drunk without a murmur. Everyone trembled at the prospect of receiving it; very few had the courage to refuse it. However, the crown prince of Wurtemberg, on whom Napoleon had cast his glance, was hastily seen to marry Princess Charlotte of Bavaria in order to outwit the schemes of the tyrant. Françoise Stephanie Tascher, niece of the Empress Josephine, married by force to the prince of Arenberg, obstinately refused to follow her husband to the nuptial chamber and always contrived to live with him in a state of exemplary hostility.

Never was Napoleon's folie des grandeurs more obvious than in this unreasonable desire to see the blood of the Bonapartes or their relatives mixed with that of the old races. However degenerate they sometimes were, to him they were still valuable. They could lend their dim but certain lustre to his parvenu triumph. In the famous scene which caused the final break between him and his brother Lucien, the only one who would not give way, Napoleon, in a state of real frenzy, offered him any throne whatsoever on condition that he divorced his wife, the attractive Alexandrine de Bleschamps, with her questionable reputation.

**"Yes, choose, you can see I do not speak idly: all this is**



**mine or will soon belong to me, I can dispose of it now. Do you want Naples? I will take it away from Joseph who in any case does not care about it: he prefers Mortefontaine . . . What about Italy, the finest feather in my imperial cap? Eugene is only Viceroy of the country . . . In any case now that I am divorcing his mother he no longer suits me for Italy . . . Spain? Can't you see it falling right into my hands thanks to the short-sightedness of your darling Bourbons and the clumsiness of your friend the Prince de la Paix? Would it not delight you to reign in a country where before you were merely ambassador? . . . Come on, what do you want? Tell me; everything that you desire or could desire is yours, if your divorce takes place before mine."**

There is no point in dwelling on Napoleon's second marriage; this vanity saved Austria and the Hapsburg dynasty. The other reigning German princes, who had been less favoured, had to await the fall of the French empire in order to reintegrate their domains and seal their fate. Until 1807 the *Gotha* had upheld the legitimate qualifications of the dispossessed princes by continuing to include them among the houses that were still royal: "Our publication," one of its editors, Doctor Biel, was to write later, "had fortunately traversed the agitations and political upheavals which marked the end of the eighteenth century and proceeded quietly on its way oblivious of what was happening elsewhere, when suddenly this indifference to politics was held against it as a crime." Greater candour would be impossible. Scorning the Imperial thunder which had brought fire and slaughter to one part of Europe, the *Almanach de Gotha* remained imperturbable and ignored, or pretended to ignore, the decline of certain dynasties and insisted on maintaining them virtually on their thrones. Following a denunciation by Cardinal Caprara to the minister for foreign affairs, legal action was taken against the *Almanach de Gotha*. Imperial censorship caused every copy of the 1808 issue to be seized and destroyed. In fact the censorship office found the word

"genealogy" to be an insult, since the Bonapartes could not produce one and this tendentious word was suppressed. Between 1808 and 1814, the succeeding editions, which were compiled under French supervision, gave only "births and marriages of princes and princesses".

With the collapse of Napoleon's gigantic empire which, he thought, he had consolidated by his "dynastic system," a breeze of frenzied delight shook the old trees so ill-treated by twenty years of wars and invasions. Metternich, the new mediator of Europe, attempted to restore the spirit of the Holy Roman Empire by instituting the Holy Alliance, and succeeded in settling the fate of the victims of France. Certain territories were returned to their legitimate owners while others, more numerous, were allocated to the victors of the coalition. In fact, the majority of these dispossessed princes were indemnified only with fine words, or, at best, fine titles. Then the wondrous category came into being, the "Mediatized Lords of Germany". These included the families of princes or counts who, having possessed the quality of the State of the Holy Roman Empire, were considered as equals by birth of existing ruling houses and felt justified in allying themselves with them. At its session of August 18th 1825, the German Diet recognised that the heads of princely families could have the quality of Durlaucht, "Most Serene Highness." On February 13th, 1829, the heads of the former families of counts which had been mediatized received the qualification of Erlaucht, "Most Illustrious Highness." The title of "Most Serene Highness" was granted only, in accordance with the terms of the Diet's decision, to the heads of the princely houses. But the custom spread of giving the same title to the younger members of these families, and several courts sanctioned this use through a series of nominal decrees, the details of which it would be tedious to enumerate.

If the mediatized houses were deemed worthy of allying themselves to ruling families, the same did not apply to other families of princes, dukes or counts who, in spite of their fame or their antiquity, could not aspire to such an honour. The daughter of

the prince of Croy or of the count Erbach might become empress of Austria or queen of Bavaria, but the daughter of a family as distinguished and ancient as that of the prince of Bauffremont, or the daughter of an English duke as eminent as the duke of Marlborough, was not eligible. [Thus, to "prove" something about this or that House using the *Almanach* requires considerable historical knowledge and legal skill.] This case was argued at length during the discussions of a possible marriage of the future Emperor William I of Germany to a Princess Radziwill (see p. 285). There was the even stranger case of the younger branch of the Esterhazys, which had been mediatised, while the older branch did not even appear in the *Almanach de Gotha* and was content with being included in the *Taschenbuch der GrSflichen Heuser*, and so could not ally with reigning families. [An astonishing turn of events which again shows with what care the *Almanach* must be used.] The Bonapartes also provided an example. Lucien's branch was relegated to the third part of the *Gotha* and not empowered to succeed.

This explains why the "unequal unions" between the members of reigning families and, for better reasons, those of the sovereigns themselves, were not considered valid from a dynastic point of view. The *Gotha* referred to them as "morganatic marriages". This word is said to derive from the German expression *Morgen gaben*, in other words, "the morning gift," given after a night of pleasure to the delightful creature who procured it for you. It was in fact a farewell gift; and the expression has degenerated remarkably, since in the end it applied no longer to a rupture but to the marriage which sanctioned this momentary madness. There is another etymology for the adjective "morganatic". The writer and historian La Varende saw in it an echo of the ancient customs of the Vikings which allowed a man to have three wives at the same time as soon as he was capable of satisfying all three of them. More danico: marriage "Danish style" .... This is apparently the true meaning of "morganatic". (M. Gerard Launaey drew attention to this.)

These marriages were the terror of nineteenth-century courts, for they made them appear rather bourgeois. On learning that his

cousin, Grand Duke Nicholas, was to marry a woman named Burenina, the daughter of a tradesman, Tsar Alexander III, alluding to the square courtyard where the shop stood, cried: "I have been related to many courts, but this is the first time I have been related to the court of Gostinov!" [The similar charge is now being used by Grand Duchess Maria against Prince Nicholas Romanov. The Grand Duchess claims that it is her son, Grand Duke George, who is Pretender to the Throne of Russia, because Prince Nicholas married morganatically.]

In the past nobody had worried very much about offending morality or public opinion by having, in full view of everyone, one or more mistresses. Margrave Charles III - William of Baden-Durlach, who was called "the Great Mogul of Germany," had as mistresses a hundred and sixty pretty girls dressed as hussars, who every evening drew cards from the Tarot pack for the honour of sharing his bed. During the nineteenth century it became difficult to maintain these controversial habits. People began to demand of their princes singular virtues and in particular just plain virtue. The princes themselves, who were tired of power, began to envy the lot of their subjects, feeling the need for a peaceful family life. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this one there was a kind of "resignation of rulers," many of whom disappeared into the anonymity of an ordinary life with the person of their choice. Several Hapsburg archdukes abandoned their rank, their title and even their name in order to become simple citizens. Many grand dukes of Russia preferred to go into exile, rather than renounce the woman they wished to marry; various infantas of Spain followed suit. A duke of SaxeMeiningen, who had married an actress, devoted himself entirely to the theatre and even founded a company which had its moment of celebrity. The women in their turn wanted to free themselves from the subjection of their illustrious origin; but more of this in the Conclusion.

Queen Victoria was the first to encourage morganatic marriages. She led the way in the British royal family. There was a difference: the children of these "unequal" marriages were not excluded from the succession to the throne. In a letter to her son, the future Edward VII, she described, fairly accurately, the change which had

taken place in Europe:

**Times have much changed; great foreign alliances are looked on as causes of trouble and anxiety, and are no good. What could be more painful than the position in which our family were placed during the wars with Denmark, and between Prussia and Austria? Every family feeling was rent asunder, and we were powerless. The Prussian marriage, supposing even Louise wished it and liked the Prince (whereas she has not even seen him since she was a child), would be one which would cause nothing but trouble and annoyance and unhappiness, and which I never would consent to. Nothing is more unpopular here or more uncomfortable for me and everyone, than the long residence of our married daughters from abroad in my house, with the quantities of foreigners they bring with them, the foreign view they entertain on all subjects; and in beloved Papa's lifetime this was totally different, and besides Prussia had not swallowed everything up. You may not be aware, as I am, with what dislike the marriages of Princesses of the Royal family with small German Princes (German beggars as they most insultingly were called) were looked on, and how in former days many of our Statesmen like Mr. Fox, Lord Melbourne and Lord Holland abused these marriages, and said how wrong it was that alliances with noblemen of high rank and fortune, which had always existed formerly and which are perfectly legal, were no longer allowed by the Sovereign. Now that the Royal family is so large (you have already five, and what will these be when your brothers marry?) in these days, when you ask Parliament to give money to all the Princesses to be spent abroad, when they could perfectly well marry here and the children succeed just as much as if they were the children of a Prince or a Princess, we could not maintain this exclusive principle....**

And the queen added, justifiably, that such unions would introduce new blood into the royal family, whereas foreign princes were already almost all cousins. Queen Victoria proved her liberalism in the matter moreover when she gave the title of "Princess Edward of Saxe-Weimar" to Lady Augusta Gordon Lennox, the prince's morganatic wife, whereas at the court of Vienna or Berlin such a thing would not have been possible. Two of the queen's daughters were to put these principles into practice, one by marrying Prince Henry of Battenberg, son of a morganatic marriage of Prince Alexander of Hesse, the other by becoming the wife of the marquis of Lorne who made her utterly miserable.

Until relatively recently, that is, after the collapse of the Second Empire, the *Gotha* remained almost exclusively royal and Germanic. It was only in 1874 that French or English ducal families began to appear in it, as well as a Russian or Italian princely family. In 1878 the new editor of the *Almanach de Gotha*, wishing to make it the book of the European upper aristocracy, published a list giving the state of the ducal families in the United Kingdom and undertook a far-reaching reform, the aim of which was to distinguish between the ruling or "mediatised" houses, born of marriages between partners of equal birth, and those of which the heads had contracted unequal unions. This unfortunate discrimination provoked a general outcry from the interested parties and, after it had been applied for two years, it was abandoned. As from 1890, the *Almanach de Gotha* proper assumed its definitive form; that is to say it was divided into three parts:

I. A genealogical handbook. [But severely damaged by French censorship.]

II. A diplomatic and statistical handbook which enumerated all the high-ranking officers of the principal countries in the world as well as the diplomatic and consular representatives. It provided also all the information one could want about finance, the army, the navy, the population, the clergy, etc., in these countries.

III. An appendix listing all the sovereigns in the [western] world in

order of age, another in order of the date of their accession, and a calendar giving the dates of royal birthdays and anniversaries, in order to simplify the task of zealous courtiers.

The diplomatic and statistical handbook was remarkably well done and Prince von Bulow gives a striking example of it in his *Memoirs*. At the time of the armistice negotiations during 1871, Count Guido Henckel-Donnersmarck, the ostentatious lover of the marchioness of Paiva, was called to Versailles to give his opinion on the amount of war indemnity to be demanded from France. In opposition to Bleichroder, who said that France could pay at the most a thousand million francs of war indemnity, Henckel maintained, more accurately, that this rich country could easily find five thousand million and he justified this opinion in a memorandum which he drew up overnight, only using the statistics given in the *Almanach de Gotha*. A fine revenge against France and the irritation caused by the censorship of the Napoleonic empire.

The most interesting part was, naturally, the genealogical handbook and in Cannes there used to live an elderly lady who, when she received her new edition of the *Gotha* each year, hastily tore off its red cover, stamped with an imperial crown, in order to have a leather binding, with her own arms, put on the genealogical section, the only one that she condescended to read....

This genealogical section was also divided into three parts:

I. The first part was taken up by the genealogy of the ruling houses of Europe and those which had been dispossessed after the Congress of Vienna.

II. The second part listed the mediatised princes and counts of Germany.

III. A third and last part which included the other princely houses of Germany and Austria- Hungary, the ducal houses of France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, as well as certain princely

houses of Spain, Italy and France.

The *Almanach de Gotha* therefore did not aspire to group all the ducal and princely families of Europe. In addition to many families tricked out with imaginary titles, and thus excluded, there were some authentic families, the Princes Bagration, who did not appear for the simple reason that they had refused or omitted to send in an entry. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century there was in the third part of the genealogical handbook a display of astonishing titles, some of them rescued from long oblivion, others freshly emerged from the chancelleries of the Vatican or of the king of Spain. It proved that a mention in the *Almanach de Gotha* was the best consecration for the career of a man of the world. It was also a fine trump card for achieving an "American marriage," and the English dukes of the gay nineties made the young American heiresses pay very dearly for their titles. [See, for example, [TO MARRY AN ENGLISH LORD: OR, HOW ANGLOMANIA REALLY GOT STARTED](#) by Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace.] Not wanting to contest the authenticity of certain parchments on which the ink of the royal signatures had barely had time to dry, at least people allowed themselves to smile. Gabriel-Louis Pringue tells in his *Trente ans de diners en ville* that the Duke Loubat, who had recently received his ducal crown from the pope, was told one day by the marquis of Modena, irritated by hearing him moan about the draughts which gave him colds in the head: "Since you're so frightened of them, why didn't you ask the pope for a closed crown?"

Many rich foreigners, from countries where the sovereigns refused to give titles (this was the case in Roumania and Bulgaria), had to solicit them from the king of Italy or the king of Spain, who were fairly prodigal with this favour. Since they could not take the titles home, they displayed them ostentatiously in the watering places where they spent their delectable and delicate lives.

In spite of the fact that each year this third section expanded considerably, the *Almanach de Gotha* remained the symbol of the old European monarchies for which it had been created. It was



simultaneously their *Golden Book* and *Black Book*. It was also a vast family album, showing the predominance of certain races and certain dynasties who, although reigning over modest little countries, played a fairly considerable role in Europe by serving as stud-farms, or harems, for the great imperial and royal houses. It was in this way that the Saxe-Coburgs, who already possessed five thrones at the beginning of the nineteenth century (the grand duchy of Saxony, the duchy of Saxe-Meiningen and Hildburghausen, the duchy of Saxe-Altenburg, the duchy of Saxe-Gotha and finally the kingdom of Saxony) acquired four other thrones: that of Belgium through Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, that of Portugal through the marriage of Prince Ferdinand to Maria II da Gloria, that of Bulgaria through another Prince Ferdinand, a grandson of Louis-Philippe, and finally the most important of all, that of Great Britain through the marriage of Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Queen Victoria. The duchess of Dino relates in her memoirs that during the preliminary negotiations she asked who was going to marry the young queen, and a diplomat replied to her: "One of the royal stallions, of course! A prince of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha...."

Outside the imperial or royal palaces the *Gotha* throughout the nineteenth century enjoyed a continuously increasing vogue, bringing into aristocratic or merely bourgeois homes some of the atmosphere of the courts. It satisfied - by deceiving it - that sublime passion for monarchy felt by those living far away from it. In the seventeenth century, La Bruyere had already written that court life did not make people happy, but prevented them from feeling so elsewhere.... So the *Gotha* carried out its function just as well at court as in the cities, or in the provincial chateaux. In vast country estates, in little garrison towns, whose grey monotony was sometimes illuminated by the meteoric passage of royalty on a tour of inspection, gentlemen and modest civil servants dreamily pored over the pages of the *Almanach de Gotha*. They resembled those people who longed for distant countries, and would read, as they sat by the fire, travellers' tales or even railway time-tables.... [These types of lonely folk still are around. To read about them, click [HERE](#).] All the lingering romanticism of the nineteenth century, which hungered

for almanacks and naive pictures, survived in this mania. The prestige of princes was still immense" even if their power had waned. The lumieres of the eighteenth-century philosophes had transformed all these potentates into enlightened and consequently more popular despots. The time had gone when the peasants of Wurttemberg would throw themselves into ditches or hide behind a hedge whenever they saw the carriage of their gracious duke whose will and pleasure were often so nasty. The princes were genteel and were models of amiability.

Princess Catherine Radziwill, an old habitue of the courts, described courtiers in general as

**"pleasant people, for since their childhood they had been taught to be pleasant, to smile perpetually, even when they were bored. They had been taught the art of remembering faces and names, and also of showing the most lively interest in things about which they did not care in the least. This had made them into agreeable people who, although they were sometimes tedious, made up for this fault by the numerous opportunities they had for pleasing those who were bored by their conversation. You were always liked when you could give others, in addition to good food and good cigars, the chance of meeting under the best auspices pretty women to pay court to, or handsome gentlemen to fall in love with . . ."**

Princes had become society people.

First the French Revolution and then the collapse of Metternich's system had changed Europe and sovereigns knew that they had to behave well if they wished to keep their crowns. A crown was no longer anything more than a prize for civic virtue. They had learned also that the strongest desire of their peoples was not so much to obtain reforms or a reduction of taxes as to be able to contemplate at their ease the august features of their masters. This

obliged them to lend themselves, with admirable docility, to every official duty.

The reign of personal power was followed by the reign of personal charm. In this way one saw the "royals" overcoming their fear, opening railway lines, laying foundation stones, launching ships, visiting hospitals, listening to learned speeches, distributing decorations and, most of all, learning to cut a good figure in the face of attacks on their life. The princes of the last century no longer died at the head of their troops on a battlefield, but in the street or at the theatre, cut down at arm's length by anarchists. Their patience was inexhaustible, and Francis-Joseph of Austria or Queen Mary of England were perfect examples of those sovereigns who lived in the service of their subjects. The majority of their royal colleagues resigned themselves to this subjection. Ludwig II of Bavaria was the only one to show a certain recalcitrance, for this madman - who had singular moments of lucidity which alarmed his entourage more than his attacks of insanity - regarded this subjection as the degradation of the monarchy. Was he not right? Was not the ham acting of these sovereigns, kept up by their subjects in order to expose the royal person to public view, more distasteful, or at least more hypocritical than his? Is anything sadder than the slow extinction of the Scandinavian monarchies which survive, like old soldiers, on a small pension from their socialist subjects? It is not a very Shakespearean end, and one cannot fail to have more admiration for the fate of Gustavus IV of Sweden, the dethroned monarch, wandering half-crazed over the battlefield of Leipzig and asking loudly for a sword "to show the sovereigns of the Coalition, who had just ordered the retreat, how they used to beat Napoleon". Should we not also admire even the *strange folie des grandeurs* of the Empress Charlotte who, imprisoned in the Chateau de Bouchoute, consoled herself for the loss of the Mexican throne by wearing a gold paper crown. . . ?

Princes and sovereigns, from the nineteenth century onwards, became human to the point of gradually losing the divine prestige which had been their source of strength. The vogue for watering

places, the discovery of the first seabathing resorts as well as the greater ease of communications, gave them a taste for travel. They left their palaces more frequently in order to mingle with the international aristocracy which, during the twentieth century, was to degenerate into a kind of "cafe-society". Accompanied by a numerous suite of aides-de-camp, secretaries, lackeys and chamber maids, they settled in villas close to the healthgiving springs or camped in uncomfortable hotels whose proprietors, after the guests had gone, added their names to the sign in order to perpetuate this illustrious memory. At Baden, Ems, Schandau or Carlsbad, the entire Gotha met again every summer and rivalled each other in ostentation. This was the delight of the idle onlookers who would point out to each other, with much bowing and scraping, a grand duke taking a morning walk with his aide-de-camp, or a reigning princess forcing her lady-in-waiting to join her in drinking water containing iron. During these short summer gatherings romances would bud or friendships would be formed, giving the illusion of a great solidarity between princes. In the little Biedermeier-style theatres, essential ornaments of all these romantic holiday resorts, archdukes would applaud singers before eloping with them - even marrying them - while in the Kursaals the fate of nubile princesses would be decided. Writers, painters and musicians, satellites of these small wandering courts, would try to perpetuate their memory, seeking a compromise between their professional conscience and their duties as courtiers. There are many amusing anecdotes to illustrate this.

"If Your Highness desires it, I will replace your mouth by a dot," remarked the painter making a likeness of a princess who was desperately screwing up her full lips in order to make them appear thin and spiritual, and it was Queen Isabella II of Spain, a charming ogress hungry for young flesh, who declared to a young musician: "I adore your music, but I am a trifle deaf: come closer, there, nearer to my thigh...."

From one capital to another, from spas to bathing places, the sovereigns, even the most modest, travelled only in special trains,

with drawing-rooms with sumptuous displays of armorial bearings. They enjoyed the privilege of being able to stop the train when they wished. The Empress Elizabeth of Austria frequently did this to visit a chateau she had seen from the window of her compartment, or simply in order to relax a little by walking on foot in the countryside. The slightest journey involved a considerable display of forces, red carpets at the station, authorities clad in frock-coats to make speeches of welcome, platoons of cavalry, bouquets of flowers and above all fanfares to drown the seditious shouts of the anarchists. The German lakes, among others Lake Constance, where the steam-yachts of the royal family of Wurttemberg constantly plied up and down, found floating courts on their waters. These courts were moreover very modest in comparison with those which assembled at Cowes or Kiel, the royal families of Britain, Greece, Denmark, Germany and Russia. Germany and Russia rivalled Great Britain in nautical splendour, and the arrival of William II on Hohenzollern or Nicholas II on Standart, followed by the dowager empress on the Polar Star, endowed these family reunions with unrivalled splendour. The principal masters of the world were there, with all their court on board, anchored a few cable-lengths away from each other on these magnificent ships. Steam-driven launches flying the royal or imperial flag, would bring the royal visitors aboard. On deck, orchestras played discreetly and at night the ships were brilliantly lit, perfect symbols of a glittering world that was about to founder.

Imperceptibly these romantic holiday places, with their somewhat old-world charm, were abandoned by royalty. They came to prefer other towns, other climes. At the end of the nineteenth century Cannes and Biarritz, Lausanne and Venice had become the high spots of the Gotha, the refuges of exiled aristocrats, stopping-places for wandering princes, relaxation for bored monarchs, the paradise of those attracted by the glitter of the throne and a marvellous hunting-ground for adventurers of both sexes. They were the scenes of strange morganatic marriages and tempestuous love affairs. They supplied topics of conversation for all the salons of Europe. In this way the Gotha had become a vast

park where all the species of royalty grew, protected in fragile greenhouses, carefully supervised and labelled. Certain very risky graftings such as the Battenbergs or the Tecks had produced surprising and magnificent results; wild varieties such as the Petrovich Niegochs, sovereigns of wretched Montenegro, had fortunately become acclimatised and married their offshoots to those of more ancient growth. The muttering of distant or suppressed revolutions was heard nevertheless, but like a waterfall this was an indispensable element in the landscape. The gun shots of shooting expeditions and the cannon shots announcing royal births and deaths, echoed the shots of would-be assassins. But still there was an impression of tranquillity, courts were sheltered behind the barriers of etiquette. Yet a few cannon shots sufficed to destroy this fairy tale palace which had replaced the burgs and citadels of the past. Royalty, whose illusions and incomes vanished in the cataclysm of the 1914 war, were suddenly exposed to all the rigours of the revolutionary hurricane.

It was at St. Petersburg in 1917 that the knell of old Europe sounded: like an old lady who had forgotten her age in prolonging her pleasures, suddenly she had to flee before the mob, wearing her ball dress, with a fur thrown hastily over her bare shoulders and clutching to her heart - which had never beaten so fast - her family jewels. The glow from her burning palaces lit up her departure, and her burning country houses guided her desperate flight across the plains of the East. The Russian grand dukes had barely reached safety - and for such a short time - in the Caucasian estates, or on board British cruisers, when the German empire collapsed also. In the space of a few days there vanished from the map of Europe two empires, Germany and Austria, four kingdoms, Prussia, Bavaria, Wurttemberg, Saxony, six grand duchies, Baden, Hesse, Mecklenburg-Schwerin and Mecklenburg-Strelitz, Oldenburg and Saxe-Weimar, five duchies, Brunswick, Saxe-Altenburg, Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, Saxe-Meiningen and Anhalt, and seven principalities, Lippe, Schaumburg-Lippe, the elder Reuss branch, the younger Reuss branch, Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt, Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen and Waldeck. From this Atlantis of

princes there survived only the tiny principality of Liechtenstein which still exists. It is the last state of the Holy Roman Empire of Germany.

Dispersed by war or revolution, fleeing from socialism and poverty, the ancient dynasties took refuge in Cannes, Biarritz or Lausanne, so beloved by the Gotha. Here they sometimes found, along with memories of the good old days, certain financial resources. Royal highnesses were to be seen washing dishes in restaurants, where, in the past, they had spent as much in one evening as would now allow them to live for a month. Princesses became mannequins or manicurists while their brothers or husbands sold, for miserably low prices, the jewels that they had been able to save. One day a footman was heard to reply contemptuously to a visitor who had come to the wrong door: "If you want the Grand Duchess, it's the tradesmen's entrance!"

Nothing was impossible. Royal families who had lost their throne many years ago like the Orleans family or the Bourbons of Naples gave good advice to those who had been recently dispossessed, and the *Almanach de Gotha* continued to list the marriages, births and deaths which indicated the increasingly precarious existence of those fallen demi-gods.

The Second World War completed the dismemberment and dispersed all the Balkan sovereigns, whose thrones had not even lasted a century. The throne of Spain had already fallen without a sound as her sovereign had resigned herself to her fate in 1931. Fifteen years later, Italy, saving the expense of a revolution, followed Spain's example. The only surviving monarchies today are those of Scandinavia, in addition to Luxembourg, Belgium, Holland, as well as, of course, Britain, the last bulwark of the monarchy in Europe. Isolated between two republics, the principality of Liechtenstein is the last remaining vestige of an era which has completely gone, while the principality of Monaco, clinging precariously to the French coast, perpetuates the tradition of the miniature courts of the eighteenth century which so

resembled a musical comedy where a prima donna could become a princess. Greece, situated at the gateway to a communist East, has allowed herself the luxury of a foreign dynasty which perpetuates the memory of the old royal races of antiquity.

The majority of the former ruling houses therefore live in exile, in republics bordering on their former kingdoms. Their members are now no more than mere citizens, whose prestige survives only with difficulty the loss of their power. There are pretenders such as the count of Paris or the Archduke Otto, who firmly maintain the need for monarchy and do not despair of re-ascending the thrones of their ancestors. But how many princes have declined into a life of mediocrity and are satisfied with their fate?

The *Almanach de Gotha* exists no longer, but it continues to exercise a fascination which can be explained. It is simultaneously the emblem and the vestige of everything that down the centuries has made up the greatness, the strength and the charm of Europe. The red and gold copies of the *Almanach de Gotha* are now no more than cemeteries. They are still frequented by necrophiles attracted to the splendours of the good old days, but the number of these collectors does not diminish and assures the perennity of an almanack, an object which after all is ephemeral. (In the British Museum the *Almanach de Gotha* is catalogued under Ephemerides.)

"Are you one of those people who live with the *Gotha* in your hand?" a former lady-in-waiting from the Viennese court once asked a young man who had come to see her, and the latter, bowing in order to kiss her hand, replied, thinking of the famous motto of the German empire:

**"Princess, Gotha mit uns!"**

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