

**DARK SECRET HISTORIES**

Joe Murray Callaghan (ed.)

**The Unbelievable  
Twisted and Not  
Always Gentle but  
Ferocious XIXth  
Century Stories**

feat. Archduke Rudolph, Mary Vetsera, Jennie Cramer, Jimmy Malley,  
Emil du Bois-Reymond, The Jersey Devil, Lizzie Borden, John Williams

*... and Its Intriguing Dangerous  
Splendour*

**INTEGRAL**

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## Twilight of the Empire: The Mayerling Pact of the Austrian Crown Prince and His Mistress

Omar Sharif and Catherine Deneuve revived in their 1968 film “Mayerling” (directed by Terence Young) one of the most famous sentimental and political dramas of history (in the 1936 version of Anatol Litvak another two great actors were starring—Charles Boyer and Danielle Darieux). The plot of the movie respects in general terms the historical facts. It’s the late nineteenth century Austria. The Emperor Franz-Joseph and his son, the Crown Prince, Archduke Rudolf, have never seen eye to eye. While the Emperor (acted by James Mason) retains the traditions of the empire in the rapidly changing world keeping it a police state, Rudolf is liberal, wanting to see the people have a say in what happens in their lives. Rudolf even rejected the Emperor’s choice of a Spanish wife for him, he instead choosing Belgian Princess Stephanie as his wife, that marriage which he himself never saw and will never see as anything more than a political alliance. While Rudolf has almost an unhealthy infatuation with his mother, the Empress Elizabeth (impersonated by Ava Gardner), she has largely been an absent figure from Vienna and thus his life. As Franz-Joseph has had his steady mistress in Elizabeth’s frequent absences, he has allowed Rudolf to have the same in the form of actress Mitzi Kaspar as the Emperor knows she could never be more than a dalliance and as she retains a certain balance within the royal house. Things change when Rudolf meets beautiful twenty year old Baroness Maria Vetsera. Their attraction begins as a clandestine affair which then grows into love which Rudolf increasingly flaunts in public in wanting always to be with her. This does not sit well with Franz-Joseph, his secret police who do whatever they need to retain the Emperor’s natural order. As such, Rudolf tries to find options to make Maria his wife, one, with the help of his good friend, Edward, the Prince of Wales, to live as commoners in England, or two, to support the imminent and secret uprising in Hungary, they who want Rudolf as their King, which in realistic terms means an act of treason on Rudolf’s part against his father.

The historical “Mayerling incident” is the series of events surrounding the apparent murder–suicide of Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria (August 21, 1858—January 30, 1889) and his lover, Baroness Mary Vetsera (March 19, 1871—January 30, 1889). Rudolf, who was married to Princess Stéphanie of Belgium, was the only son of Emperor Franz Joseph and Empress Elisabeth, and was heir apparent to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Rudolf’s mistress was the daughter of Baron Albin Vetsera, a diplomat at the Austrian court. The bodies of the 30-year-old Archduke and the 17-year-old baroness were discovered in the Imperial hunting lodge at Mayerling in the Vienna Woods, 26.6 kilometres (16.5 mi) southwest of the capital, on the morning of January 30, 1889.

The death of the crown prince interrupted the security inherent in the direct line of Habsburg dynastic succession. As Rudolf had no son, the succession would pass to Franz Joseph’s brother, Archduke Karl Ludwig, and his eldest son, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

This destabilization endangered the growing reconciliation between the Austrian and Hungarian factions of the empire. Succeeding developments led to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie by Gavrilo Princip at Sarajevo in June 1914, and the July Crisis that led to the start of the First World War. But, in a way, the end of the Empire started at Mayerling in 1889...

Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria, was the only son and third child of Emperor Franz Joseph I and Elisabeth of Bavaria. He was heir apparent to the throne of Austria-Hungary Empire from birth. In 1889, he died in a suicide pact with his mistress, Baroness Mary Vetsera, at the Mayerling hunting lodge. The ensuing scandal made international headlines. He was named after the first Habsburg King of Germany, Rudolf I, who assumed the throne in 1273.

Rudolf was born at Schloss Laxenburg, a castle near Vienna, as the son of Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth. Influenced by his tutor Ferdinand von Hochstetter (who later became the first superintendent of the Imperial Natural History Museum), Rudolf became very interested in natural sciences, starting a mineral collection at an early age. After his death, large portions of his mineral collection came into the possession of the University for Agriculture in Vienna

In 1877 the Count of Bombelles was master of the young prince. Bombelles was the former custodian of his aunt Empress Charlotte of Mexico.

Rudolf was raised together with his older sister Gisela and the two were very close. At the age of six, Rudolf was separated from his sister as he began his education to become a future Emperor of Austria. This did not change their relationship and Gisela remained close to him until she left Vienna upon her marriage to Prince Leopold of Bavaria.

In contrast with his deeply conservative father, Rudolf held liberal views, that were closer to those of his mother. Nevertheless, his relationship with her was, at times, strained.

In Vienna, on May 10, 1881, Rudolf married Princess Stéphanie of Belgium, a daughter of King Leopold II of the Kingdom of Belgium, at the Augustinian Church in Vienna. Princess Stéphanie of Belgium (May 21, 1864—August 23, 1945), a Belgian princess by birth, became Crown Princess of Austria through her marriage to the heir-apparent of the Habsburg dynasty, Archduke Rudolf. Her grandfather Leopold I of Belgium was the country's first king. Her aunt, Charlotte of Belgium, the future ill-fated Empress of Mexico, was married to Maximilian, the brother of her future father-in law, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. Stéphanie Clotilde Louise Herminie Marie Charlotte was born at the Royal Palace of Laeken in the Kingdom of Belgium. Her mother, Queen Marie Henriette, was an Archduchess of Austria by birth and aunt to the Queen of Spain. Her father, Leopold II of Belgium, finally became King of the Belgians in December 1865. The royal couple were ill-suited for each other and had an unhappy marriage. The contradictory Leopold II was serious and delicate. Marie Henriette was undisciplined, outspoken, and boisterous. Leopold was openly abrasive to her, and tried to dominate her with his criticisms and frequent infidelity. While her natural charm made Marie Henriette more popular with her Belgian subjects than her husband, she eventually retired from court life to escape him, and lived the rest of her life in Spa near the Ardennes.

Leopold had little interest in Stéphanie and her older sister Princess Louise and the education of his daughters was neglected as he focused all his doting attention on his son, Prince Léopold, Duke of Brabant, the future of the Saxe-Coburg and Gotha dynasty in Belgium. Tragically, when he was nine Prince Leopold caught pneumonia and died. His father never recovered. He reconciled briefly with Marie Henriette solely in the hope of producing another male heir, but the result was the birth of Princess Clémentine in 1872. Leopold thereafter lost interest in his family. He turned his attentions to the notorious creation of the Congo Free State, which was his personal fiefdom and not a Belgian colonial territory and as such its ruthless exploitation amassed him a vast private fortune. Leopold also rejected his family for

his mistresses; he had so many scandalous liaisons that he was known to his subjects as *Le Roi des Belges et des Belles* ("The King of the Belgians and of the Beauties"). In 1909, on his deathbed, he married his favorite mistress in an attempt to expunge the sin of infidelity.

Brought up in the unhappy life that was the product of their parents' arranged marriage, Stéphanie and her sister did no better in their own. Louise married her second cousin, Prince Philipp of Saxe-Coburg, a harsh man who was fourteen years her senior. After she eloped with her lover, Leopold had her committed to a mental asylum. She was finally granted a divorce in 1907.

In March 1880, Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria was invited to the Belgian court at the insistence of Leopold II. Rudolf arrived in Brussels on March 5. After meeting the fifteen-year-old Princess Stéphanie, he wrote to his mother, Empress Elisabeth that "[he had] found what [he] sought," noting that she was "pretty, good, [and] clever". Having refused Princess Mathilde of Saxony, as well as several Infantas of Portugal and Spain, he found that Stéphanie was one of the few available Catholic princesses in Europe. Under pressure by his parents to marry as soon as possible, the Crown Prince was satisfied with her and by the 7th of March, he asked for her hand and announced their engagement.

Rudolf's mother was deeply disappointed with the match as the Belgian monarchy dated only from 1830 and did not compare to the Habsburgs in terms of seniority, even though its royal house was a branch of that of Saxony (one of the oldest ruling houses in Europe). Rudolf's father was pleased, however, and approved the marriage.

Stéphanie was despatched to Vienna to be taught Imperial court etiquette in preparation for her marriage but a month after her arrival, the ladies-in-waiting realized that she had not yet reached puberty. When the obvious questions were put to her, it became clear that she had no idea what was meant; she had been left completely ignorant of the facts of life. The wedding had to be postponed and the humiliated girl was sent back to Belgium for a time.

On May 10, 1881, several weeks before her seventeenth birthday, Princess Stéphanie of Belgium married the Crown Prince in the Saint Augustine's Church in Vienna. Her parents walked her down the aisle. Among the illustrious attendees were the future King Edward VII of the United Kingdom and his nephew, the future German Emperor Wilhelm II. The nuptials were celebrated lavishly throughout Austria, and the Austrian astronomer Johann Palisa named asteroid 220 Stephania in her honour in 1881. After the ceremony, the couple honeymooned at Laxenburg outside the capital. On May 18 the couple was welcomed in Budapest.

The marriage was happy at first, but difficulties reportedly developed. Though intelligent, Rudolf was highly strung, unconventional, impulsive and very liberal, while Stéphanie's very conservative upbringing left her conventional, formal and reactionary. Their only child, Archduchess Elisabeth Marie of Austria, was born at Laxenburg Castle on September 2, 1883. She was known within the family as "Erzsi," short for "Erzsébet", the Hungarian form of "Elisabeth."

Stephanie received little support from the Imperial family during her marriage. Empress Elisabeth avoided Stéphanie and disdained her, believing her to be an inadequate match for her son.

The relationship between Stephanie and Rudolf broke down quickly. In 1886, Rudolf infected Stephanie with gonorrhoea which made further pregnancies impossible and they reportedly

discussed divorce. Both began to seek consolation outside their marriage. During a visit to Galicia (presently, a region divided between Poland and Ukraine) in 1887, Stéphanie fell in love with a Polish Count. During the next eighteen months, she did not try to hide her affections for the count from her husband, who continued his own liaisons.

In 1889 Rudolf and Baroness Mary Vetsera, his lover, were found dead. Their murder-suicide pact is known as the Mayerling incident. Stéphanie married again on March 22, 1900 at Miramare. The groom was Prince Lónyay de Nagy-Lónya et Vásárosnamény (Bodrogolaszi, August 24, 1863—Budapest, July 20, 1946), a Hungarian nobleman of unequal rank who, in 1917, was elevated by the Emperor of Austria to the rank of *Fürst*. Her father was so furious at the marriage that he forbade Stéphanie to see her dying mother.

She settled with her new husband in his castle Oroszvár—Rusovce in western Hungary, modern-day Slovakia, until the advancing Red Army forced them to flee their estate. They found sanctuary in Pannonhalma Archabbey, near Györszentmárton, Hungary.

In 1935 she wanted to publish her memoir to set the record straight, but this caused a scandal and a court forbade their distribution. Police visited every bookshop in Vienna in order to seize the copies already on sale. In it she published Rudolf's last letter to her, and proclaimed that (in her view) he and the Baroness had made a suicide pact. Her memoir was eventually published outside of Austria in 1937 as *Ich sollte Kaiserin werden (I Was To Be Empress)*. Stéphanie died at Pannonhalma on August 23, 1945.

Although the marriage of the Belgian Princess with the Austrian Crown Prince was initially a happy one, by the time their only child, the Archduchess Elisabeth, was born on September 2, 1883, the couple had drifted apart and he found solace in drink and other female companionship. Rudolf started having many affairs, and wanted to write to Pope Leo XIII about the possibility of annulling his marriage to Stéphanie, but the Emperor forbade it. In 1886, the spouses were diagnosed with gonorrhoea, which rendered Stéphanie sterile.

In 1886, Rudolf bought Mayerling, a hunting lodge. In late 1888, the 30-year-old crown prince met the 17-year-old Baroness Marie Vetsera, known by the more fashionable Anglophile name Mary, and began an affair with her.

Marie Alexandrine von Vetsera (March 19, 1871—January 30, 1889) was a member of Austrian "second society" (new nobility). Known by the English form of her name, "Mary" (her maternal grandfather's second wife was English), she was the youngest child of Baron Albin von Vetsera, a diplomat in foreign service at the Austrian court, and his much younger wife, Héléne (also known as Eleni) Baltazzi, member of a wealthy Greek family from Chios island, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Albin, who was made a Baron in 1870 by the Emperor Franz Joseph, was 22 years older than his young and socially ambitious wife. Mary had three siblings: Johanna (known as Hannah), Ladislaus and Franz Albin. Both of Héléne's sisters had married counts and Mary and her sister were expected to raise the family's social status by continuing the tradition of marrying into families of importance.

Mary Vetsera attended a finishing school for nobility. These exclusive boarding schools, for girls of noble birth between the ages of 12 and 17, were geared to a moral education, not an academic one (which was thought to give a young woman "intellectual pretensions"). Those institutes emphasized social graces: French, music, drawing, dancing and handicrafts, preparing young women for their roles in society as aristocratic wives and mothers.

“Smart Society”, made up of parvenu elements, who were “poor in pedigree”, but full in purse, now began to command more attention from the leaders in more aristocratic circles of the *beau monde*. The Vetsera family occupied this niche, and Hélène held lavish parties in attempts to socialize with the upper echelons of the Austrian court, all in order to introduce her daughter to the most eligible men. Famous for “her elegance and taste in dress”, the attractive and vivacious young Baroness soon acquired the nickname “The Turf Angel” for her love of horserace meets at the Freudenau course. It was very apparent to the Imperial family that Vetsera was being blatantly groomed by her mother for an advantageous marriage; Empress Elisabeth noted in 1877: “Madame Vetsera wants to come to Court and gain recognition for her family”. Countess Marie Larisch, a niece of the Empress and one of Vetsera’s closest friends, claimed she had confided: “Mamma has no love for me. ...Ever since I was a little girl she has treated me like something she means to dispose of to the best advantage”.

Vetsera met the crown prince in November 1888 and began a three-month-long affair with him. Other accounts, however, describe their relationship as being one of three years’ duration, which would have made Vetsera about 15 when they met.

“[At Ambassador Reuss’s reception in late January 1889] Rudolph noticed me and leaving Stéphanie came straight up to me. “She is there,” he said without any preamble, “ah, if somebody would only deliver me from her!”

“She” was Mary Vetsera, “his mistress of the ardent face. I, too, glanced at the seductress. Two brilliant eyes met mine. One word will describe her. Mary was an imperial sultana, one who feared no other favourite, so sure was she of the power of her full and triumphant beauty, her deep black eyes, her cameo-like profile, her throat of a goddess, and her arresting sensual grace. She had altogether taken possession of Rudolph, and she longed for him to be able to marry her. Their liaison had lasted for three years... At the *soirée* I was struck by my brother-in-law’s state of nervous exhaustion but I thought it well to try and calm him by saying a word or two about Mary which would please him, so I remarked quite simply: “She is very beautiful”... Rudolph left me without replying. An instant later he returned and murmured: “I simply cannot tear myself away from her”—Louise of Coburg

Given her mother’s ambitions for her and the fact that Rudolf was married to Princess Stephanie of Belgium, her family and friends found this liaison to be not only foolish, but potentially socially compromising for the family as well. When Hélène discovered that Vetsera had sent Rudolf a personally engraved cigarette case, she raged: “She is compromising herself when she is scarcely 17 years old and so is ruining not only her life but also that of her brothers and sisters and mother...”.

Maureen Allen, an American friend of Vetsera, recalled that she did not take the affair—or any of her earlier ones—frivolously: “[She] was very serious... people gave her credit for not taking love lightly, but rather quite seriously”. While Rudolf had not only a wife and child, but other lovers as well, Vetsera did not pursue any other eligible men, but instead focused all her attention on the crown prince. She appears to have thought she could be a credible threat to Princess Stephanie, perhaps even to usurping her position and title, but seems to have been ignorant of the fact that Rudolf was simultaneously having a serious affair with the actress Mizzi Kaspar. (Kaspar was an actress and possibly a prostitute. Prince Rudolf is said to have spent large sums of money on her, especially by way of gifts, including 60,000 gulden