

**LETTERS OF THE  
EMPRESS FREDERICK**



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*Emmons Walker photo.*

*The Empress Frederick*

1900

LETTERS OF  
THE EMPRESS FREDERICK

*edited by*

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE  
SIR FREDERICK PONSONBY  
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MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED  
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1928

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*First Edition October 1928*  
*Reprinted October and November 1928*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

## PREFACE

THE main purpose of this volume of the letters of the Empress Frederick has been to allow the Empress's own words to provide the answer to those cruel and slanderous accusations from which her memory has suffered. For this reason the running commentary necessary to enable the reader to understand the letters has been reduced to the minimum.

These letters, while fairly representing the thoughts and opinions of the Empress, give but a very imperfect picture of her character and personality. An advanced thinker of strong liberal views, she hesitated to express such views freely to Queen Victoria, to whom she knew they would not be acceptable. Moreover, the Empress's many artistic activities had associated her with the world of art, where she had imbibed modern theories which did not appeal to the Queen. Consequently the letters hardly refer to those aesthetic tastes which were an outstanding feature in her life.

The material available not being sufficient for a complete biography, the best course seemed to be to concentrate entirely on the letters. It may be urged that a publication must be premature in which, for judicious reasons, some interesting material has to be suppressed. On the other hand, to delay the production of these letters would be to postpone them for a new generation to whom

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the Empress Frederick would be unknown except as an historic figure.

The letters speak for themselves. They represent a regular weekly, almost daily, correspondence, characterised by the same dutiful tone on the part of the Empress and the same affectionate wisdom from Queen Victoria.

In this volume of letters reference is made to more recent publications containing allusions to the Empress and in the majority of cases acknowledgment is made in the footnote. This, however, does not apply to several letters from Queen Victoria to the Empress and from the Empress to Queen Victoria which have already appeared in *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, edited by Mr. George Earle Buckle, and my thanks are due to Sir John Murray for permission to make use of this material.

The papers of my father, the late Sir Henry Ponsonby, contained letters which, though fragmentary, throw side-lights on the subjects discussed by the Empress : these have also been included.

To the Honourable Mrs. Hovell I am indebted for many details connected with her husband's experiences at San Remo and also for allowing me to see the papers and newspaper cuttings she had collected dealing with the Emperor Frederick's illness.

To many friends I am indebted for advice, but particularly to Sir Rennell Rodd who found time to read through the proofs and make many valuable suggestions. Having been an intimate friend of the Empress Frederick and Secretary of Embassy in Berlin during the most interesting part of her life, there is no one living who has a more intimate knowledge of the history of Germany during that period. I am under a great obligation to Mr. S. F. Markham, M.A., for the invaluable assistance he

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gave me. I have also to thank Mr. A. V. Marten for having undertaken the arduous task of transcribing the letters, and finally my thanks are due to Mr. Emery Walker for the very artistic reproductions he has made of the photographs of the Empress Frederick.

F. E. G. PONSONBY.



## INTRODUCTION

THE circumstances under which the letters of the Empress Frederick came into my possession are so exceptional and even dramatic that I make no apology for giving them in detail.

Soon after King Edward came to the throne in 1901, the accounts of the Empress Frederick's health began to be alarming, and as she was his favourite sister, he decided to go and stay with her for a week at Friedrichshof, near Cronberg. He took with him Sir Francis Laking, his physician in ordinary, and myself as Equerry and Private Secretary. The addition of Sir Francis Laking to his suite was very much resented not only by the German doctors attending the Empress, who rightly thought she was past all medical aid, but also by the Emperor's suite, who considered his presence to be a slur on the German medical profession. It was, however, the King's idea that possibly Sir Francis Laking might do something to mitigate her terrible sufferings by administering narcotics in larger doses than the German doctors were accustomed to give.

After I had been at Friedrichshof for three days, I received a message that the Empress wished to see me in the evening at six o'clock. At the hour named I went upstairs and was shown into her sitting-room where I found her propped up with cushions; she looked as if

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she had just been taken off the rack after undergoing torture. The nurse signed to me to sit down and whispered that the Empress would be better in a moment as she had been given an injection of morphia. I sat down feeling very helpless in the presence of so much suffering, and waited. Suddenly the Empress opened her eyes and began to speak. How did I like Friedrichshof? What did I think of it? Had I seen all her art treasures? The impression that I was talking to a dying woman vanished and I was suddenly conscious that I had to deal with a person who was very much alive and alert. We talked of the South African War and of the way it was being misrepresented in Europe, and we discussed the political situation in England. She asked searching questions about the King's position as a constitutional monarch and expressed her admiration of our constitution, but after a quarter of an hour this intense conversation and hurricane of questions seemed to tire her and she closed her eyes. I remained silent, uncertain whether I ought not leave the room. Just then the nurse came in and said I had been over twenty minutes and that I really must go. "A few minutes more", said the Empress, and the nurse apparently consented, for she left the room. After a pause the Empress opened her eyes and said, "There is something I want you to do for me. I want you to take charge of my letters and take them with you back to England." When I expressed my readiness to undertake their custody she seemed pleased and went on in a dreamy sort of way: "I will send them to you at one o'clock to-night and I know I can rely on your discretion. I don't want a soul to know that they have been taken away and certainly Willie [her son, the Emperor William II.] must not have them, nor must he ever know you have got them."

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Our conversation was again interrupted by the entrance of the nurse, who explained that the Empress had said "a few minutes' conversation" and I had been with her for over half an hour. This time there was no doubt I had to go and so I retired to my room wondering if the Empress had said all that there was to be said on the subject.

I dined as usual with King Edward. On this occasion the German Emperor, the Duchess of Sparta (afterwards Queen of the Hellenes), Princess Frederick Charles of Hesse (both daughters of the Empress), Countess Perponcher, Count Eulenburg, General von Kessel, General von Scholl, Rear-Admiral von Müller, Count Hohenau and the German doctors Renvers and Spielhagen were also present. After dinner we talked till about eleven, when everyone went to bed. I went to my bedroom and started work. There was so much to do that the time passed quickly.

This was the first time King Edward had gone abroad since he had ascended the throne. Prior to his accession one Equerry had been able to attend to his correspondence, etc., during his visits abroad, and at first he was under the impression that there would be no necessity to increase the number now that he was king. But, as he found out later, it was a totally different proposition, and the work was really more than one man could do. In addition to his official boxes and letters, the ciphering and deciphering of telegrams, and the arrangement for the Foreign Office King's Messengers, there were the requisition of special trains, instructions to the royal yacht and the escort of cruisers, the ordering of guards of honour and the mass of small detail connected with any continental journey. But what made all this doubly diffi-

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cult was the fact that I had to accompany the King whenever he went out and that often he was out all the afternoon. I had no shorthand clerk in those days and therefore it meant writing till 2 A.M. every night.

The castle clock boomed one and I waited expectantly, but there was dead silence, and I was coming to the conclusion that I had either misunderstood or that some unforeseen obstacle had prevented the letters reaching me, when I heard a quiet knock on my door. I said "Herein", and four men came in carrying two boxes about the size of portmanteaux, and covered with black oilcloth. The cords round them were quite new and on each box was a plain white label with neither name nor address. I noticed that the men wore blue serge breeches and long riding boots and I came to the conclusion that they were not trusted retainers but stablemen quite ignorant of what the boxes contained. They put the two boxes down and retired without saying a word.

It now dawned on me that I had undertaken no easy task, and I began to wonder how I was to get such large boxes back to England without anyone suspecting their contents. I had assumed, perhaps not unnaturally, that the expression "letters" meant a packet of letters that I should have no difficulty in concealing in one of my portmanteaux. But these large corded boxes were quite another matter and the problem of getting them back to England required careful thought. To adopt any method of concealment and to attempt to smuggle them away was to court disaster, as the whole place was full of secret police, but on the other hand, to account for these boxes which had apparently dropped from the skies was no easy matter. I therefore wrote on the label of one "Books with care" and on the other "China with care", with

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my private address, and determined to place them in the passage with my empty boxes without any attempt at concealment.

The next morning my servant was astonished to find this weighty addition to my luggage, but I explained in an offhand way that they were things I had bought in Homburg, and that I wanted them placed in the passage. Perhaps even this was injudicious, as the first thing that happened was a visit from King Edward's courier, M. Fehr, who said that strict instructions had been given to the servants that nothing was to be allowed to come into the castle unless it was passed by himself or the Emperor's Chief of Police; yet in spite of all these precautions he found that two boxes of goods from Homburg had reached me without anyone knowing anything about them! This was very awkward, and I felt I was making a bad start. I told him that Custom House officers were bad enough, but if he began to make trouble before I started I should never get the goods into England. "It is at the Custom House I want your help, not here," I said in an aggrieved voice. Under the impression that the boxes contained something contraband and that I intended to invoke his aid to get them through the Custom House he became very confidential and said I could rely on his help. So the boxes remained with my other luggage and were seen by everyone who passed along that passage.

On March 1, 1901, we left Friedrichshof to return to London. That day a party of soldiers from the garrison was employed to carry all the luggage down. I was talking to the Emperor in the hall at the time and out of the corner of my eye I could see the procession of soldiers carrying portmanteaux, suit-cases, despatch boxes, etc. ;

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when these two black boxes came past they looked so different from the rest of the luggage that I became nervous lest someone should inquire what they were, but no one appeared to notice them, and the Emperor went on talking. When they disappeared from the hall I breathed again, but not for long because, as ill-luck would have it, they were the last to be placed on the wagon which stood in front of the windows of the great hall, and there seemed something wrong with the tarpaulin cover. The other wagons were covered up, but this particular wagon remained uncovered with these two boxes with their new cords and labels staring at me. The Emperor, however, was holding forth on some subject that interested him, and naturally everyone, including myself, listened attentively. It was a great relief when I at last saw the tarpaulin cover drawn over the luggage and a few minutes later heard the wagon rumble away.

After I arrived in England I took the two boxes to my private house, Cell Farm at Old Windsor, and locked them up.

On August 5, 1901, the Empress Frederick died at Friedrichshof, Cronberg, and the funeral took place on the 13th. It was a long-drawn-out ceremony beginning with a service in the little church at Cronberg, after which the body was taken by train to Potsdam where the final service was held. King Edward this time took with him Lord Clarendon (the Lord Chamberlain), Admiral Sir John Fullerton, Major-General Sir Stanley Clarke, the Honourable Sidney Greville, and myself as Private Secretary.

One evening after dinner Count Eulenburg, the head of the Emperor's household, took me aside and said he wanted to speak to me quite confidentially. He explained

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that when the Empress Frederick died, no letters or papers had been found, although a thorough search had been made, and the Emperor wished me to ascertain, without making too much of it, whether by chance these letters were in the archives at Windsor. To give some idea of how thorough the search was at Cronberg, Sir Arthur Davidson, who happened to be at Homburg at the time and who drove out to Friedrichshof, told me that the grounds were all surrounded by cavalry and the castle itself by special police, while competent searchers ransacked every room.

I replied that there would be no difficulty about this and that I would write at once to Lord Esher, who was Keeper of the Archives. I accordingly did so, knowing full well that Lord Esher was quite unaware of the existence of these letters, and in due course I received a reply saying that they were certainly not in the archives. This I forwarded to Count Eulenburg, who wrote a short note thanking me for all the trouble I had taken.

Some years later I had another conversation with him on the subject and he seemed then to suspect that I was in some way connected with the disappearance of these letters. He asked me several questions about my visit to Friedrichshof, all of which I was able to answer with candour, although I was conscious at the time that these questions were merely the preliminary overtures to more searching and precise inquiries. Fortunately we were interrupted before we got down to the pith of the matter and I was saved from embarrassing questions.

So the letters have remained undisturbed for the last twenty-seven years, and during all this time the question what the Empress intended me to do with them has constantly occurred to me. Obviously I was not meant to

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burn them, because she could easily have done this herself had she wanted to do so. With every desire to carry out the wishes of a dying woman, I wanted to make sure that I was rightly interpreting them, but there was no one who could throw any light on the matter ; no one to whom the Empress had confided her intentions. There seems no doubt that her letters to Queen Victoria must have been sent out from England to her at Friedrichshof, and the question therefore arises why did she send for these letters when she must have known she had not long to live ? The theory that she intended to look through them and select some for publication is strengthened by the fact that occasionally whole pages are rendered undecipherable with erasures. This must have been her work, and if this is the case it is clear that she wished to erase certain passages from the letters before they were eventually published. The fact that she should have sent for these letters, looked through them, deleted passages, and finally, have sent them back to England seems to point to her having contemplated their publication.

Having come to the conclusion that the time had arrived when the letters must be sent away to prevent their being destroyed, she thought she could not do better than entrust them to me. I was not only her godson and the son of one of her greatest friends, but I would have exceptional facilities for taking them to England.

The curious part is that she should not have confided her intention to her brother, King Edward, or given him any hint of what she had in her mind. Presumably the fact that her letters to Queen Victoria had been sent out to her must have been known by King Edward and, therefore, if she merely intended to send them back to

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the archives, it would only have been natural for her to entrust them to her brother. That she did not do so points to her having wished something more done with them, something which she feared would not meet with his approval. Whether she intended to see me again in order to explain her intentions or whether, if the nurse had not interrupted us, she would have done so at the time, must necessarily remain hypotheses that can never be verified.

The most probable theory is that when Bismarck's *Reminiscences* was published and other contemporary memoirs appeared, she writhed under the criticisms of her conduct and objected to the part she was depicted as having played in German politics. She therefore was determined that her side of the question should at least have a hearing and she intended to select certain letters and edit them for publication, at the same time obliterating any passages that were indiscreet and which time had proved to be inaccurate. Her terrible illness made this impossible, and all she was able to do was to erase certain passages. Finding that her end was approaching, she determined to confide her intentions to me, but circumstances prevented her from doing more than giving me the letters. It seems quite inconceivable that if I was merely to hand them back to the King or put them back in the archives, she should not have said so at once or have spoken to her brother on the subject, more especially as she saw him daily during his visit.

On looking through the letters that had been entrusted to my care I found the following letter or memorandum that had been written to Queen Victoria a few months after the death of the Emperor Frederick.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The date would appear to be about September 13, 1888.

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### MEMORANDUM CONCERNING THE COLLECTING OF MATERIAL FOR A LIFE OF FRITZ

As I have never kept a diary the only documents of the thirty years of our married life that exist are my letters to dear Mama, and my correspondence with Fritz. Dear Mama could do me the most immense service, if she would let someone most trustworthy and discreet (under Sir Th. Martin's supervision) be allowed to make extracts from my letters *to her* concerning the political events, also matters of the court and our life here, etc., with a view to my having selections made and translated—from those extracts later. If dear Mama would allow this to be set about soon, it would be a great service to me. My letters to Stockmar are all burnt, those to Countess Blücher also. I must not let the matter rest, I may die any day, and the truth which is being so systematically smothered and twisted must be put down somewhere, no matter whether it be published in my lifetime or no. I feel that my memory has suffered terribly by the shock I have sustained and by the sorrow which seems to have shaken the very foundations of my being.

I can still remember things which I might not remember later. I ought at least to begin to arrange my material. I should be very thankful if dear Mama could help me in this way.

This seems to confirm the theory that the Empress wished her version of events published and that she even considered the possibility of publication during her lifetime.

After her death in 1901, I came to the conclusion that it was not in her interests that these letters should then be published. Even assuming they had been entrusted to me for this purpose, I felt that these wishes had not been expressed with sufficient clearness to warrant my attempting any immediate publication.

These letters have therefore remained untouched during the last twenty-seven years, and it was only the continual reference to and criticism of the Empress Frederick

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in recent publications that led me to reconsider my responsibility in the matter. These criticisms have been so bitter and so unjust that in the interests of historic truth, to say nothing of the memory of the Empress Frederick, I came to the conclusion that these letters should now be published.

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