

THE EX-CZARINA

SOME MEMORIES AND AN IMPRESSION

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IN SPITE of what is generally called the "Popular Press," the instinct of the average English-speaking man is to treat women with courtesy and both men and women with justice. Should a woman have the grave misfortune to be an empress she is entitled to as much consideration as if she were a seamstress or a factory worker. But for reasons hard to understand there has been no fair play for the elder daughter of Ludwig, fourth Grand Duke of Hesse and our English Princess Alice, the favourite granddaughter of Queen Victoria and the wife of Nicholas Romanoff sometime Emperor of Russia. Her younger sister married that Grand Duke Serge of Russia who fell to a bomb that can hardly be said to have been misplaced; she also was greatly beloved by Queen Victoria, and the two girls were very much at Buckingham Palace in their early days and were prepared for their unhappy married lives with all the care and thought that could be lavished upon them.

I rub my eyes when I read that the Czarina is a deeply scheming *intrigante* who had ambiguous relations with Rasputin and aimed at the success of Germany over the country she had adopted by marriage as her own. It is only necessary to cast my memory back to the time when I was just entering womanhood and the Princess Alexandra Alix was a girl some ten years my junior. Certainly I knew the shy, reserved simple child well enough to realise that she had not the mental development for any form of intrigue. Residence at Buckingham Palace under the keen critical eye of an august grandmother, an eye that nothing could possibly escape, did not make for

striking individuality, nor did the quiet simplicity of the German home, and the Princess grew up beneath the double burden of surveillance and etiquette, sharing the quiet intellectual life of an adored mother. Yet she had a certain measure of high spirits, loved tennis and dancing, and having tuned her life to play its small part in the great household orchestra, seemed happy enough.

She married Nicholas Romanoff a month after the death of his father, Alexander III, and was plunged into the heart of an entirely new life. Her first duty was to provide the throne with an heir. Although she has been a devoted mother, the disappointments as daughter succeeded to daughter were very deep. Highly sensitive, she felt she had failed her husband and the Empire. The strain of child-bearing was too much for her and she became first depressed and then neurotic. Remember that Russian home life only came to her in a single guise, and that was the official one. "A despotism tempered by assassination" was a description not inept of government in Russia. For all the luxury and pomp surrounding her life the Czarina was a lonely woman, full of the deepest apprehensions. She could not move save under guard. If her husband travelled from place to place there could be no peace of mind until the journey was completed. Every stranger might be an assassin, every day might see a fresh victim to forces she could neither gauge nor fathom. Small wonder that her mind, never a strong one, began to fail.

I have been particularly interested in Russia, partly on account of my intense sympathy with the revolutionary movement and partly on account of the mar-

riage of the Princess Alix and the Czar. I always wondered how the sensitive, beautiful girl I had known would play her part in that strange country among its various peoples, how she would respond to the curious attitude of the majority, their veneration and adoration of the throne. Friends in Petrograd told me from time to time, first of the Czarina's growing depression, then of the settled gloom of her life. Then I heard that she was retiring more than ever from court functions, that she even dined in her own rooms with one or two maids of honour, and was happiest when spending long hours in her private chapel, that the strain of religious mania that is in her blood was making itself manifest. It did not surprise me any more than I was surprised when, on the assassination of the Grand Duke Serge his widow, the Czarina's sister, retired to a convent. Anxiety about the dynasty, grief at the lack of an heir, the breakdown of a fair constitution through constant child-bearing, these were the causes and, through the medium of an intensely narrow religious outlook, a great interest in mysticism was the result.

I heard of the Czarina endeavouring to get into touch with exterior powers and being responsive to influences healthy minds would have ignored or rebuffed. Of this phase I heard much from the late W. T. Stead, with whom the Czarina corresponded. The son came at last after preparations and ordeals that need

not be discussed, and then the overwhelming desire was that this life should be saved for the throne. Nervous, even neurotic, the Czarina needed a strong man to make life endurable, and Nicholas Romanoff was never able to answer to that definition. The fact that the Czarina was a devotee of mysticism was public property; Rasputin was the last and greatest of all the charlatans who benefited by her state of mind. But if the Czarina listened to Rasputin it was to the monk who claimed supernatural power, not to the political intriguer. Not only did she lack the interest but she lacked the subtlety, there never was and there is not to this day the gift that intrigue demands. I have seen enough of life to know what type of woman has the capacity to handle large and difficult situations, and indeed I do not know anyone who knew Princess Alix and is not of my opinion. She was at worst a weak woman who was in the hands of those who sought to achieve all manner of ends through her weakness. Admit that, and the worst that can be said in truth has been laid to her account. I am not so foolish as to suppose that fiction of the kind that appeals to the largest numbers of the unthinking is going to be abashed by plain facts, but none the less I have felt impelled to place these facts on record, for the ex-Czarina is a greatly suffering and distraught woman whose case calls for the pity of all and the hatred of none.

THE ADVANCE OF ENGLISH POETRY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

PART IV

Two Northumberland Poets—Wilfrid Wilson Gibson—his early failures—his studies of low life—his collected poems—his short dramas of pastoral experiences—"Daily Bread"—lack of melody—uncanny imagination—whimsies—poems of the Great War—their contrast to conventional sentimental ditties—the accusation—his contribution to the advance of poetry.—Ralph Hodgson—his shyness—his slender output—his fastidious self-criticism—his quiet facing of the known facts in nature and in humanity—his love of books—his humour—his respect for wild and tame animals—the high percentage of artistic excellence in his work.—Lascelles Abercrombie.

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON—a horrible mouthful—was born in Hexham, Northumberland, in 1878. Like Walt Whitman's, his early poetry was orthodox, well groomed, and uninteresting. It produced no effect on the public, but it produced upon its author a mental condition of acute discontent—the necessary conviction of sin preceding regeneration. Whether he could ever succeed in bringing his verse down to earth, he did not then know; but so far as he was concerned, he not only got down to earth, but got under it. He made subterranean expeditions with the miners, he followed his nose into slums, he talked long hours with the unclassed, and listened sympathetically to the lamentations of sea-made widows. His nature—extraordinarily delicate and sensitive—received deep wounds, the scars of which appeared in his subsequent poetry. Now he lives where John Masefield was born, and like him, speaks for the inarticulate poor.

In 1917 Mr. Gibson collected his poems in one thick volume of some five hundred and fifty pages. This is convenient for reference, but desperately hard to read, on account of the soggy weight of the book. Here we have, however, everything that he has thus far written which he thinks worth preserving. The first piece, *Akra the Slave*

(1904), is a romantic monologue in free verse. Although rather short, it is much too long, and few persons will have the courage to read it through. It is incoherent, spineless, consistent only in dullness. Possibly it is worth keeping as a curiosity. Then comes *Stonefolds* (1906), a series of bitter bucolics. This is pastoral poetry of a new and refreshing kind—as unlike to the conventional shepherd-shepherdess mincing, intolerable dialogue as could well be imagined. For, among all the groups of verse, in which, for sacred order's sake, we arrange English literature, pastoral poetry easily takes first place in empty, tinkling artificiality. In *Stonefolds*, we have six tiny plays, never containing more than four characters, and usually less, which represent, in a rasping style, the unending daily struggle of generation after generation with the relentless forces of nature. It is surprising to see how, in four or five pages, the author gives a clear view of the monotonous life of seventy years; in this particular art, Strindberg himself has done no better. The experience of age is contrasted with the hope of youth. Perhaps the most impressive of them all is *The Bridal* where, in the presence of the newly wedded pair, the man's old, bed-ridden mother speaks of the chronic misery of her married life, intimates that the son is just like his dead father, and