

Buried Letters

Helen Parker-Drabble

Captain Aleksandar Petrović,
Camp Interpreter,
Serbian Army,
Scottish Women's Hospitals,
Macedonia

Sister Chloris Drabble
Scarborough

12 VIII 1918

My dearest Sasha,

I am lost without you. I desperately hoped your first letter would greet me when I arrived home. I pray it's only been delayed, but I'm terrified you've gone down with malaria – or worse.

Why, why, why did I accept Dr G's order to return home for my annual holiday before she would allow us to marry? I should have stayed at your side, but I know we couldn't wed without her say-so.

Pa is trying to talk me into delaying our wedding till after the war. How can I explain over a teacup the devastation done to poor Serbia? He can't grasp I have spent this last year treading in an ocean of sweat and blood. I'll keep trying to make Pa understand, for it'd be a sorry start to leave with bad feeling between us.

But don't fret. I knew when you took my hand in yours for the Kolo that I am yours and you are mine. Do you recall your first words to me? You said, 'Trust me, Sister.' You soothed me as well as the delirious, wounded soldier' and 'You will need to learn the men's language. Start with, "Ne govorim srpski." – 'I don't speak Serbian.'

You promised me the soldier would give me 'no more trouble' – but you still agitate me. Sometimes when I remember the time we've spent together, I can almost feel you near me. Our stolen kisses I leave till bedtime. Goodness me, I'm blushing again!

I learnt so much in your language classes – not just how to talk to my patients, but how to understand their proud characters. I miss everyone so and I'm in hot haste to get back. I don't fit here anymore, Sasha, worse, I feel useless. I try to be bright and merry, but I'm bitterly lonely. I still have bad dreams, but I keep my head up and eyes to the front. No one can hear my heart pounding or know my throat sometimes tightens and it's difficult to swallow. To think we're driven to death when we're near the front line, yet I haven't been happier than when I've been with you, amidst the chaos. All we can do is trust Him and His plan for us.

Hannah says I look haggard, but I'll be well-rested for our wedding. I've been stitching our sashes. I'll wear the silk proudly over my uniform on our special day. Sewing is not my greatest accomplishment, as you know, yet you still love me.

I'd feel everyone is against us if not for my sisters. Pat says she'll join us when she qualifies. It's she who baked the wedding cake in your parcel. Family tradition dictates a silver sixpence be stirred in for luck, but we agreed Ma's silver crucifix is more fitting.

It hurts that I don't have your photograph, so I've been busy drawing. With a pencil stroking your cheek, I can almost believe I'll look up and see your loving eyes gazing down on me. Pa wanted me to have a portrait taken before I leave, so I'm sending you a copy.

I've written to head office to say my orders to return haven't arrived yet and I've urged the secretary to post them again. I beg, write as soon as you have a moment.

Your little wolf, always,

Chloris

Sister Chloris Drabble
C/o Scottish Women's Hospitals
London Office

28. August 1918.

My dear little wolf,

I trust this reaches you quickly. Your address went missing in the rush to get to my new posting. I'm eager to receive a letter to say when you're joining me, but yet nothing. I'm worried Dr G was right, and you've changed your mind. Yet I know in my heart that you yearn to be back with me.

I hang onto my memories. As I write, I remember the first day I called you 'moj mali vuk': 'my little wolf'. The gramophone was playing 'They Didn't Believe Me'. When the music ended, I heard you shouting and ran to your side. The convalescents were amusing themselves by piling mattresses on a poorly Serbian soldier. He was just a boy and was panicking. Instead of going to his aid, they were bent over with laughter. You were bristling from fury and pointing your finger like a dagger at the ring-leaders. You gave them such gyp, just as you did when persecutors took away Nellie's crutches, I think.

Is 'gyp' the right word? You see I am still collecting new ones. I hope I remember correctly every word and phrase you taught me. I think of you when I use them. No, I think of you every minute, dear little wolf.

Soon we'll start to rebuild my poor homeland. How did our love spring from such horror? The image of our wedding candle lighting your loving face moves me through each day.

I pray that after the war we find someone in my family alive. I know if, God willing, you meet my mother she will take you to her heart immediately. I believe your family will accept us when they know how much happy and purposeful we are together.

Please send me your photograph. It will nestle in the pocket next to my heart until I have you in my arms again.

Father [REDACTED] at St [REDACTED], [REDACTED] fervently hopes you will write very soon with your arrival date.

My life is yours,

Sasha

Scottish Women's Hospitals Collection

22.08.2018

Dear Ms Drabble,

Thank you for your email concerning the all-female medical units, under the umbrella of The Scottish Federation of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies.

Please find enclosed the letters related to the service of Sister Drabble. You will see that two of the letters were written to and from Chloris and her fiancé. It appears neither letter reached the addressee.

Yours sincerely,

Aila Murray