

The following excerpts are quoted from:

King, Greg. 2006. *The Court of the Last Tsar. Pomp, Power and Pageantry in the Reign of Nicholas II.* Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Part Four: Pageantry

Chapter 21: An Imperial Wedding

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One week after Alexander III's funeral, the second great ceremony of Nicholas II's reign took place. The incredible irony of the situation was lost on no one: what should have been the happiest day in Nicholas's life was instead a depressing reminder of the tragedy that had just befallen the imperial family.

Weddings of grand dukes and duchesses and members of the imperial family generally followed a recognized procedure. The round of parties and receptions varied greatly according to the rank of the bride or the groom, and the venue also differed according to personal choice. But these marriages, the etiquette surrounding them, and all the details of their ceremonial were conducted according to precedent and tradition laid out by the minister of the imperial court and the grand master of ceremonies. Imperial weddings were never considered state occasions; that honor was reserved exclusively for the nuptials of the sovereign, or the heir to the throne.

Friday, November 11, 1894, the formal wedding contract was signed. A magnificent parchment illuminated and embossed in gold, it stated that Nicholas II accepted his intended bride and her "magnificent dowry," a piece of official fiction that concealed the relative poverty of the Hessian royal family. Paragraph by paragraph, the contract stipulated precisely that personal items, jewels, and wealth the bride brought to the marriage, promising that these would remain under her complete personal control.

The day of the wedding dawned cold but clear in St. Petersburg. At seven o'clock, members of the imperial guards regiments, who had been detailed to stand at intervals along the route down Nevsky Prospekt, took up their posts. An hour later, the quiet of the early winter morning was shattered by a twenty-one-gun salute, fired from the cannon of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul and calling St. Petersburg to celebrate the coming festivities.

Two weeks earlier some three thousand invitations to attend the new emperor's wedding had gone out from the office of the minister of the imperial court. Surmounted by a double-headed eagle and embossed in gilt, the engraved vellum cards summoned the guests to the Winter Palace on Monday, November 14, 1894. For the day, the deep mourning imposed by Alexander III's death was set aside. Gentlemen were ordered to come in full regimental dress; bureaucrats and civil servants were to don the uniform stipulated by their position in Peter the Great's Table of Ranks, while those in the Diplomatic Corps were requested to wear white tie and tails, with orders. Russian ladies were to wear full court dress and foreign women, evening gowns, with full jewelry, including tiaras and veils and awards. At nine that morning, the first guests began to arrive, their carriages depositing them at the entrances to the Winter Palace specified on their invitations, according to their rank. They were met by pages and court chamberlains in uniforms dripping with gold braid, who escorted them up the Jordan Staircase, lined with members of the Chevalier Life Guards Regiment in silver cuirasses and helmets, sabers drawn in salute, and to the Parade halls where they were to view the procession to and from the palace cathedral. The gathered crowd, noted one foreign correspondent, "*was a splendid spectacle, with the variety of brilliant uniforms, and the costly dresses and jewels worn by the ladies.*"

At half-past eleven, the emperor, accompanied by the sixteen-year-old brother, Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, left Anichkov Palace in an open, landau drawn by four white horses. A few minutes after Nicholas and his brother left Anichkov Palace, Empress Marie Feodorovna climbed into a closed red and gold

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court carriage beneath the portico that, at a signal from the driver, circled the courtyard and rolled through the gates onto Nevsky Prospekt. The empress drove down the Nevsky and across the Fontanka to the Sergeievsky Palace to collect the bride. Alexandra descended the heart-shaped staircase and crossed the Entrance Hall, wrapped in heavy furs to protect her against the chill of the winter morning. She wore not her wedding gown, which awaited her arrival at the Winter Palace, but a simple traveling dress. Once the bride had joined her future mother-in-law in the carriage, the two women set off down the broad avenue to the Winter Palace, escorted by divisions of Lancer and Hussar Guards.

At the Winter Palace, the bride's coach came to a halt to the wild cheers of the crowd that filled the immense Palace Square. Brois Gerois, one of the pages in attendance, recalled, "*Alexandra Feodorovna was beautiful and majestic, too, and resembled her sister closely, but still she took second place. We met them at the doors of the carriage and helped them get out. The bride offered her hand for us to kiss, but with an awkward and embarrassed gesture. A sense of unease was thus the first thing you noticed on meeting the young Empress, and this impression she never managed to dispel. She was so obviously nervous of conversation and at the moments when she needed to show some social graces, her smile would become suffused with little red spots and she would look intensely serious. Her wonderful eyes promised kindness, but instead of a bright spark, they contained only the cold embers of a dampened fire. There was certainly purity and loftiness in this look, but loftiness is always dangerous: it is akin to pride and can quickly lead to alienation.*"

While the emperor waited in the Blackamoor Hall, smoking and chatting with various guests, his bride, accompanied by his mother and her sister, walked to the Malachite Hall, where her wedding dress was prepared. Alexandra sat before a large gilded looking glass, used by all Russian grand duchesses on their wedding days, while maids fluttered about, completing her toilette. On the lace-covered dressing table stood Empress Anna's ornate, solid gold toilette service, the work of an eighteenth-century craftsman from Augsburg. Alexandra nervously awaited the arrival of Monsieur Delcroix, the court hairdresser.

By tradition, the maids of honor of every grand duchess participated in the ceremonial robing of the bride in her splendid gown. Alexandra's wedding outfit was the most intricate ensemble she would ever wear. Her stockings were of lace, her shoes embroidered and decorated with seed pearls and lace overlays. Over these, she wore layers of wide, starched petticoats, which added volume to her skirt. The gown was modeled on the traditional Russian court dress. The wide, full overskirt, of silver brocade, was open from the waist to the floor in an inverted V to reveal a second underskirt of silver tissue, edged along the hemline with ermine. The décolletage, also edged with white ermine, was cut low, two reveal her neck and shoulders. The long sleeves, split from just below the shoulders, were edged with white ermine and hung in stiff folds below the waist. The tightly fitted, boned bodice was embroidered with a foliate design in gold thread adorned with diamonds, which sparkled at every movement. The overskirt fanned out from the waist to a fifteen-foot train, also edged with ermine. Over this, Alexandra wore an Imperial Mantle. Ordinarily, grand duchesses wore a mantle of crimson velvet, but Alexandra's mantle, as a concession to her rank as bride of the emperor, was of cloth-of-gold, lined and edged with ermine. These robes were so heavy that eight pages – four on each side – and the chamberlain, carrying the hem, had to help carry them; without their assistance, Alexandra could scarcely move.

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Alexandra wore her hair swept back and coiled into a bun at the back of her head; by tradition, Delcroix, the court hairdresser attached two ringlets, which hung down to her bare shoulders, from her own hair on either side of her face. Her long veil of Honiton lace had been designed by her grandfather Prince Albert and had previously been worn by her mother Princess Alice, and by her sisters Victoria, Elizabeth and Irene on their wedding days. It was held in place by a Russian fringe tiara of diamonds set in platinum, surmounted by a large pink diamond. In addition, she wore the Romanov Nuptial Crown, of diamonds sewn on red velvet. This was placed on her head, according to tradition by Empress Marie Feodorovna. Surrounding these traditional headpieces was a wreath of orange blossoms, brought from the imperial conservatory in Warsaw.

Across the bodice of her gown stretched the blue sash of the Order of St. Andrei, held in place by a large diamond star. Along with a number of diamond-and-pearl bow brooches and a diamond stomacher, Alexandra wore, by tradition, the Imperial Riviere, a diamond necklace of 475 carats, with matching earrings, all of which had belonged to Catherine the Great. These earrings were so heavy that they had to be supported with wires looped around the top of the ears, as the day wore on, the wire cut into the flesh, causing Alexandra much pain. She carried a small bouquet of white roses with sprigs of myrtle, tied together with long, white velvet ribbons embroidered with Peter the Great's monogram in gold thread. On her right hand, she wore a ring sent from her grandmother Queen Victoria as one of her wedding gifts. *"The bride,"* wrote her future mother-in-law, *"was thoroughly enchanting, so lovely and beautiful and with an Imperial calm and dignity."*

At ten minutes past twelve, the guns of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul opened fire, beginning a fifty-one-gun salvo that announced the beginning of the processions. At the same time, the doors of the private apartments swung open and the wedding procession marched out. A hundred officials appeared in pairs; quartermasters of the court, in scarlet and gold livery; the gentlemen-at-arms, in white and gold; the masters of ceremony; the grand master of ceremonies; the gentlemen of the Household, in uniforms covered in gold braid; chamberlains; and, finally, the grand marshal of the imperial court, swinging his ebony wand of office topped with a gilded, double-headed eagle. He raised the staff slowly, then brought it down on the inlaid wooden floor with three loud thuds, announcing *"Her Imperial Majesty the Empress."* At that moment, Marie Feodorovna appeared, leading her future daughter-in-law at the head of the imperial procession.

In deference to the occasion, Marie Feodorovna wore a long, white velvet court gown, decorated with scallops of gold lace and panels of white crepe embossed with pearls. A pearl-and-diamond tiara and a matching necklace sparkled as she walked. She held her head high, but her eyes were red and swollen from crying. *"It was painful to watch the poor Empress,"* wrote Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich. *"She seemed even paler and more frail than usual, like a victim being led to the slaughter; finding herself in front of thousands of eyes at such a difficult and grief-stricken time was inexpressibly painful for her."*

Alexandra walked at her side. Nicholas walked behind his mother and his bride. He wore the ceremonial dress uniform of a colonel in the Life Guards Hussar Regiment. His scarlet broadcloth tunic was decorated with gold braid, golden epaulets with the diamond initials of his father, gold aiguillettes denoting his rank as adjutant general to Alexander III, and several rows of medals.

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Count Vorontzov-Dashkov followed the emperor, leading members of Nicholas II's Entourage and Suite. The foreign royal guests came next, a long procession headed by Marie Feodorovna's father, King Christian IX of Denmark; her brother King George I of the Hellenes and his wife, Queen Olga; Alexandra's brother Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig IV of Hesse; Prince Alfred, the duke of Edinburgh and of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, in Russian naval uniform, with his wife, Grand Duchess Marie Alexandrovna, an aunt of Nicholas II, the prince and the princess of Wales, the former in the uniform of a colonel in chief of the Russian Dragoons, his wife in a long white court gown; Prince Ferdinand of Romania; Prince George, the duke of York, in a British naval uniform; and Alexandra's sister Irene with her husband, Prince Heinrich of Prussia. They were followed by members of the imperial family; all the grand dukes wore the cordon of the Order of Hesse, and the princes, the cordon of the Order of St. Andrei.

The three thousand guests invited to witness the processions to and from the cathedral had been strictly divided according to rank and precedence. So immense was this procession that it took nearly half an hour for the wedding party to pass the guests who waited in the halls.

Waiting at the cathedral doors was a host of clergymen. As the choir burst into an anthem, the clergymen led the procession down the aisle of the cathedral to the red-carpeted dais beneath the dome, which was flanked by huge bowers of roses, orchids, lilies, and lilacs. Nicholas ascended the dais first, then turned to face the congregation. Slowly Empress Marie Feodorovna took the hand of her future daughter-in-law and led her up the steps to the waiting emperor.

The emperor and his bride exchanged traditional wedding vows: she promised to love, honor, and obey; he, to cherish and worship. At the end of the benediction, the Court Choir burst into the great Te Deum; at the same time, by a prearranged signal, the bells of the city's churches tolled. Within the cathedral, however the atmosphere was more subdued. Marie Feodorovna, now the dowager empress, had cried throughout the service. And, according to Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, "*The whole thing looked grotesque. I doubt whether the greatest of theatrical producers could have staged a more appropriate prologue for the tragedy of the last Tsar of Russia.*" The emperor, noted one witness, "*was very pale, and was visibly affected.*" It was Alexandra, beautiful and attired in her rich gown, who made the most lasting impression. Princess Elizabeth Naryshkin-Kuryakin recalled that she "*looked so impressive that the Emperor seemed almost insignificant beside her.*"

There was no reception or wedding luncheon to celebrate the occasion. "*When all the family and friends gathered around Nicholas with their congratulations,*" remembered Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig IV of Hesse and Bei Rhein, "*I went unofficially to look for Alix. I found her by herself, standing alone in the middle of a room. I slipped in, and went to her to hug her, and she told me that the silver dress and gold mantle were so heavy that she could not move from her spot. I went quickly to find Nicky and told him. Quickly, two kamer-herren were sent to help her and soon she could move again.*"

After Alexandra changed out of her wedding gown into a traveling outfit, husband and wife left the Winter Palace for Anichkov Palace. Waiting beneath the porte cochere was the dowager empress. She met her son and

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new daughter-in-law with the traditional Russian welcome of bread and salt. Together with Nicholas's youngest sister, twelve-year-old Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna, the emperor, and the empress appeared at an upper window of the palace. *"Here they stood for fifteen minutes,"* wrote one reporter *"bowing repeatedly in response to the acclamations of the multitude gathered outside the Palace. Grand Duchess Olga, with girlish enthusiasm, repeatedly kissed her hand to the crowd. The Empress leaned on the arm of her husband and smiled radiantly on the throng."*

There was no honeymoon, and Nicholas and Alexandra spent their first night together as husband and wife in the emperor's former childhood bedroom. *"We all sat together during the evening,"* Nicholas recorded in his diary, *"reading and replying to telegrams. We dined at eight o'clock, and went to bed early as Alix had a bad headache."* Sadly, to the new empress, her wedding *"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 one."*