



Historical Association

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By Eirean Hickey

The Lost Letters of Alexandra Feodorovna

A young woman walks through the east wing of her grand home, finding herself in a spacious study that hasn't been used since before her grandfather's time. Wanting to take her mind off the events of the following day, she explores the luxurious workspace. The desk is crafted from sturdy mahogany and boasts intricate wave patterns on its sides, adorned with her family crest. The room exudes a sense of tranquillity and stillness that has a soothing effect on the young woman, who takes a moment to relax in the padded window seat overlooking the central courtyard. The walls of the room are adorned with rose-coloured wallpaper and the floor is covered with a soft, cloud-like carpet. There is a small intricate grandfather clock in pride of place upon the mantle of the large fireplace, providing a calming tick-tock rhythm. She gracefully moves towards the plush wingback chair and settles in, her footsteps silent on the velvety carpet. As she runs her fingers over the desk's waves, she feels a slight resistance. She applies more pressure to the wave, and a portion of the desk protrudes. She tugs at the wood, and it creaks as what appears to be a shallow drawer emerges. Inside there is a bundle of four lengthy letters, tied up individually with different coloured ribbons. The envelopes are yellowed with age and worn from being held. She cannot read the name on the first envelope as she pulls it out, due to what she thinks are tears having smudged the ink. The mysterious nature of the letters piques her interest, and she moves back to the window seat and curls up to read the first letter.

29th September 1839

Livadia Palace

Livadiya

Crimea

Dearest Grandmama, I have arrived safely in Russia, despite your worries. I must be here for Nicholas, as his father is dying and he needs all the support he can get. I have been in his position and losing a parent is the most difficult thing possible. Ella and I have received a warm enough welcome here in Crimea, but everyone is over-polite, cautious, or irritated at our arrival. The Tsar greeted us personally in full military dress in a lavish ceremony that left him looking extremely tired and unwell. We had been unsure about how we would be received by the Tsar due to reports of rapidly declining health. I am thankful for the Tsar's warm welcome, as it will earn me more respect at the Russian court. The grand ceremonial greeting, despite the Tsar's illness, will help with my settling in. The advisors are being excessively polite because they are not yet familiar with my temperament and do not want to cause any offence. There are those who are annoyed because they feel that the Tsar exhausted his remaining energy by greeting me. I have not gotten to speak with Nicholas nearly as much as I would have liked, but I suppose that was to be expected. He is busy every day learning some new aspect of ruling, as Russia is such a large country with many territories and his father fell ill so suddenly. They expected him to be fit to rule for at least another 5 years. I haven't voiced my concerns to anyone else yet grandmama, as I do not wish to add to the problems here in Crimea, but I am afraid of converting to the Russian Orthodox Church. I have been informed I must if I wish to marry Nicholas. I have been assured that I can belong to both Lutherism and Orthodoxy, but I feel like I am still renouncing my beliefs, It feels like I'm betraying my country, my old self, and you, Grandmama. However I love Nicholas, so I must reconcile myself with the thought. Do you have any advice grandmama? You always have sensible suggestions. I know grandpapa was not entirely accepted by parliament due to some religious issues, would any of the advice you offered him benefit me? I am also afraid of the Russian people's reaction to me. I've mentioned before that the king's advisors have a negative opinion of me, due to the king's deteriorating health since my arrival. I'm concerned that if they believe this, it may spread to the rest of the Russian population as well. The Tsarina also dislikes me, she preferred Princess H el ene of France for Nicholas and she has not said any more than polite greetings to me. This also does not bode well as she is very well-liked by the people and they will support her. I realise now grandmama, I have spent this entire letter worrying and mentioning all the negatives, while there are many positives in my new life. I am here in Crimea, which is a beautiful country, with the one whom I love most in the world, and I have finally been accepted by the Tsar as a good wife for his son, life is not all bad. I miss you grandmama and I hope to see you again soon. Lots of love, Your darling granddaughter,

Alix

*U*pon the completion of the first letter from the stack, the young woman lifted her eyes

to examine the clock in the room. Despite the dark and gloomy sky outside, it was still relatively early. She stretched her legs, folding the letter and sliding it back into its designated envelope. She decided to read the second letter, which was tied with a black satin ribbon, the type used during a period of mourning. Although she had already figured out the sender and recipient of the letter, she felt intrigued. Carefully unfolding the letter, she noted that it was shorter than the previous one. With the clock's steady tick-tock in the background, she began to read.

5th November 1839

The Winter Palace

St. Petersburg

Russia

Dearest Grandmama, The thing we have all been dreading has come to pass. The Tsar has passed away. He passed in his sleep on the 1st of November, in the arms of the Dowager Empress, surrounded by his children. Nicholas has been inconsolable, he looked up to his father, and I do not think he will ever be the same. So much of who he is is due to his father, so his death will impact Nicholas in ways unimaginable. The Dowager Empress refuses to leave her bed, or eat, or do anything other than sob. She truly loved the Tsar, as did all of the Imperial Family. I feel even more like an outsider than before. All of the family is in the deepest mourning, while the rest of the country follows suit. The Tsar was loved by his family and the Imperial Court, and his death is mourned by the entire country. As an outsider, I feel even more disconnected from the family's grief. Although I sympathize with Nicholas, I did not have the same relationship with the Tsar as others did, having only arrived in Russia a month ago. I am asking for your advice grandmama, as I do not know what to do, as I do not think there is anything I can do to help ease the situation other than be there for Nicholas. I also should mention that I converted to the Russian Orthodox Church the day after the Tsar passed. With the Tsar having passed away, Nicholas is to be crowned soon, and he wishes to be married before that happens. Our wedding date has been picked and I have converted. I thought I would have a bit longer to get fully comfortable with it, even just in my mind, but my time ran out. When Nicholas asked me to convert the day after his father died, I could not say no. It was important to him and after having lost his father, I had to do this for him. Some may act as if I have betrayed my faith, but deep down, I am still a member of The Church of England, and that is what I truly believe. With my conversion, I had to select a new name. I wished to rename

myself Yekaterina, which is the Russian form of Katherine, however, Nicholas insisted I choose Alexandra after his great-grandmother, so we could be a second Alexandra and Nicholas. I did not mind as it was already close to Alix. Again, I could not deny him that simple request. I must admit, I do not think my life is ever going to be the same or even similar again now. I miss you and I will write with news of my upcoming wedding soon. Lots of love, Your darling granddaughter,

Alix

The young woman has just finished reading the second letter in the bundle when she hears a quiet knock at the door. A gentle voice calls out, "Are you in there, Your Royal Highness?" The young woman holds her breath, not wanting to give away her new favourite hiding place. When the person on the other side of the door does not hear any response, they move on down the hall to check the next room. The young woman lets out a short sigh and replaces the second letter in its envelope. The next letter in the pile is rather long and is tied up with an ivory ribbon. The young woman decides to retire to her bedchambers and read the last two in bed before going to sleep. She stands, straightens out her dress, and gathers up her reading material. She then closes the hidden drawer in the desk and makes her way to the top of the room. She stops with her hand on the door and has one last look around the room, her eyes lingering on the ornate clock above the mantle. Then she leaves and walks back to her bedchambers. She tucks herself into her bed, before turning on her bedside lamp as night has fallen very fast, and begins the third letter.

30th November 1984

The Winter Palace

St. Petersburg Russia

Dearest Grandmama, Thank you for all your advice, I greatly appreciate it, and I will have to put it into practice. I am doing well, thank you for inquiring. My wedding was four days ago, and it was one of the best days of my life! We got married at the church here in the Winter Palace, the Grand Church of the Winter Palace of St. Petersburg. It's quite an ostentatious name, isn't it? I suppose that fits with the Russian Monarchy. I've come to realise that the common people worship their rulers almost as much as they do their God and saints. The Russian monarchy also has a very impressive collection of crown jewels, but an even more impressive jeweller, he lives here in St. Petersburg. His company goes by the name of House of Fabergé, and they do the most amazing work. I have had a clock commissioned for you, as a way of saying thank you. I know it will never fully repay you for everything you did for me as a child, but it is a start. I was saddened that you could not attend my wedding, but even still, it was a great day. I wore a diamond crown, the Romanov Imperial Nuptial Crown with orange blossoms in my hair. My earrings had once belonged to Catherine the Great and I had a pearl necklace around my neck. My favourite was the lovely ring you gifted me that I wore for the wedding and ever since, and when I look at it I think of you. And I cannot thank you enough for all my other presents. I shall cherish them forever. I wore the lace veil that grandpapa designed, in honour of you and grandpapa, and to bring a piece of mother with me as she wore it at her wedding to father. My dress was beautiful, it was a Russian wedding dress, in silver. I was given the star and sash of the Order of St. Andrei to wear upon my dress. Nicholas wore the Hussar uniform, which is his favourite calvary uniform. I was very lucky to have all my siblings there with me on such an important occasion, although I wish mother and father could have been there. I have seen the beginnings of the portrait that you commissioned, and it is shaping up to be a wonderful piece of art. Nicholas was most touched by your making him Col. in Chief of the Scots Greys, and it was the Regiment he admired more than any other when he was at Aldershot this year. You are far too good to us. The wedding happened on the dowager empress' birthday. We were able to ease court mourning then, but it has already returned in full strength. As happy as I was with my wedding, it seemed to me a mere continuation of the funeral liturgy for the dead Tsar, with

one difference; I wore a silver dress instead of a black one. Despite my wedding and new position in the Imperial Family, the people still do not like me. A newspaper report was published covering our wedding, and it was an excellent report until the end, when it started to criticise me. My favourite quote was “She has come to us behind a coffin. She brings misfortune with her.” Despite my joking, I am worried. The people still do not like me and I only hope I won’t make things any harder for my dear Nicholas. The next big event for the Imperial Family will be Nicolas’ coronation. I can tell he is already quite excited, but if you were to ask him he would say that it was a formality, and he is already Tsar. The coronation will not happen for some time, as we must finish the period of mourning for Nicholas’ father. Thank you again for everything, from both me and Nicholas. Lots of love, Your darling granddaughter,

Alix

After finishing the letter, the young woman couldn’t help but feel a deep sadness for Alix.

Her wedding day was supposed to be a joyous occasion, about the love she shared with her husband, rather than being in the shadow cast by the Tsar’s death. The young woman had recently gotten married, and it was the best day of her life. It was heartbreaking to think that Alix couldn’t experience the same happiness. However, Alix clearly cared deeply for Nicholas, and it was lovely to read about how obviously smitten the young woman was with her husband, much like herself and Philip. She also empathised with Nicholas, having lost her father just four months prior. She knew how hard it was to deal with such a loss and appreciated Alix’s efforts to be there for him. The young woman hopes Queen Victoria was able to offer good advice to Alix, as life was very difficult for her during that period. The young woman replaces the letter into its corresponding envelope and ties the ivory ribbon back around it. She then places it onto the small pile on her small table that sits beside her large ornate oak bed. She lifts the final letter, the one tied up in a deep royal purple ribbon. She unties the bow, pulls out the letter, and begins to immerse herself in the writings once more.

19th May 1896

The Winter Palace

St. Petersburg

Russia

Dearest Grandmama,

The most awful tragedy has struck, many Russian civilians have been killed in an accident, and I can't help but feel like it was all our fault. Nicholas' coronation took place on the 14th, and it was a very happy affair. In all the churches in St. Petersburg, the liturgy was read and prayers of thanksgiving were recited. At 10, the ceremony began with Nicholas sitting upon the throne of Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich, the dowager empress on the throne of Tsar Alex Mikhailovich Tishayshy, and I upon the throne of Grand Prince Ivan III. My mother-in-law holds the more powerful and prestigious position of Dowager Empress in Russia, which surpasses the rank of Empress. I had a magnificent coronation gown designed, and I wore a set of the Imperial Crown Jewels. They officially belong to Marie, as the current higher-ranking empress. I had to beg her to lend me a set for the coronation, which she reluctantly agreed to, only after Nicholas stepped in on my behalf. Despite my being Nicolas' wife for six months now, she still does not like me, but as you say grandmama, "The important thing is not what they think of me, but what I think of them." A liturgy was read out, and then Nicholas and I were anointed and we took communion of the Holy Mysteries at the altar. That was that, it was over very fast. The festivities for us and the people of Russia were the more important part. There was a week of celebrations leading up to the coronation, with parades and the arrival of different foreign royals and well-connected dignitaries. Nicholas' coronation is the largest in Russian history and the celebrations will continue until my birthday. In the days after the official coronation, we dined with all of our visitors, met with ambassadors from all over Russia, and held a masked ball, and other regular balls and parties. On the 18th, we arranged for the citizens of St. Petersburg to receive a free meal and a small gift. It was a national holiday, and the feast was held outdoors in the Khodynka Field, which is normally used as a military training area. It was chosen as it was a large outdoor space, which was thought to be large enough to accommodate everyone. It was not. Over half a million people arrived, which was just about manageable when everyone was standing or milling about slowly. A rumour started to spread that there was not enough beer or pretzels and that the cups Nicholas had commissioned contained a gold coin. A crush began as people wanted to ensure they got what they were entitled to. The police were unable to keep control. Over 1,200 people died in the crush as a result, due to some people getting stuck in the trenches and getting trampled to death and about 12,000 were injured. This morning's news reports were all about it. It's being called the Khodynka Tragedy, and some people are saying it is a sign, that Nicholas's reign is going to be bad for the people. The worst part is that we made an appearance, having only been told that a crush had taken place, but had been solved. Instead, all the bodies were cleaned up and we weren't told the truth until later. I am firm on the fact that we need to pay compensation to the families who lost someone in the crush, I am taking a leaf out of your book by being strong and not letting my opinion be brushed aside. We were told the crush was over the commemorative cups, so I jokingly called them cups of sorrow, however, that name is true now. It was recorded though, and being used in some of the articles, which I think is making the situation worse. Nicholas and his advisors are working

on a statement to be released, but I do not think we can do anything now. We have already been called tone-deaf by the Chinese Imperial Commissioner, and I think it is news of this tragedy that is going to reach the rest of the world, rather than how beautiful Nicholas' coronation was. Do you have any ideas on how we could move on past this tragedy, or will it be with us forever? I wish you could be here to help us through this, you always know what to do. Lots of love, Your darling granddaughter,

Alix

***T**he young woman knelt before the Archbishop of Canterbury. With delicate precision, he bestowed upon her the St. Edward crown, and at that moment, time seemed to stand still. She knew that she was now the Queen of England, and the immense responsibility of this role was not lost on her. Her mind traced back to her ancestors, including her father and his father, and everyone before them, who had all served their country well. Her mind wandered to the stack of letters sitting on her bedside table. As she reflected on the letters and their author, Alix, she couldn't help but think of the love and loss that had filled her life. Though Alix's tragic death at a young age was heart-wrenching, the relationship she had shared with her grandmother, Queen Victoria, was truly beautiful. Alix's story left her with a deep desire to cultivate relationships as strong as the one between Alix and Queen Victoria with her people. Filled with a strong sense of purpose, she rose to her feet and embraced her new role as Queen Elizabeth II.*

Word Count: 3,500

