

The Bloomsbury Ballerina

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Extract

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Chapter One



THE LOPUKHOV DYNASTY

When I knelt down by my mother to say my prayers, the only petition I had to send heavenwards was the heart pulsing wish that I might be one of the beautiful angels I had seen at the theatre ... I was going to be a beautiful angel, even if I had to run away from home.

LYDIA LOPOKOVA¹

When Lydia told the story of her career, she started, as most dancers do, with the first time that she had ever seen a ballet performance, and with the moment of childish epiphany when she had sworn herself, body and soul, to become a part of the stage in front of her. Lydia had been only seven when her father, Vasili Lopukhov, had taken her to St Petersburg's magnificent lyric theatre, the Mariinsky, and to a little girl in 1898 it may have seemed adventure enough simply to cross the immense square in which the theatre was set, dodging the stream of carriages that drove wealthy merchant families to the same performance, enjoying the self-importance of her own specially scrubbed appearance and brushed curls.

But inside, as Lydia and her father were directed to their seats in the gallery, the sense of occasion became still more momentous. Below her the auditorium curved away in a haze of sea-blue drapery and velvet; crystal lamps and gilded mouldings shone under the glitter of an enormous spreading chandelier; the elite of St Petersburg sat ranked across the *bel étage*, diamonds sparking at women's throats, medals gleaming from the uniforms of the men. When the theatre darkened and the dancers began to move across the stage in their mysteriously choreographed patterns, the whole

experience could have been overwhelming to a small child. Yet when Lydia later described this event on British radio, her Russian accent swerving through her carefully scripted prose, she remembered herself feeling exuberantly, unabashedly entitled to the whole spectacle:

Every number thrilled me and I finally found it impossible to keep my feet from moving. When the curtain fell I was standing on my seat and as the music continued I began to dance and do some childish imitations of the poses and some rather bold attempts to lift my leg higher than my head, with the result that I fell from my perch and carried home a fine bump with black and blue decorations just under my curls ... My father later told me that I had danced all the way home, keeping it up until bedtime.²

Aged seven, Lydia had danced her first comedy role.

But there was another, less innocent story behind the trip, which she didn't choose to relate to her British audience. Vasili Lopukhov was a poor man, the son of peasants, and when he had taken his youngest daughter to the Mariinsky, he had not been offering her an exceptional treat, but embarking on a calculated strategy of grooming her for a life on the stage. He had both financial and professional reasons for planning this, since ballet in turn-of-the-century Russia was still under the protection of the Tsar, and its artists were generously provided for. The Imperial Ballet School, which had originally been founded by the Empress Anna Ivanovna in 1738 to provide dancers for court entertainments, continued to feed, clothe and educate its pupils either for free or at minimal cost. Once students graduated into the adult ballet company, the financial rewards could, to a man of Vasili's class, be fabulous. The most junior dancers were paid a salary of 600 roubles a year, double Vasili's own highest earnings, while a leading ballerina, like Anna Pavlova, could aspire to 3,000 roubles. Even on retirement the dancers were guaranteed a pension, and for certain adroit women the stage was an unparalleled opportunity to acquire wealthy lovers, or 'protectors', as they were discreetly called within the profession.

Mathilde Kschessinska, the diamantine coquette who had been

the Mariinsky's queen ballerina from the early 1890s, had proved just how high a dancer could aim, after she had netted, as her first lover, the young Tsarevich Nicholas. She had then moved on to his uncle, the Grand Duke Sergei, and had finally secured a younger cousin, the Grand Duke Andrei. Even though Kshessinska could not marry into the imperial family (at least, not until after the Revolution), her lovers brought her mounting political influence within the theatre, as well as a magnificent collection of houses, jewellery and clothes. In the world of the Mariinsky, the silks and furs that wrapped Kschessinska's carefully tended body, the diamond earrings that framed her pretty, voracious face, were all graphic images of worldly success; and they must surely have been in Vasili's mind as he manoeuvred little Lydia into embracing her vocation.

Vasili would in fact get four of his five children successfully launched on to the ballet stage. Lydia might be the only one to make her reputation abroad, but her older brother Fedor would become a seminal force in Soviet dance, directing the Mariinsky ballet company in the decade following the Revolution, and choreographing much of its new repertory. In 1965, Fedor's son Vladimir would also become a dancer in the company, and Vladimir in turn would see his own son Fedor follow in the family profession. If Vasili had hoped only to make money by sending his children out to work in ballet, he had ended up founding a minor dynasty.

This represented a dramatic leap of aspiration for a man of his background; yet within the history of Lydia's family it was not entirely without precedent, for on both sides, her father's and her mother's, there had been generations with stories to tell of adventure and upheaval. Years later, when Maynard attempted to map his wife's ancestry, he discovered that in contrast to his own solid line (which could be traced back to an eleventh-century Frenchman, William de Cahagnes, who settled in Britain after the battle of Hastings), Lydia's family tree was so widely scattered that it was often invisible.* Such were the distances travelled by some of her forebears that generations

*Piecing together Lydia's background has been made subsequently more difficult by the fact that none of her immediate family, except Fedor, survived beyond 1947 and that during the 1942–3 siege of Leningrad the family flat was looted and the family's papers and photographs either scattered or destroyed.

of her family had gone unrecorded and the earliest ancestor that Lydia had been able to identify for Maynard had been her maternal great-great-grandfather, born in Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Lydia had known only his surname, Douglas, and also the fact that as an engineer he had left home to find work in Sweden, possibly inspired by earlier generations of Scots who had crossed the North Sea to hire out their skills for the construction of St Petersburg. The travelling gene had skipped a generation, as Douglas's son Gerhart had remained in Sweden as a tapestry weaver. But it had sent the latter's son Karl (Lydia's grandfather) on a route still further east, sailing to Latvia, where he had found employment as clerk to the Municipal Council of Riga, and where he had also found his future wife, Charlotte Johnson.

Charlotte had been the daughter of an itinerant and unscrupulous Scottish merchant, 'a courageous brigand', according to Lopukhov family lore, 'who always tried to get something for nothing'.³ But she herself proved a compliant wife and willingly followed her new husband to his next place of work, the Estonian capital Revel (now Tallinn), where in 1860 she gave birth to Lydia's mother, Constanz-Rosalia Karlova Lorn. In many ways, this little Douglas household was a model of modesty and rectitude, speaking the German language that was native to their district in Revel, and practising a devout Lutheran faith. However, a glimmer of nonconformity shone through their seriousness, for Karl was a keen amateur painter, while Charlotte cut a quixotic figure among the Revel housewives by insisting on dressing in the Scottish fashions of her youth. Their daughter, known by the diminutive Karlusha, was a fair, plump girl with a watchful expression blurring her mild features, but she too had inherited a small spark of Douglas restlessness and Johnson courage. At some point the family moved down to the university town of Derpt, now Tartu, and when Karl died, leaving the family short of money, she overcame her devotion to her mother to travel 200 miles to St Petersburg and take employment as a masseuse.

Barely twenty years old, Karlusha sought security within the city's large German community, where she was at least able to continue speaking her own language. Missing her mother, she clung on to

memories of home by wearing the style of tartan cap that Charlotte had always favoured. But by the time she was twenty-three, either work or social contacts had persuaded her to venture further afield, for it was in 1883 that Karlusha met Vasili Fedorovich Lopukhov, a man alarmingly and attractively outside her limited experience.

'Lopukhov' in Russian means burdock or wild plant, and it was a suggestive name for a serf family that had survived as tenaciously as that of Karlusha's new lover had. Originally Vasili's forebears had lived and worked in the most north-easterly corner of Russia, on the Mongolia-Buryat border. Yet over the generations, as some of them were sold, gambled or transferred to different estates by aristocratic masters, who until the emancipation decree of 1861 exercised despotic control over peasant lives, the family had migrated down to the central prairies of Russia. For Vasili's father, Fedor Lopukhov, this journey had ended in the Tambov province, around 300 miles south-east of Moscow, in the tiny village of Serpovskaya, and it was here that he met his wife, a woman of Tartar birth whose family had themselves migrated south from Kazan.

Within their closed community this couple seem to have been an active, even exceptional, pair. Fedor was assigned the duties of lay server in the local church; his wife was sought after as a skilled midwife; and their son Vasili, born around 1856, grew up with a lively estimation of his own worth. Having inherited his mother's dark good looks and his father's rich tenor voice, there was no question of him remaining in obscurity in Serpovskaya, and after he had signed up to join the army, Vasili applied for a transfer to the Life Guards of the Moscow regiment, based in distant St Petersburg.

Vasili was almost illiterate – he had barely been able to sign his name on his military papers – yet once in St Petersburg he became something of a barracks hero. He wore his handsomeness with a swagger, growing a closely trimmed beard across his wide cheekbones; he became leader of the regimental choir; and his gregarious, quick-witted energy made him popular among his peers. His officers too noted his qualities (his final certificate of regimental service commended his 'zealous and excellent conduct'), and when, in 1883, Vasili proposed to Karlusha (having already been briefly married, and then widowed), his companions may have wondered what he saw in this

shy Estonian with her halting grasp of Russian. Perhaps Vasili had simply got Karlusha pregnant – their first daughter, Evgenia, was born in 1884. Or perhaps he had seen in Karlusha's more refined background the shape of his own ambitions. Certainly, as he served out his final months in the army, Vasili was imagining for himself a much wider world. He was learning to speak German with his new wife, and when he left his regiment in July 1883 he did not take the obvious route of seeking employment in one of St Petersburg's expanding industries, but instead applied for work as an usher in the city's most prestigious dramatic theatre, the Alexandrinsky.

This was not a skilled job, nor a highly paid one, earning him just 180 roubles a year, yet for Vasili it brought a significant chance to rewrite his prospects. Unlike the mass of the Russian population, who in 1883 still lived and died doing the jobs to which they had been born, employees within the Imperial institutions were given opportunities to rise. Vasili might have begun work at the most menial level, checking in coats at the Alexandrinsky cloakroom, but he had his foot on the first rung of a hierarchy, and he wasted no time in climbing upwards. His personable looks and willing nature soon got him promoted to the job of directing the public to their seats, and, with his growing knowledge of the theatre and his fluent German, Vasili earned himself a reputation as the Alexandrinsky's 'educated usher'. He took meticulous pride in his appearance – one of Lydia's earliest memories was of her father's perfectly manicured nails – and by 1891 he was appointed to some sort of control position among the front-of-house staff. It brought him a taste of power, a salary of 300 roubles and the most prized privilege among the ushers: showing the wealthy boyars to their boxes and earning their generous tips.

Even so, Vasili was not well off. Although he was able to move himself and Karlusha from their first rented apartment on Kabinetskaya to a larger space at 8 Yarmskaya,* he had a growing household to support. Two years after the birth of Evgenia, Karlusha gave birth to Fedor, with a second daughter, Anna, following in 1889, Lydia in 1891, and two more sons, Nikolai and Andrei, in 1896 and 1898. With two servants also living in the flat, the family were always

*Now Ulitsa Dastagevskogo.

cramped. Lydia recalled that as a small child she slept on a narrow platform above the kitchen stove, enjoying the warmth but having no kind of privacy. Vasili's earnings were certainly never high enough to protect against any sudden bad luck (it may have been debt that forced him to relocate his family twice in 1895, swapping between different flats within the same building),* and any serious illness or emergency could derail his finances. When two-year-old Anna died from a brain seizure – perhaps meningitis – Vasili had to petition his employers for help with doctor's fees and funeral expenses (he was granted 25 roubles), and in 1896 he again had to plead for emergency funds to treat a recurrent nervous disorder of his own.

The doctor who visited the Lopukhovs wrote in his report that all the family were, at that moment, unwell, and throughout their childhood Lydia and her siblings were lectured by Karlusha about the dangers of illness. St Petersburg's open sewers made the city, at the end of the nineteenth century, one of most disease-ridden capitals of Europe, and while Yarmaskaya was not located in a slum neighbourhood, each apartment building in the narrow street huddled around a dank courtyard from which rose the stinking fumes of the residents' cesspit. For an anxious mother like Karlusha, contagion lurked in every dark corner, and she was, the children recalled, watchfully vigilant about where and with whom she would allow them to play.

But she was equally alert to the dangers of moral contagion, for it was while the children were still young that Vasili began to pursue what Fedor would euphemistically call in his memoirs 'gypsy freedoms'.⁴ Love had been squeezed out of the Lopukhov marriage by the accumulating stress of raising a family; and all the differences in background and temperament that had once made the couple attractive to each other were hardening into suspicion and dislike. Karlusha, at ease with her own family, could be merry and demonstrative, but her shyness with strangers and her strict Lutheran faith made her recoil from the loud drinking companions and boisterous theatre friends whom her husband brought home. Vasili in turn grew impatient with his antisocial wife, who still stubbornly preferred to speak in her native German tongue, and by the time that Lydia was

*They moved from flat no. 11 to no. 6, then to no. 12.

born he was beginning to look for his pleasures elsewhere.

For several years Karlusha struggled to console herself with her religion. Such was her determination to remain true to her marriage vows that she even took temporary care of a baby boy whom Vasili fathered during one of his drinking jaunts. For several years, too, Vasili's excesses were kept under control and away from the eyes of his children, so that their earliest experiences of family life were happy ones. One crucial advantage of his duties at the Alexandrinsky was that they required him to remain inside the auditorium during performances, allowing him to watch every production and learn the craft of the actors. This was the world of culture after which Vasili hankered. Even though he could still barely read, his ear was extraordinarily acute, and he learned chunks of the repertory to recite back home for his wife and family.

These performances remained distinct in the memories of his children, alive with verve and melodrama. When Vasili was at home, the flat rang with the sound of his voice, with his singing, with his constant demands that his family talk and read to him. And clearly the children thrived. A photograph taken when Lydia was about ten shows the five Lopukhovs looking intelligent, grinning, alert. Although they might not get new winter boots, they did always have books in the flat, including, Lydia remembered, a thick anthology of fairy tales that was kept in the sitting room and contained her own favourite story, Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Nightingale'.

From the distance of adulthood Fedor came to believe that their father had been a potentially 'outstanding' person, who in other, more privileged circumstances might have been a distinguished singer or actor.⁵ Certainly it was Vasili's theatrical talent that the children all inherited. Yet without any disciplined outlet, this talent became a boorish, dissolute parody of itself. Increasingly restless, increasingly frustrated, Vasili squandered more and more of his free time and money in bars. Five times between 1903 and 1909 he was fined for turning up drunk to work, and his proud professional reputation began to unravel. He was threatened with the sack after abusing a patron who had asked him to pick up a dropped coin, and there were allegations (later dropped) that he had been selling theatre tickets on the black market. Although Vasili's services were twice formally



Lopukhov family photo, back row from left to right:
Evgenia, unknown, Lydia; front row from left to
right: Fedor, Nikolai, Andrei

recognised – in 1902 he was made a Private Honorary Citizen and in 1906 an Hereditary Honorary Citizen – during his final years at the Alexandrinsky the ‘educated usher’ had become an embarrassing liability.

At home too he was no longer loved and revered. With his temper blackened by alcohol and his judgement clouded, Vasili became verbally, if not physically, violent towards Karlusha. The children, in defending her, joined ranks against him. Lydia had a photograph of her mother and two younger brothers which she kept by her bed for most of her life. It was taken around 1905, but in it Karlusha looks much older than her forty-five years, a square, anxious woman, her brows knitted tightly as she stares at the camera, her mouth clamped shut.

Of her father, Lydia kept no mementoes.

Yet if Vasili’s drinking laid domestic traps and terrors for the future,



Karlusha, with Andrei and Nikolai, St Petersburg, 1900

it was still a reasonably contented household into which Lydia was born on 7 October 1891.* She was baptised Lydia Vasilievna Lopukhova at the Simeonovskaya church on Mokhvaya Street, with the wife of a corporal in the Imperial Guard and a private from the Imperial regiment standing as her godparents. Karlusha, barely recovered from the loss of Anna, may have watched her new baby anxiously, but Lydia grew into a lively toddler, with a wide smile and energetic limbs that tilted boldly at the world. She became her mother's petted child, quick to be entertained by new experiences and always impatient for the family walk on which Karlusha insisted on taking her children every day. During Lydia's early years, her world was mapped by the sights and smells of the different routes her mother took – down the wide Zagorodny Prospekt, whose indoor market was piled with honeycombs, fruit and hams; across to the gleaming Vladimir church with its bronze domes and its crowds of beggars; further off to the park by Vitebsk Station, where Karlusha let

*This is the date under the Old Style Russian calendar. Once Lydia moved to the West and adjusted to the Gregorian calendar, she gave her birth date as 21 October. This deviated by a day from the normal calculation of adding thirteen days to OS dates (twelve days for nineteenth-century dates) but it may have been that Lydia was born late on 7 October and counted from the 8th. Lydia herself was never punctilious about such details, giving different dates of birth on her three passports and, when it suited her professionally, being 'vague' about her age.

her children race alongside the plumes of steam that rose from the trains as they rumbled heavily south towards Kiev and Minsk.

But Lydia's favourite walk was the one that led to her father's theatre, the Alexandrinsky, and to the elegant street that lay in the shadow of its golden stuccoed walls. This was Theatre Street, home of the school where St Petersburg's dancers and actors were apprenticed to serve in the Imperial companies, and where at the age of seven she had vowed her own future would lie.

In Lydia's adult memory it had been the visit to the Mariinsky that had inspired this vow, but in reality the examples of both Evgenia and Fedor must have had some influence on her. Vasili had already secured places at the Theatre School for his two older children, Evgenia in August 1895 and Fedor the following year, and as the pair brought home foreign-sounding chatter of pliés and pirouettes he may have guessed that he would have little trouble convincing his second daughter to follow them. Whether he had Karlusha's wholehearted support is unclear. By 1900 her two eldest children had graduated to boarding status at the school, coming home only at weekends and holidays, and she may have felt some aversion to Lydia, her favourite, being set up to join them. While discipline at the Theatre School was reassuringly strict, its teachers were still preparing the children for a life on stage and, with it, a world of bohemian morals and material dazzle that were disturbingly alien to her own simple Lutheran beliefs. To Karlusha, unlike Vasili, Kschessinska would hardly have been a persuasive role model.*

On the other hand, she was in no position to argue with the privileged care and education that entry to the Theatre School would bring, nor with the fact that these advantages were fiercely sought. Thousands of families petitioned every year simply for the chance to apply to the school, and of the 100 boys and 200 girls given auditions, fewer than twenty were finally accepted. Priority was given to those who had close relatives working as actors or dancers, and Vasili had already had to work his contacts hard to secure Fedor and

*Karlusha kept only one of her children, Nikolai, at home. He later confessed to Fedor that he had 'behaved like a lout' at his audition so that he could go to a regular school and study maths and science. F. Lopukhov, *Sixty Years in the Ballet*, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1966, p.75.

Evgenia's applications, helped by a dancer at the Mariinsky with whom he was friendly. The two older Lopukhovs had only just scraped a place each, and by May 1901, when it was time for Lydia's own audition, she was feeling the burden of her family's expectation. Even though the school was, officially, only looking for suitable raw material – an attractive face, a pliable personality and graceful build – experience had taught Vasili that many of those petitioning had already acquired some dance training. The competition would be intense, and he had attempted to prepare Lydia with some rudimentary coaching, impressing on her the need to smile prettily at the panel of examiners and explaining to her that when she was asked to run up and down the room for them, she must try to turn out her feet as she did so, like a real ballerina.

It was also Vasili, rather than Karlusha, who took charge of Lydia during the long day of the audition, as they joined the apprehensive line of families filing into the Theatre School. Lydia was familiar with this building from the outside and, wearing a brand-new pair of white silk socks that Karlusha had given her, she may even have felt some chirpy spurt of confidence. But there was little to reassure her, or any of the girls, as they were directed down the echoing hallway and up the marble staircase that led to their waiting room. Even those few precocious applicants who had been preening themselves in grown-up ruffles and jewellery – eclipsing Lydia's pride in her new socks – were cowed by what awaited them in the hall where the first stage of the audition took place.

Twenty-five of the most powerful figures within the world of the Imperial Theatres had been gathered to watch the little girls perform, some of the men wearing the full dress uniform of court, several of the women identifiable as ballerinas by their graceful hauteur. Seated behind a long table, they were an impenetrably august group, terrifying for the nine-year-olds who were being delivered up to their scrutiny. In small groups the girls were first checked over by a ballet master who delivered a dry, professional commentary on their appearance to the examiners and dispassionately weeded out those with physical defects, such as knock knees or flat feet. The girls were then requested to run, one by one, the length of the enormous room, and Lydia could only repeat Vasili's instructions to herself like

a mantra: 'I kept on thinking I must point the feet outwards, all the way up the hall.'⁶ Her run was evidently correct, however, or perhaps the examiners had simply seen interesting possibilities in her diminutive prettiness and in the determined energy that animated her pert body and grey-blue button eyes. By the end of the day, after a medical examination and an afternoon of academic tests, only thirteen girls remained, and Lydia was among them.

Over the next eight years she and this select band would get to know each other more intimately than sisters, as they were drilled into the mysteries of their new vocation. Only the finest dancers were considered fit for the Tsar, and the Imperial coffers had, historically, paid generously to ensure that they were well trained. The most skilled ballet masters in Europe had been brought over to St Petersburg during the previous century and a half, instilling elements of French elegance, Danish buoyancy and Italian virtuosity into the Russian style. And if the Mariinsky dancers who inspired Lydia now look stolidly limited to us – posing in their photographs like stiff curios from a distant era – they were the outstanding athletes of their day. The women had exploited rapid advances in the technology of pointe shoes to master a scintillating vocabulary of pirouettes and bourrées, of delicate, skimming hops and airy balances. Their male partners, too, were engaged in a heroic conquest of gravity as they pushed their bodies towards more vaulting jumps, and lifted their ballerinas to more daring heights.

As for the ballets they performed, no more spectacular repertory could be seen anywhere in the world. Marius Petipa was their principal architect, a French choreographer who had been employed at the Mariinsky since 1847 and over the years had perfected a formula for combining technically brilliant dancing with theatrical sensation. *La Bayadère* (1877) was a typically opulent product, its stage designers conjuring dazzling illusions such as a castle in the sky and a collapsing Indian temple, its hand-embroidered costumes made from the finest silks, velvets, ermines and Brussels lace. During the second half of the nineteenth century the Imperial purse donated around 80,000 roubles each year to the staging of two such productions; and when these costs were added to the dancers' salaries, to the upkeep of the horses and carriages that drove them to the theatres, as well as to the



Mathilde Kschessinska, Nitri, *The Talisman*; St Petersburg, 1909

wages of teaching staff, dressers and maids, ballet constituted a conspicuous drain on the Tsar's resources.

St Petersburg's intellectuals had tended to be critical of this extravagance, judging that most ballets in the repertory amounted to little more than a parading of pretty legs, designed for the titillation of young soldiers and old men. However, Nicholas II was a serious admirer, and after he came to the throne in 1894, artists at the Mariinsky became still more privileged, petted by the Tsar's family and fêted by the city's dedicated band of balletomanes. Four years after Lydia's audition, during the abortive revolutionary uprisings of 1905, some of the newly politicised dancers began to complain that the drudgery of their life rendered them little better off than serfs. Yet most of Russia's population would regard the dancers' status as rare and fortunate, for the rewards for their daily discipline could be life-changing – not only for themselves but for their families. When little Lydia first prayed to become one of the beautiful dancing angels that she had seen at the Mariinsky, Vasili had had every reason to pray beside her.