

As the end of July approached, the six-week idyll came to an end. Alix had filled the diary with messages: "Love is caught, I have bound his wings. No longer will he roam or fly away. Within our two hearts forever, love sings." As the *Polar Star* slipped past Dover, north-bound for the Baltic, Nicholas read her prayer, "Sleep gently, and let the gentle waves rock you to sleep. Your Guardian Angel is keeping watch over you. A tender kiss."

Next day, Nicholas stood at the rail watching a fiery sunset off the coast of Jutland and gazing across the water as twenty ships of the Imperial German Navy dipped their flags in salute. Entering the Baltic through the Skaggerak, the *Polar Star* steamed slowly down the Danish coastline within sight of the ancient castle of Elsinore. But Nicholas's thoughts were far away.

"I am yours," Alix had written, "you are mine, of that be sure. You are locked in my heart, the little key is lost and now you must stay there forever."

There was another entry, too—a strangely prophetic line from Marie Corelli: "For the past is past and will never return, the future we know not, and only the present can be called our own."

CHAPTER FOUR

Marriage

AT GATCHINA, Nicholas found his family in a state of alarm over his father's health. Troubled by headaches, insomnia and weakness in the legs, the Tsar had consulted doctors, who recommended that he rest, preferably in the warm climate of the Crimea. But Alexander III was not a man to disrupt his schedule simply because he was not feeling well. The family entrained in September, not for the Crimea, but for the Imperial hunting lodge at Spala in Poland.

There, the Tsar continued to feel ill, and a specialist, Professor Leyden, was summoned from Vienna. Leyden carefully looked over the bearlike frame and diagnosed nephritis. He insisted that his patient be moved to the Crimea immediately and forced to rest. This time, Alexander III agreed. Nicholas, meanwhile, found himself caught in a struggle between "my duty to remain here with my dear parents and follow them to the Crimea and the keen desire to hurry to Wolfsgarten to be near my dear Alix." Eventually, he suppressed his ardor and went with the family to the summer palace at Livadia in the Crimea.

There, amid warm breezes scented with grapes, the Tsar began to improve. He ate well, took sunbaths in the garden and even went down to walk on the beach. But this improvement was only temporary. After a few days, he again began to have trouble sleeping, his legs gave way and he took to his bed. His diet was rigidly restricted and, to his distress, he was forbidden ice cream. Sitting alone by his bedside, his sixteen-year-old daughter, Olga, suddenly heard her father whisper, "Baby, dear, I know there is some ice cream in the next room. Bring it here—but make sure nobody sees you." She smuggled him a plate and he enjoyed it immensely. A St. Petersburg priest, Father John of Kronstadt, whose followers believed him ca-

pable of miracles, was summoned. While the doctors worked, Father John prayed, but the Tsar grew steadily worse.

Sensing what was coming, Nicholas asked Alix to come to Livadia. She came immediately, traveling by train as an ordinary passenger. Normally the fiancée of a tsarevich would have been honored with a special train, but the Minister of the Imperial Court, whose job it was to make such arrangements, was so involved with the illness of the Tsar that he simply forgot. Approaching the Crimea, Alix wired ahead that she wanted the ceremony of her conversion to Orthodoxy to take place as soon as possible. Nicholas could not suppress his happiness. "My God, what a joy to meet her in my country and to have her near," he wrote. "Half my fears and sadness have disappeared."

He met her train in Simferopol and brought her to Livadia in an open carriage. During the four-hour drive, they were stopped repeatedly by Tartar villagers with welcoming bread and salt and armloads of grapes and flowers. When their carriage rolled up in front of the palace guard of honor, it was brimming with fruit and flowers. In his bedroom, seated in an armchair, Alexander III awaited the young couple. He was dressed in full-dress uniform. He had insisted, despite all objection, that this was the only way for the Tsar of Russia to greet a future Russian empress. Kneeling before the pale, enfeebled giant, Alix received his blessing, and she and Nicholas were formally betrothed.

For the ten days that followed, the life of the household revolved about the sickbed of the dying Tsar. Nicholas and Alix went quietly about the house, caught up in an unsettling swirl of happiness and despair. They walked through the vineyards and by the sea, although they never dared to go too far from the house. She sat at his side while he began reading over the reports submitted by his father's ministers. It was a difficult role. Plunged into the bosom of a grief-stricken family, she felt herself an outsider. Her one contact and confidant was Nicholas. Marie was too busy caring for her husband to worry about the niceties of welcoming her future daughter-in-law. It was natural, of course, in a household where the patient was husband, father and ruler of a great empire, that attention should be concentrated on him and his wife. Doctors, government ministers and court officials treated Marie not only with the normal deference due an empress, but with the extra consideration accorded a human being facing a great personal ordeal. Doctors hurried from the bedside to the Empress, scarcely noticing the shy young man and woman standing outside the door or waiting at the foot of the stairs. In time Alix

became offended by this treatment. Her lover, whom she honored, was Heir to the Throne. If this huge Tsar whom she scarcely knew should die, her fiancée would be the Tsar. Yet he was treated like a nobody.

She put many of these feelings into a famous passage in his diary: "Sweet child, pray to God. He will comfort you. Don't feel too low. Your Sunny is praying for you and the beloved patient. . . . Be firm and make the doctors come to you every day and tell you how they find him . . . so that you are always the first to know. Don't let others be put first and you left out. You are Father's dear son and must be told all and asked about everything. Show your own mind and don't let others forget who you are. Forgive me, lovy."

For ten days after Alix's appearance at Livadia, the agony in the sickroom continued. Then, on the afternoon of November 1, 1894, Alexander III suddenly died. Marie fainted into Alix's arms. "God, God, what a day," wrote Nicholas. "The Lord has called to him our adored, our dear, our tenderly loved Papa. My head turns, it isn't possible to believe it. All day we rested upstairs near him. His respiration became difficult, suddenly it became necessary to give him oxygen. About 2:30 he received extreme unction; soon light trembling began and the end followed quickly. Father John remained with him an hour at the bedside, holding his head. It was the death of a saint, Lord assist us in these difficult days. Poor dear Mama."

No one better understood the significance of the death of the Tsar than the twenty-six-year-old youth who had inherited his throne. "I saw tears in his blue eyes," recalled Grand Duke Alexander, Nicholas's brother-in-law. "He took me by the arm and led me downstairs to his room. We embraced and cried together. He could not collect his thoughts. He knew that he was Emperor now, and the weight of this terrifying fact crushed him.

"Sandro, what am I going to do?" he exclaimed, pathetically. "What is going to happen to me, to you, to Xenia, to Alix, to mother, to all of Russia? I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers."

In the late afternoon, while the guns of the warships in Yalta harbor still thundered a last salute to the dead monarch, an altar was erected on the lawn in front of the palace. Courtiers, officials, servants and family formed a semicircle, and a priest in golden vestments solemnly administered the oath of allegiance to His Imperial Majesty, Tsar Nicholas II.

When morning came the following day, the palace was draped in

black and a storm raged on the Black Sea. As the embalmers arrived to deal with the body, the priests effected the religious conversion of the Protestant German Princess who suddenly stood so close to the Russian throne. Before noon that very day, the new Tsar, his betrothed and his widowed mother went to the palace chapel for a special service.

"Even in our great grief, God gives us a sweet and luminous joy," wrote Nicholas. "At ten o'clock in the presence only of the family, my dear Alix has been consecrated to Orthodoxy." After the service, Alix, Marie and Nicholas took Holy Communion together and, said Nicholas, "Alix read beautifully and in a clear voice, the responses and the prayers." When they returned to the palace, the new Tsar Nicholas issued his first Imperial Decree. It proclaimed the new faith, new title and new name of the former Princess Alix of Hesse. Queen Victoria's Lutheran granddaughter had become "the truly believing Grand Duchess Alexandra Fedorovna."

The death of the powerful Tsar Alexander III at the age of forty-nine was a shock to all Russia. No arrangements had been made for a funeral, and the body of the dead Tsar was forced to wait for a week at Livadia while telegrams flew between the Crimea and St. Petersburg. The wedding, originally planned for the following spring, was moved forward at Nicholas's insistence. Staggering under the weight of his new office, he had no intention of allowing the one person who gave him confidence to leave his side.

"Mama, many others, and I think it would be better to celebrate the marriage here in peace, while Papa still is under this roof," he noted in his diary, "but all the uncles are against it, saying that I should marry in Petersburg after the funeral."

Nicholas's uncles, the four brothers of the dead Tsar, were independent, strong-minded men who carried great weight in the family. Their view, that the wedding of their young nephew was too important a national event to be performed privately at Livadia, prevailed. Meanwhile, the Orthodox ceremonies of death went on continuously. The family kissed the lips of the dead Tsar as he lay in his coffin, and went to the chapel twice a day to pray for his soul. "My dear Papa was transferred from the chapel to the large church," Nicholas wrote. "The coffin was carried by the Cossacks. . . . When we got back to the empty house, we absolutely broke down. God has afflicted us with heavy trials."

At the end of a week, the coffin, draped in purple and accompanied by the mourning family, left Livadia for Sevastopol, where a funeral train awaited. As the train rolled north from the Crimea across the Ukraine, clusters of peasants gathered along the track to watch the dead Tsar pass. In the cities of Kharkov, Kursk, Orel and Tula, the train halted and services were held in the presence of local nobility and officials. In Moscow, the coffin was transferred to a hearse and carried to the Kremlin for an overnight rest. Low clouds whipped across a gray November sky, and splinters of sleet bit into the faces of the Muscovites who lined the streets to watch the cortege. Ten times before reaching the Kremlin the procession stopped and separate litanies were sung from the steps of ten different churches.

In St. Petersburg, red-and-gold court carriages heavily draped in black waited at the station to pick up the family and move off through streets filled with the slush of an early thaw. For four excruciating hours the cortege advanced slowly across St. Petersburg to the Cathedral of the Fortress of Peter and Paul, where the Romanov tsars were buried. Throughout the city, the only sounds were the beat of muffled drums, the clatter of hoofs, the rumble of iron carriage wheels and the slow tolling of church bells. In the procession, the new Grand Duchess Alexandra Fedorovna rode alone, thickly veiled, behind the rest of the family. As she passed, the silent crowd strained to see their young Empress-to-be. Shaking their heads, old women crossed themselves and murmured darkly, "She has come to us behind a coffin."

The Kings of Greece, Denmark and Serbia arrived to join the royal mourners. Edward, Prince of Wales, and his son George, Duke of York, represented Queen Victoria; Prince Henry of Prussia represented his brother, the Kaiser. In all, sixty-one royal personages, each with an entourage, gathered that week in the marble palaces of St. Petersburg. In addition, the ministers of the Imperial government, the commanders of the Russian army and navy, the provincial governors and 460 delegates from across Russia came to pay their respects. "I have received so many delegations, I had to walk in the garden. My head is spinning," wrote Nicholas. At a banquet arranged in honor of the foreign guests, "I almost broke into sobs sitting down at the table because it was so difficult to see all this ceremony when my soul was so heavy."

For seventeen days, the body of Alexander III lay exposed in its coffin. Thousands of people shuffled past the open bier while a priest stood by chanting prayers and a hidden choir sang mournful hymns.

Twice a day all the royal mourners rode through the dank and misty streets for services. During this period, the future King George V wrote to his wife, Mary:

"Every day, after lunch, we had another service at the church. After the service, we all went up to [the] coffin which was open and kissed the Holy Picture which he holds in his hand. It gave me a shock when I saw his dear face so close to mine when I stooped down. He looks so beautiful and peaceful, but of course he has changed very much. It is a fortnight today."

Amid the priests and their litanies, the rooms and streets decorated in black, the sad faces, the tears and the wringing hands, Alexandra suppressed her own small, pathetic happiness. "One's feelings one can imagine," she wrote to her sister. "One day in deepest mourning lamenting a beloved one, the next in smartest clothes being married. There cannot be a greater contrast, but it drew us more together, if possible." "Such was my entry into Russia," she added later. "Our marriage seemed to me a mere continuation of the masses for the dead with this difference, that now I wore a white dress instead of a black."

The wedding took place on November 26, one week after the funeral. The day selected was the birthday of Empress Marie, now the Dowager Empress, and for such an occasion protocol permitted a brief relaxation of mourning. Dressed in white, Alexandra and Marie drove together down the Nevsky Prospect to the Winter Palace. Before a famous gold mirror used by every Russian grand duchess on her wedding day, the bride was formally dressed by the ladies of the Imperial family. She wore a heavy, old-fashioned Russian court dress of silver brocade and a robe and train of gold lined with ermine. From a red velvet cushion, Marie herself lifted the sparkling diamond nuptial crown and settled it carefully onto Alexandra's head. Together the two women walked through the palace galleries to the chapel where Nicholas waited in the boots and uniform of a Hussar. Each holding a lighted candle, Nicholas and Alexandra faced the Metropolitan. A few minutes before one in the afternoon, they became man and wife.

Alexandra was radiant. "She looked too wonderfully lovely," said the Princess of Wales. George, the Duke of York, wrote to Mary in England, "I think Nicky is a very lucky man to have got such a lovely and charming wife and I must say I never saw two people more in love with each other or happier than they are. I told them both that I could not wish them more than that they should be as happy as you and I are together. Was that right?"

Because of the mourning, there was no reception after the wedding,

and no honeymoon. The young couple returned immediately to the Anitchkov Palace. "When they drove from the Winter Palace after the wedding, they got a tremendous . . . ovation from the large crowds in the streets," George wrote to Queen Victoria. "The cheering was most hearty and reminded me of England. . . . Nicky has been kindness itself to me, he is the same dear boy he has always been and talks to me quite openly on every subject. . . . He does everything so quietly and naturally; everyone is struck by it and he is very popular already." At the Anitchkov Palace, Marie was waiting to welcome them with bread and salt. They stayed in that night, answered congratulatory telegrams, dined at eight and, according to Nicholas, "went to bed early because Alix had a headache."

The marriage that began that night remained unflawed for the rest of their lives. It was a Victorian marriage, outwardly serene and proper, but based on intensely passionate physical love. On her wedding night, before going to bed, Alexandra wrote in her husband's diary: "At last united, bound for life, and when this life is ended, we meet again in the other world and remain together for eternity. Yours, yours." The next morning, with fresh, new emotions surging through her, she wrote, "Never did I believe there could be such utter happiness in this world, such a feeling of unity between two mortal beings. I love you, those three words have my life in them."

They lived that first winter in six rooms of the Anitchkov Palace, where the Dowager Empress Marie remained mistress of the house. In his haste to be married, Nicholas had allowed no time for preparation of a place for himself and Alexandra to live, and they moved temporarily into the rooms which Nicholas and his brother George had shared as boys. Although he ruled a continent, the young Tsar conducted official business from a small sitting room while the new twenty-two-year-old Empress sat next door in the bedroom working on her Russian language. Between appointments, Nicholas joined her to chat and puff on a cigarette. At mealtime, because the apartment lacked a dining room, Nicholas and Alexandra went to dine with "Mother dear."

The young couple minded their cramped quarters less than the long hours apart. "Petitions and audiences without end," Nicholas grumbled, "saw Alix for an hour only," and "I am indescribably happy with Alix. It is sad that my work takes so many hours which I would prefer to spend exclusively with her." At night, Nicholas read to her in French, as she wanted to improve her use of the court

language. They began by reading tales by Alphonse Daudet and a book about Napoleon's life on St. Helena.

Occasionally, on snowy nights, Nicholas bundled Alexandra into fur robes beside him in a sleigh. Then he set the horses to flying under the walls and domes of the city and across the frozen white landscape. Back in their apartment, they changed into dressing gowns and had a late supper before a roaring fire.

On the last day of 1894, Nicholas looked back at the enormous events of that fateful year. In his diary he wrote: "It is hard to think of the terrible changes of this year. But putting our hope in God, I look forward to the coming year without fear, because the worst thing that could have happened to me, the thing I have been fearing all my life [the death of his father and his own accession to the throne], has already passed. At the same time that He has sent me irreparable grief, God has sent me a happiness of which I never dared to dream, in giving me Alix."

Certain problems are universal. Nicholas, genuinely grieved for his abruptly widowed mother, tried to comfort her by his presence, dutifully dining with her and often staying to sit with her after dinner. During the early months of his reign, Nicholas turned to his mother for political advice. She gave it freely, never suspecting that Alexandra might be resenting her role. To Marie, Alexandra was still an awkward young German girl, only recently arrived in Russia, with no knowledge or background in affairs of state. As the period of mourning ended, Marie returned to public life, to the clothes, the jewelry, the brilliant lights she loved so much. She was constantly seen driving down the Nevsky Prospect in an open carriage or sleigh pulled by a pair of shiny blacks, with a huge, black-bearded Cossack on the runningboard behind her. In the protocol of the Russian court, a dowager empress took precedence over an empress. At public ceremonies, Marie, dressed all in white and blazing with diamonds, walked on the arm of her son while Alexandra followed behind on the arm of one of the grand dukes. So natural did the leading role seem to Marie that when she discovered that her daughter-in-law was bitter, Marie was surprised and hurt.

Alexandra, for her part, felt and behaved much like any young wife. She was shocked by the sudden blow which had struck Marie, and her first reaction toward her mother-in-law was sympathetic. Before long, however, the strains of living under the same roof and competing for the same man began to tell. At meals, Alexandra

was doubly insulted. Not only was she completely ignored, but the older woman treated her beloved Nicky like a schoolboy. Despite elaborate politeness between "dear Alix" and "Mother dear," a veiled hostility began to appear.

One incident especially irritated Alexandra. Certain of the crown jewels traditionally passed from one Russian empress to the next, and, indeed, protocol required that Alexandra wear them on formal occasions. But Marie had a passion for jewelry and when Nicholas asked his mother to give up the gems, she bristled and refused. Humiliated, Alexandra then declared that she no longer cared about the jewelry and would not wear it in any case. Before a public scandal occurred, Marie submitted.

Like many a young bride, Alexandra sometimes had difficulty accepting the swift transition in her life. "I cannot yet realize that I am married," she wrote. "It seems like being on a visit." She alternated between despair and bliss. "I feel myself completely alone," she wrote to a friend in Germany. "I weep and I worry all day long because I feel that my husband is so young and so inexperienced. . . . I am alone most of the time. My husband is occupied all day and he spends his evenings with his mother." But at Christmas she wrote to one of her sisters, "How contented and happy I am with my beloved Nicky." In May she wrote in his diary, "Half a year now that we are married. How intensely happy you have made . . . [me] you cannot think."

The domestic tensions eased in the spring of 1895 when Nicholas and Alexandra moved to Peterhof for the summer and Marie left Russia on a long visit to her family home in Copenhagen. More important, Alexandra discovered that she was pregnant. Grand Duchess Elizabeth came to stay with her sister, and together the two young women painted, did needlework and went for carriage rides in the park. Both Nicholas and Alexandra marveled at the baby's growth. "It has become very big and kicks about and fights a great deal inside," the Tsar wrote to his mother. With the baby coming, Alexandra began planning and decorating her first real home in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, fifteen miles south of St. Petersburg. "Sad to leave Peterhof and . . . our little house on the shore where we spent our first summer so quietly together," Nicholas wrote to Marie. "But when we entered Alix's apartments [at Tsarskoe Selo] our mood changed instantly . . . to utter delight. . . . Sometimes, we simply sit in silence wherever we happen to be and admire the walls, the fireplaces, the furniture. . . . Twice we went up to the future nursery; here also the rooms are remarkably airy, light and cozy."

Both parents hoped that the new baby would be a son; a male heir would become the first tsarevich born directly to a reigning tsar since the eighteenth century. As the date approached, Marie returned, bubbling with excitement. "It is understood, isn't it, that you will let me know as soon as the first symptoms appear?" she wrote to Nicholas. "I shall fly to you, my dear children, and shall not be a nuisance except perhaps by acting as a policeman to keep everybody else away."

In mid-November 1895, when Alexandra began her labor, artillerymen in Kronstadt and St. Petersburg were posted beside their guns. A salute of 300 rounds would announce the birth of a male heir, 101 would mean that the child was a girl. Alexandra suffered intensely in labor, and birth was protracted. At last, however, the cannon began to fire, 99 . . . 100 . . . 101 . . . But the 102nd gun never fired. The first child born to Tsar Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra Fedorovna was the Grand Duchess Olga Nicolaievna. At birth, she weighed nine pounds.

The joy of having their first baby instantly dispelled all worries about whether the child was a boy or a girl. When the father is twenty-seven and the mother only twenty-three, there seems infinite time to have more children. Alexandra nursed and bathed the baby herself and sang the infant to sleep with lullabies. While Olga slept, her mother sat by the crib, knitting a row of jackets, bonnets and socks. "You can imagine our intense happiness, now that we have such a precious little one to care for and look after," the Empress wrote to one of her sisters.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Coronation

IN THE spring, when the ice on the Neva, used all winter as a thoroughfare for sleighs and people, began to crack, the thoughts of all Russians turned to the coronation. The year was 1896, the twelve-month period of mourning was over and the new Tsar was to be crowned in Moscow in May.

Realizing that for the forty-nine-year-old Dowager Empress Marie the coronation would be partially a reminder of the sudden death of Alexander III, Nicholas attempted to console her. "I believe we should regard all these difficult ceremonies in Moscow as a great ordeal sent by God," he wrote his mother, "for at every step we shall have to repeat all we went through in the happy days thirteen years ago! One thought alone consoles me: That in the course of our life we shall not have to go through the rite again, that subsequent events will occur peacefully and smoothly."

The coronation of a Russian tsar was rigidly governed by history and tradition. The ceremony was held in Moscow; nothing so solemn, so meaningful to the nation, could be left to the artificial Western capital thrown up by Peter the Great. By tradition, the uncrowned tsar did not enter the city until the day before his coronation. Upon arriving in Moscow, Nicholas and Alexandra went into retreat, fasting and praying, in the Petrovsky Palace outside the city.

While the Tsar waited outside the city, the Muscovites painted and whitewashed buildings, hung strings of evergreen across the doorways and draped from the windows the white-blue-and-red Russian flag. Every hour thousands of people poured into the city. Bands of Cossacks galloped past creaking carts filled with peasant women whose heads were covered with brilliant kerchiefs of red, yellow, blue, and orange. Trains disgorged tall Siberians in heavy coats with fur collars, Caucasians in long red coats, Turks in red fezzes and cavalry gen-