

## THE DIARY OF MARIE ROMANOV.

*July 17, 1918—from the writings of Marie Nicolaevna Romanovna, age 19.*

*Midnight, in bed with her sister, Anastasia (Shvybz), in the Ipatiev mansion in Ekaterinburg, during the last night of their lives.*

So much of my story unfolds by moonlight. This is a tale of midnight wakings and forced marches before dawn. Since this nightmare began, I do not dare undress, even to go to bed. I wear my dressing gown, my hair is prepared, and my shoes are set beside me. I have no idea when we will be summoned to rise. We have moved, as in the worst of dreams, slowly toward this place. There is no logic other than the sleepwalker's obedience—to follow instruction which we cannot resist: an actual lunacy.

Now, I have control only of this—my record of what happened to us, to me. I have committed a single sin, my one terrible transgression. I pray to be absolved.

In this recording of memory lies all meaning to my life. Let my will prevail in this, my ultimate wish, to salvage something of value from this tragedy. The rest, as my mother says, is in God's hands.

When I look back, as I must in the short time allotted to me now, I can see the exact moment when our lives changed: at last light, on the thirteenth of March, 1917.

I recorded the moment but not the significance. The Palace went dark before dinner could be served. The electricity failed without warning. One moment, the rooms were familiar, warm, and bright—every sconce lit, the chandeliers aglow. The next second, there was a growing cold and blackness. Winter penetrated the window glass, and night invaded the Alexander Palace. Our halls, rooms, and stairways became alien; I walked blind into darkness.

At the time, as light disappeared from the Palace, I thought the event was an incident, not an ending. The Palace elevator stopped working—and Mama had to climb the stairs in the dark to reach the Children’s Wing. She arrived, pale by the faint lantern light, and her fine hand was shaking. Lili Dehn, the most loyal of the ladies-in-waiting, rushed to her side. For a moment, when the hallway door opened, we heard a strange sound like water running, but then it stopped.

“Frozen,” Mama whispered to Lili. “The pipes are frozen, and there are leaks everywhere.”

Mama became aware of me, standing at the top of the short, private staircase that connected our bedroom to hers. It was at this moment that Mama singled me out for the first time ever in my life.

“Marie, dress yourself. You must come downstairs. You must sleep down here in The Red Room. The other children will stay upstairs.”

I never imagined Mama would select me for a special mission or turn

to me for help in an emergency. I expected she would ask Tatiana, who is closest to her, or Olga, the eldest, but both of my two older sisters were too ill to go anywhere. Three days before, all the children had fallen sick, except me—somehow I escaped the contagion, the fever, and blistering rash of the measles that attacked them. My sisters and brother had been put to bed upstairs in The Green Room in the Children’s Wing, which had become a makeshift infirmary. Olga, Tatiana, my youngest sister Anastasia “Shvybz” and my brother, Alexei, lay listless in their sickbeds, their blisters intolerable, their lives in danger. One of the ladies-in-waiting, Anya, was also stricken and was put on a rolling camp bed in the dark alcove off the first floor hallway.

I alone remained well—that had to be the reason Mama singled me out and why she treated me in this new manner. Or could there be another reason? Even her voice changed. She spoke to me in imperatives.

*“Marie!”* she said—her tone at first a command, then a plea—*“Marie.”*

I did not answer at once.

“Light the lantern on your mantel. Dress, Marie. You must come downstairs at once. You must stay down here with me.”

I heard my own voice rise, high and tinny.

“For how long?”

She did not answer.

I lit the lantern, and the oil shed a wavering, golden light in my bedroom; this faint illumination revealed the clouds painted on the ceiling and the flowers abloom on my wallpaper but without their vivid color. Ordinarily, the bedroom I share with Shvybz looked like a chamber in Renaissance heaven—the ceiling hand-painted with pink-tinged clouds. Birds and butterflies fluttered forever above my head. Now, it was too dark to see these fanciful images or the painted ribbons that looped along the walls. The room reflected Mama’s taste for English country house décor but it was also filled with icons; red-and-white Russian woven shawls covered the tabletops. My bed was mussed, my blue featherbed rumped but my sister’s camp bed was unslept in; its blanket pulled taut. The sight of Shvybz’s empty bed, chilled me, made the room seem darker, colder. I knew the measles was a serious disease. I did not have to be told: All three of my sisters and my brother Alexei could die.

In the semi-darkness, I undressed, throwing off the nightclothes I’d worn all day. For a moment, I stood naked before the cheval glass. I could not have known then that this was the last time that this was my final moment of privacy, to be undressed without fearing someone would see and seize me. I did not look down at my naked body so much as I stared into my own eyes.

Why did I allow myself this moment? In the tumultuous months that have followed, I have often wondered. Did I need to see myself stand naked, alone? I have so seldom dressed or undressed in only my own company. My sisters—most especially my younger sister, Anastasia, my “Shvybz”—have

always been at my side. Shvybz and I were paired by Mama. “The Little Pair” we are called *en famille*. (Olga and Tatiana are “The Big Pair.”)

Who am I now? I wondered as I looked at my reflection. I was no longer half-a-pair, or even one-fourth of the quartet—Olga, Tatiana, Anastasia and myself. The OTMA, as we called ourselves and signed our letters.

Yet, in some ways, I have always been separate. No one can imagine what it is like to be born the third daughter of the Tsar of Russia. I have heard from Anya, the most tactless lady-in-waiting, that my birth was greeted with tears and howls of grief. For seven years, the empire had prayed for a boy and endured the births of two daughters. When I arrived, the people lost their tolerance and gave in to wild despair. When the bells rang out from the Palace, they rang only once, for a female child.

To proclaim the birth of a son, who would inherit my father's crown and dynasty, the bells would have chimed three hundred times. Three hundred cannon shots would have fired. Outcries of pleasure would have echoed across our empire; one-sixth of the world would have rejoiced. The single bell for my birth seemed to clang a funeral toll for our empire—there would be no heir.

As it was, when I appeared—pink and perfect but a female—everyone grieved or ranted except my father, who was overjoyed. Never did Papa give the faintest indication of disappointment. Papa himself has told me so many times how happy he was to have me, his third daughter. And I can give witness he felt no disappointment in the birth of his daughters: he greeted his

fourth baby, my beloved sister Shvybz, officially named Anastasia, with the same warmth and purest affection.

Never have I known any feeling from Papa, save that first emotion—his overwhelming love and pleasure—in my existence. He has always loved me, given me such love, it is impossible for me to understand why it seems everyone in his country, even his own relations, hate him.

With my mother, the Tsaritsa, it has been different. It is impossible for me to know my mother as she was before my birth, before the births of Olga and Tatiana. Our family albums bear witness to a younger woman who does not much resemble the pain-racked, distraught Empress she has been ever since I can remember. My mother, the Tsaritsa Alexandra Feodorovna, was always solemn; the grey of her eyes is more than a color, it is a mien. My mother never has appeared joyful but in the years before my birth, she looked, at least in photographs, calm and sweet-faced. Her present agonized, severe expression was then only a reflective, sidelong gaze—she seemed forever to be seeking something off in the distance. After the birth of four daughters, and always when she looked at me, her pale pupils seemed to contract and her brow furrow. It was obvious to me that I was born a disappointment.

“Marie! I am calling to you.” Her voice, this new voice, cracked like a whip. I felt the hairs rise at the nape of my neck. A draft passed through the room and chilled me. In the mirror, I could see my naked skin pebbled from the cold. I took this last look at myself and saw a 17-year-old girl, waist-long hair in

tangles.

My pupils were enlarged and glowed liquid like an animal's in the night. My eyes are famous in our family as "Marie's saucers;" I have the largest eyes, the bluest amongst us. I am actually quite different from my sisters. My figure is fuller than any of my sisters'. My complexion is darker, and I usually have high color—"Russian red cheeks!" the governesses extol—but by lantern light, I looked pale, white-faced and white-bodied save for the dark triangle between my legs. I turned away—I know it is immodest, improper to stare at myself. My woman's body still seems new to me, and in fact, it *is* new—my skin shows the stretch marks from the sudden change from the child I was not so long ago. Satin scars stripe my hips and the sides of my breasts.

"Marie!"

I donned a corset and bloomers, pulled on my warmest woolen dress, lisle stockings, and stepped, almost stumbling, into my grey kid boots. I buttoned the shoes in haste, my fingers clumsy as I rushed.

As always, I obeyed Mama and proceeded downstairs to The Red Room. I have always tried to please Mama, no matter that my efforts seemed doomed to fail. A draft caught my skirt, and the flame in my lantern flickered. I could not judge how much oil remained in the lamp. I passed The Green Room, where my sisters lay asleep, watched over by the Sisters of Mercy. In the semidarkness, the nuns' white habits glowed, giving them a ghostly presence beside the still forms of Olga, Tatiana, and Shvybz. At the end of the corridor, the

light of flickering candles emanated from my brother's room, where he was being watched over by his own attendants. All was quiet, as if those awake were silent, waiting for something to happen.

Just as I reached the top of the stairs, the flame in my lamp sputtered and went out, leaving me in darkness. My heart hammered alarms. I had never known such fear before—it raced with my blood, rushing from my heart toward my head. For the first time, I understood my mother's fainting spells, her need for the quick sniff of smelling salts. I felt uncertain on my feet, yet I could not remain still in the near-absolute blackness.

On the stairwell, I stepped with care, one hand on the wall, one foot seeking the next step, in order not to fall. Even so, I mentally tumbled headfirst. I had always run down these same steps with joy. Our "secret stairs," we called them—the narrow pitched steps that connected our rooms in the Children's Wing to the first-floor family quarters, to Mama and Papa's cozy warren of their dressing rooms and more intimate salons. How often I almost tripped in my eagerness to reach my favorite destinations— Papa's saltwater swimming pool, his private hideaway and Mama's mauve boudoir. But on this night, blind as I descended the stairs, I felt the shiver of prophecy.

*Nothing will ever be the same.*



