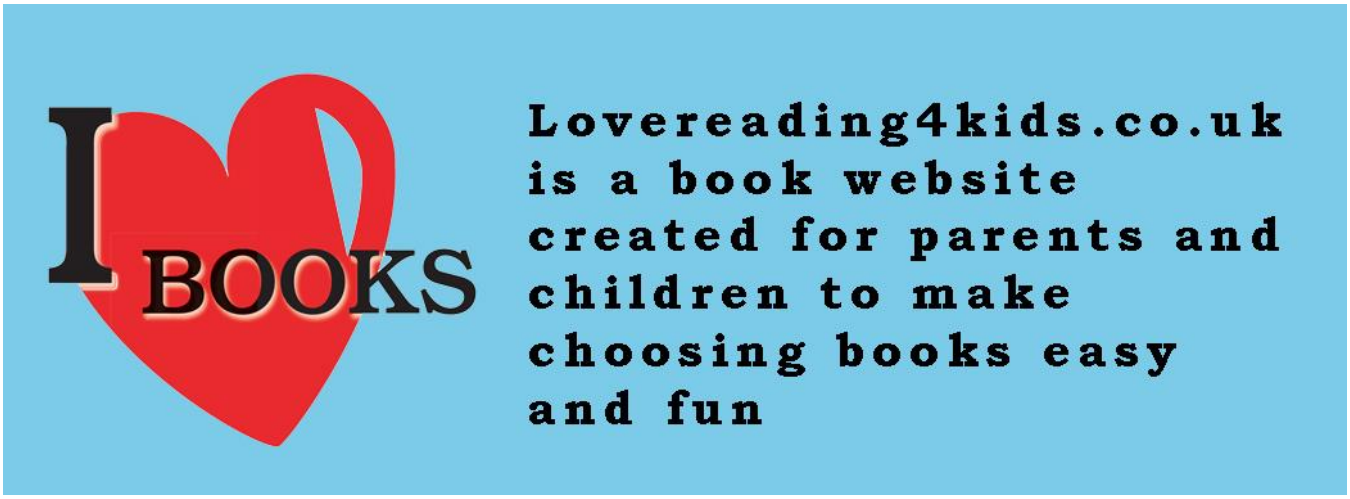


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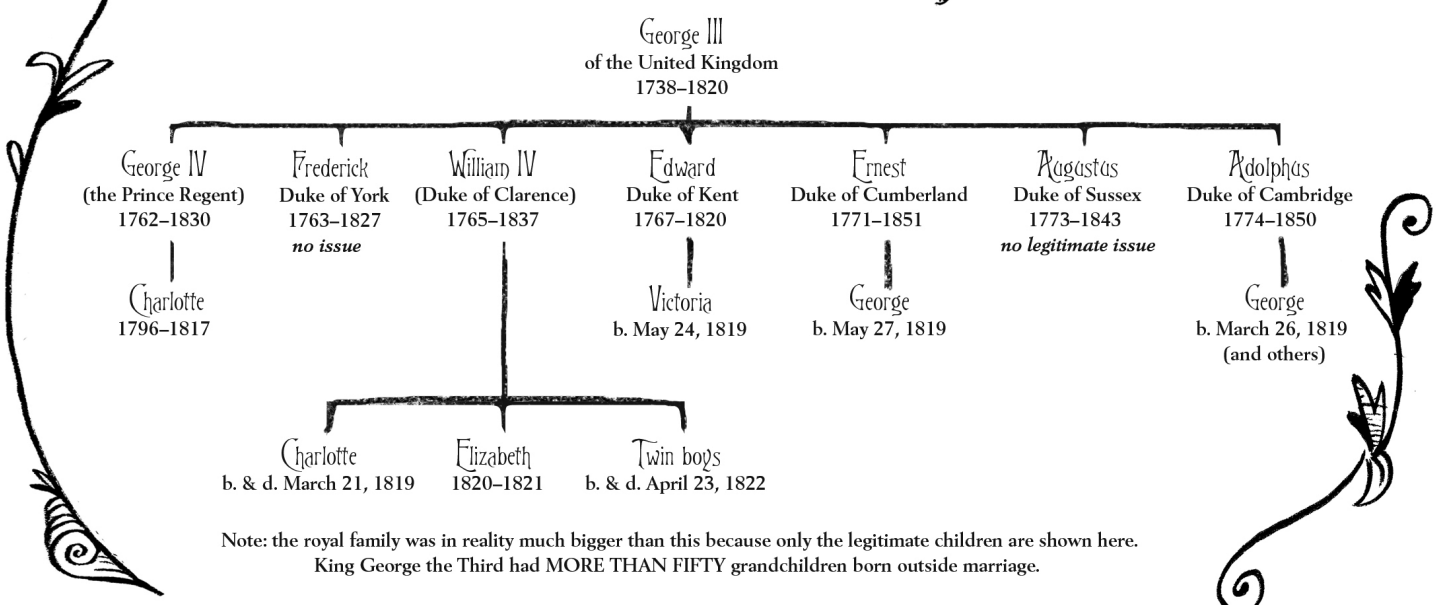
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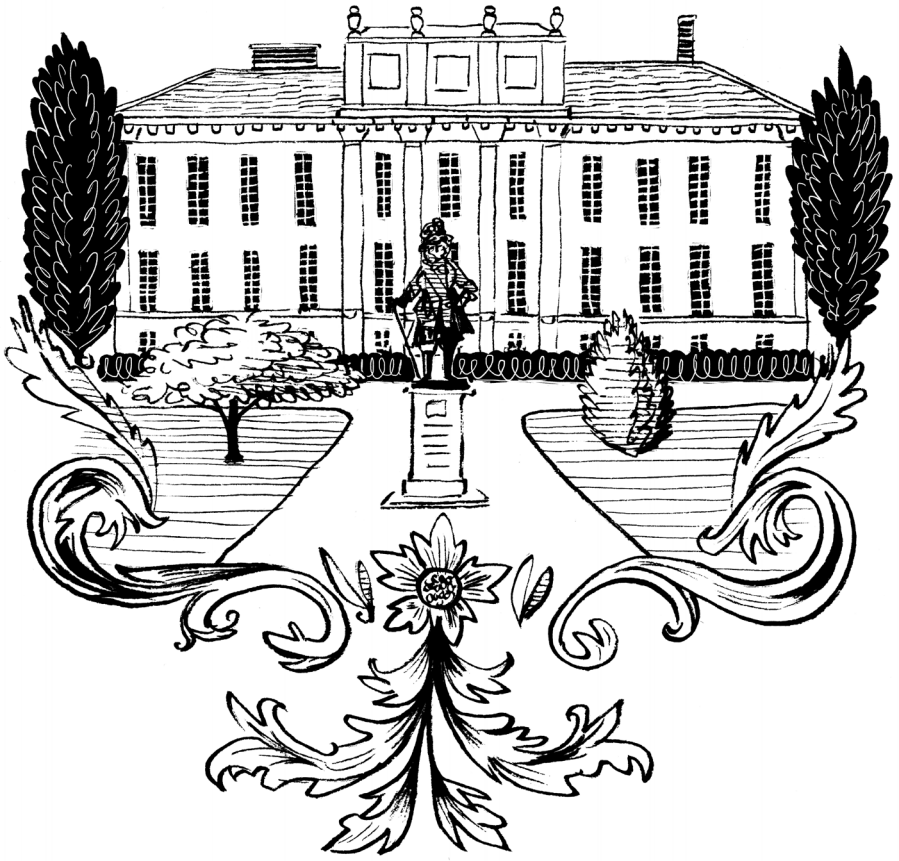
Victoria's Family Tree



Note: the royal family was in reality much bigger than this because only the legitimate children are shown here.
King George the Third had MORE THAN FIFTY grandchildren born outside marriage.

PART ONE

AT KENSINGTON PALACE





Chapter 1

Journey to the Palace

'Goodbye, Miss V.'

I struggled to reopen the carriage door, for Edward had already clicked it shut before I had had the chance to say farewell properly to my mother. But I was too late. Her stooped back was already disappearing towards the entrance of our house, Arborfield Hall. She had one hand raised to her spine, as usual, as if she found it a great effort to walk.

I gazed after her as she went, giving up my struggle with the handle.

'Have fun!' said Jane, my sister, who did at least manage to reopen the door. She climbed up the step to smack a kiss on to my cheek. 'Goodbye, Dash!' she said,

kissing him too and almost smothering him under her ringlets. 'Come back soon with lots of stories.' She jumped back down on to the gravel. 'Maybe you'll have exciting adventures that you can write down into a book of your own,' she added as an afterthought.

'Goodbye, Jane,' I said, although I don't think she heard me. Exciting adventures were the last thing I required. Of course she meant well, but Jane never understood what I might or might not want to do.

I thought she had gone, but here she was bouncing up once more upon the carriage's step. 'Mother *will* miss you, you know, Miss V!' she said. And then, this time, she really did disappear, darting back across the gravel to the house.

I am called 'Miss V. Conroy' because Jane, as the elder, is 'Miss Conroy'.

I am always 'Miss V' so that people will know that I'm not the first Miss Conroy. I was disappointed when my mother told me I would have to carry my 'V' with me, like a limp or an affliction of the speech. I thought I should like to slip through life as 'Miss Conroy'; it sounds more discreet, less noticeable. People always wonder what the 'V' stands for, and they try to find out … I hate that. I hate people knowing about me.

I am good at keeping secrets. I like to be neat and

discreet. I like to sit quiet as a mouse, escaping notice. Hopefully escaping criticism. And that's how I felt that morning when my father jumped into the carriage beside me, and with a jerk of the vehicle we moved off to begin the whole day's journey to London.

Of course my family might use my Christian name; that would be perfectly correct. But my father says that even when I was only one week old, my nursemaids reported that I was already a well-behaved young lady, a 'miss', not a normal, noisy, messy baby.

As our carriage rolled out between the gateposts, it occurred to me that perhaps at our destination for the first time people would call me 'Miss V. Conroy' seriously, and not as a joke. I decided I must prepare myself for the possibility.

I'd been up to London before, of course, with my father, in his blue-painted carriage. But we visited the shops and once the theatre, never staying more than one night. Certainly we had never stayed for several days, as was now the plan. I had packed very carefully, as always, and it had been hard to create space in my trunk for the great number of novels I thought I might need. I was a little anxious that the straps might tug loose and that my trunk and hatbox might fall off the back of our carriage. I kept trying to glimpse them out of the window. Dash was

worried too, I could tell, as he sat between my ankles. I rubbed his ears to reassure him.

'Don't worry,' my father said. 'Edward will keep the luggage quite safe.' My father had always had an uncanny ability to read the minds of other people. 'And you will be kept quite safe too, you know,' he added.

I tried to raise a little smile to show that I believed him. I thought, as I often did, of my mother's injunction that I should smile more.

But to be truthful, I didn't quite believe in the new Edward. He was a recent replacement for the old Edward, who had been my friend. All our footmen abandoned their own names and became 'Edward' when they entered my father's service at Arborfield Hall, but they never seemed to stay all that long. I was glad when the last-Edward-but-one had left, for he had been a lazy telltale. The new Edward was so new that I couldn't yet tell if we would be friends. I hoped so.

The thought made me sigh. I wished I had more friends, lots of friends, like my sister Jane. But in truth there was only Dash. It was kind of my father to allow Dash to come with us when it would have been more convenient to have left him behind.

'Now then, Miss V,' my father said, resting his hands on the round brass knob that topped the cane standing

between his knees on the carriage floor. He was leaning forward so that his chin almost sat upon his knuckles. As usual, his eyes were twinkling, amused. 'I think,' he said, 'that you and I must have a little confidential conversation before we arrive. I want things to go quite pleasantly, you know.'

I lowered my eyes to my own hands on my lap. 'Pleasantly' was far more than I hoped for from this visit. I wished merely not to disgrace or draw attention to myself.

'You must be excited to be taken to stay at a palace,' he went on. 'And it'll be easy. All you have to do is to play with another little girl. All the girls in London would be glad to take your place! Eh, Miss V?'

In truth I found the prospect as much terrifying as thrilling. This wasn't just any little girl! How would we 'play' together? Could she even play the piano? Would she expect me to entertain her with witty conversation? That would be awful, for I had none.

I glanced up doubtfully.

My father caught this and gave me one of his sharp little nods of encouragement. 'Come on! You can count on me!' he said. 'You can always count on a Conroy,' he added, with a tap of his cane on the floor, 'which means I know that I, in turn, can count on *you*.'

Of course, he was right. Of course I was a lucky girl, and I was fortunate to have a father like him to help me. I'd get through it somehow. With Dash's help too. He was a great icebreaker. Again I stroked his silky brown ears.

My father sat back on the padded seat, quite at ease. There was a pink carnation in his waistcoat. He was watching me with his usual quizzical look. My mother, Lady Elizabeth Conroy, didn't notice much because she was always so tired. But my father noticed everything.

'I know that you're a shy miss,' he said, cocking his head to the side, 'but so is the Other Party.'

'You mean –'

He nodded sharply and flashed his eyes towards the box where Edward sat next to the coachman. Of course. *Not in front of the servants.* I'd been brought up hearing these words every mealtime, every time the conversation got interesting.

'The Other Party …' I hesitated. 'May I ask, please, Papa, how I should address her when we meet?'

'Certainly!' he said. But then a furrow wrinkled his pink forehead. 'I thought your mother would have told you that.'

He leaned forward on his cane and beckoned me nearer to him.

'She is, of course, a princess,' he said very quietly. 'And

you must say, "Your Royal Highness". Never say "Princess", that's not correct when you're talking to her, always "Your Royal Highness". And wait until she speaks to you. And you know your curtsey?'

I bent my chin again, right down to my chest. My mother *had* said something vague to me about curtseys earlier this morning, but it had been in her usual dreamy manner. She had not been well recently. In fact, I could not remember her being perfectly well in my whole life.

For a second, I had to blink hard to clear my eyes. This had been one of our mother's bad mornings, when she had gone straight from her bed to recline on the chaise longue in the window, hardly stopping to dress herself properly on the way. On days like these she seemed reconciled to staying put there in her nightgown until dinnertime.

'Of course you know your curtsey, don't you, Miss V?' she'd murmured, not turning her head, as I'd crept across the carpet towards her to remind her of our departure. Well, I thought I knew my curtsey, but I wasn't entirely sure. And I hadn't dared to ask her for clarification.

Now I reminded myself fiercely that it had been a great step for her to have come down from her bedroom to see us off at all.

'I … think I know how to curtsey, Papa.'

It was the wrong thing to say. His eyebrows shot

forward and his hands tightened on that brass knob as if he wanted to hurt it. 'My God!' he said. 'My dearly beloved family have cotton wool for brains. Sometimes I think the good Lord has sent them specifically to try my patience.' He fell to looking crossly out of the window, and silence reigned.

I waited, mute, a careful hand on Dash's head to warn him that now was no time to wriggle or bark.

Eventually my father's eyes wandered back inside the carriage and I tensed myself to take the pressure of his gaze. Surely he would not be cross today, with all the excitement and strangeness of departure. I was sitting demurely on the seat, knees squeezed together, my hair smoothly looped up at each side of my head – not falling forward in torrents of ringlets like the fashionable girls wore – waiting anxiously for the storm to pass.

I was right. He was smiling again.

'Well, Miss V,' he said. My father's temper tantrums never lasted long. 'You certainly have more common sense than the rest of them.' By this he meant not only my mother and Jane but also my three boisterous brothers.

'You at least are quiet and obedient,' he said. 'And I know,' he added a little more kindly, 'that you'll miss that wretched little hound of yours. What's his name, again? Is it Splash?'

'Dash! It's Dash!'

Upon hearing his name, Dash sat up straight and raised his tiny chin as if to look my father in the eye. Dash! He was such a good dog, so well trained, so quiet and clean. He really was a comfort to me as we went about our daily business at Arborfield Hall: the shrubbery walk, piano practice, needlework. When I was sitting behind the curtain in the library with a volume of Sir Walter's in my lap, it was Dash who would first hear and warn me of the tread of the housemaid with the coal scuttle, giving me time to hop up neatly and put the forbidden book back. It was Dash who kissed me before I went to sleep at night.

But what did my father mean about my 'missing' Dash? Surely he wasn't going to be sent back to Arborfield Hall? Before I could ask, he spoke again.

'Well, young Dash!' My father prodded Dash with his cane. 'How are you going to enjoy being a royal dog? That's a distinguished canine band to be joining, and no mistake!'

I was speechless. What could he mean? I felt the shameful crimson rising up my neck, as it so often did.

'Oh, *Lord*!' he said as he saw me blush. 'Confound it! Can it be that my dear wife has failed to explain?'

He knocked his cane once or twice on the floor in his

exasperation. His eyes always seemed to flash theatrically, like those of the enchanter we had seen in last year's pantomime. 'Miss V, my apologies, but I thought you knew. The dog is to be your gift to the Other Party, of course.'

'But …'

My breath failed me. Give away my dog? To this unknown girl? I gripped my hands tighter together. Dash could sense that something was wrong. He knew his own name, the dear, dear hound.

'It's just a senseless brute, Miss V,' he said, with vexation. 'And it's of the utmost importance that you make a friend of this … erm, this child you're going to meet today,' he went on.

Despite my efforts, I felt a fat tear welling up in my eye. I tried to pretend it wasn't there. I felt utterly incapable of reaching for my handkerchief.

'Oh, come, come, my dear!' he said, pulling out his own handkerchief and shoving it roughly into my hand.

'Perhaps I have miscalculated,' he said quietly, as if to himself, and once again his gaze seemed drawn away from me, out of the window. I felt sore inside. I loved Dash desperately, but then I loved my father even more.

'I thought that you would be a good girl, Miss V,' he said. 'Equal to this task. You can do it, eh? You can give

up your dog in order to make a fine first impression? The party has asked me specifically for a dog, exactly like this one! Come, come, don't let me down. Otherwise I'll have to send you back to the country and find myself a new Miss V from somewhere else.' He gestured vaguely out of the window, as if daughters were to be picked up anywhere. 'And I'm sure I won't like the new one half as much.'

Now his attention was trained back upon me, like a beam of light concentrated by a prism glass. As always, when he *really* looked at me, I felt the warmth of his gaze.

'You're a brave little miss, aren't you?' he said cajolingly. 'And you know that it's your duty to win this little girl over, don't you? To make friends with her?'

Reluctantly, I sniffed and nodded.

'My post depends on you, Miss V!'

My father was the comptroller to the Duchess of Kent, the princess's mother. He often spoke proudly of his position in a royal household, and the advantages and connections it brought to us.

'You know that the Duchess of Kent is our patroness? And that's why we can live at Arborfield Hall and drive in a carriage, and why in a day or two, when I have a moment and when one or two bills have been dealt with, I'll be able to buy you another little puppy to replace that one.'

The thought of another puppy was horrible.

'But I love Dash,' I coughed. 'And he loves me!'

'You'll have another puppy, my dear, but the first chance to impress the princess will never come again,' he said. 'I regret it, but it really is for the best that you give her your dog.'

At that he folded his arms, throwing himself back on his seat and returning his gaze to the passing fields and damp meadows.

And so, as we sat in miserable silence, all thoughts of home wiped from my mind by this catastrophe, my hand crept down again to rest on Dash's head. I tried not to think of his life with another girl. I tried to not think of the wet, whiskery kisses he gave me, nor of his cushion, his bowl or his little felt toy mouse that I had last night packed lovingly into the corner of my trunk.

How could I endure our stay in this horrible place where Dash, my only friend, was to be taken from me? How could I possibly return to Arborfield Hall without him? And how on earth could I make friends with his thief?