FIVE EMPRESSES

Court Life in Eighteenth-Century Russia

Evgenii V. Anisimov

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CHAPTER 1

The Cinderella from Livland (Catherine I)

Emperor Peter the Great died in the early morning of January 28, 1725, in his small bedroom-study on the second floor of the Winter Palace. His death did not come easy. Excruciating pain wracked his body; the best efforts of experienced doctors brought no relief, and death was to him a deliverance from unbearable suffering.[1]

But the first Russian emperor, like almost anyone else, did not want to die. More than once he had looked death straight in the eye on battlefields and stormy seas; yet now he was clinging desperately to life and, according to one contemporary, "grew very fainthearted and even displayed a petty fear of death."[2] He prayed fervently and frenziedly, confessing and taking communion several times. Attending priests did not leave his bedside; he wept and clutched their hands. It seemed as if he were using the Orthodox priests' brocade chasubles, gleaming in the faint candlelight, as a screen against death, which stared at him steadily from the darkness of night.

The tsar, always merciless toward any violators of his strict laws, gave the order to release criminals from jails and to forgive government officials their debts and fines, an act that, according to Russian custom, was supposed to save his soul. Until the very end he had hope in God's mercy as well as in his own vitality, for he was only fifty-two years old and there were so many ideas and plans for the future ahead . . .

The teary-eyed empress Catherine Alekseevna, a stout, comely woman, did not leave the bedside of the dying tsar in the crowded study (big as a giant, the tsar was fond of small cozy rooms with low ceilings). She tried to

comfort him, but he hardly looked in her direction. It can be said with certainty that, during the last hours of his life, agonizing contemplation of Russia's future tormented the great reformer no less than his physical anguish. It was for her sake he had toiled so in merciless disregard of his own strength and health; in her name he had forced his subjects to study, build, sail the seas, die in battles and in grueling labor. Peter had created a great empire and now, leaving life, he was in despair. He did not know to whom to bequeath this great heritage: the ancestral throne of the Muscovite tsars exalted by him with the imperial crown in 1721; the young capital of the empire, St. Petersburg; a victorious two hundred thousand–man army; a

Peter the Great. From A. V. Morozov, *Katalog moego sobraniia russkikh gravirovannykh i litografirovannykh portretov* (Catalogue of My Collection of Engraved and Lithographed Portraits), vol. 3 (Moscow, 1913), folio CCCXXXIX.

formidable navy; a country so vast it stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. And there was no one in the world who could alleviate either the corporal or the spiritual agony of the great tsar. Relatives, associates, and old friends crowded around him. But in his hour of death there was no one there for him to rely on, no one on whom his gaze could rest hopefully.

Legend has it that Peter tried to write a will just before his death, but succeeded in scratching only two words on the paper: "Leave everything . . ." and then he lost control of his hand. Facts dispute this legend's authenticity. The last word that Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich heard the emperor utter was the word "later," which was accompanied by one last impatient and abrupt gesture, as if to say: "Go away everybody, leave me alone; I will make my decision later." That is probably what he wanted to tell the people who stood over him.

But "later" never came. The tsar who had ruled Russia for more than thirty years died at 5:15 A.M. on January 28. It was the end of a great era, and new, troubled times lay ahead.

* * *

Actually, those times had arrived several hours before Peter's death. Beyond the walls of the study where he lay dying, confusion and alarm prevailed. The absence of a will by Peter the Great created a dramatic situation. The fate of the imperial throne would have to be decided in a clash of court factions, small groups of nobility, high-ranking government officials, and generals. There were two rival factions. One comprised the tsar-reformer's closest associates, statesmen who came to power thanks to their abilities and Peter's particular favor. He surrounded himself with only the most loyal and energetic people, regardless of their birth.

Considered first among Peter's associates was His Most Serene Prince Aleksandr Menshikov. About the same age as Peter, he was for many years the tsar's favorite. The illiterate son of a court stableman, he started out as a batman, and later rose to field marshal general, and in another sphere a member of the British Royal Society. Apparently, the president of the society, the great Isaac Newton, could not refuse the persistent and impudent petitioner from St. Petersburg without offending his sovereign, Peter the Great.

Menshikov's allies were very influential people: the chancellor of the empire, Count Gavriil Golovkin; Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich, who administered the Russian Orthodox Church; the chief of the Secret Chancery, Count Peter Tolstoi; the procurator-general of the Senate, Count Pavel Iaguzhinskii; and Aleksei Makarov, Peter the Great's personal secretary. These were "new" persons whose power and influence could come to an end with Peter's death. So in spite of some internal animosity they immediately rallied in unison behind Empress Catherine, Peter's wife, who was made of the

same stuff as they. Like them she was not of noble birth, owed her position to Peter's graces, and was full of initiative and determination.

On one of the rare occasions when Catherine left her dying husband's bedroom, these dignitaries held a meeting; several Guards' officers were also present. Catherine's sad expression, the moving and affectionate words she used when addressing them—forsaken fledglings of Peter's nest—and, finally, generous promises, all had an effect, and the Guards pledged to help Catherine ascend the throne by thwarting Grand Duke Peter Alekseevich, the candidate from the other faction.

The grand duke was Peter the Great's grandson and the son of the late tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich. Though he was only nine years old, he constituted a menace to the new people. On his side was the tradition of succession to the throne through the direct male line of descent, in this case from grandfather to grandson; he was also supported by the high-born nobility—the Dolgorukii and Golitsyn princes, and others who were discontented with Peter's reforms. Also on the side of Peter's grandson were all those who sought an easing of the rigid policies of the regime and hoped for a respite from the furious pace of reform that Peter the Great had started in Russia.

Both court factions were prepared to fight for power, but everyone was waiting for Peter's eyes to close forever. This is how Count Henning Frederick Bassewitz from Holstein, a participant and witness of the events that occurred in the dramatic early morning hours of the 28th of January, described the situation: "We awaited the moment when the monarch would breathe his last so that we could set to work. As long as there was still a sign of life in him nobody dared to do anything: so deep were the respect and fear which this hero evoked in the people."[3] This is accurate, for the magic force of Peter the Great was strong. Reason also called for waiting—it had happened in history so many times before that a dying ruler suddenly recovered, and woe to those who had thought that his last hour had come.

Then the clock struck five and shortly thereafter doctors announced an end to the agony—Peter the Great no longer belonged to the people: he now belonged to God and to history. The final act of the political drama began. Both actors and spectators gathered in a brightly illuminated hall of the Winter Palace: senators, presidents of colleges (government departments), church hierarchs, generals, and senior officers. The crowd murmured excitedly. Suddenly all fell silent—the doors opened and into the room hurried Menshikov, Golovkin, and Makarov, followed by the empress herself. Her voice choked with grief, Catherine broke the anticipated but startling news that their sovereign, her beloved husband, "has passed to his eternal rest," leaving behind his orphaned subjects. Then she composed herself, as she had done so often, and spoke courageously and resolutely. At the end of her short speech she made it known that she would competently continue the policies of the late emperor, be attendant to her subjects, and promote the welfare of the empire, whose throne Peter the Great had shared with her.

Having done everything she could do in that situation, supported by courtiers and in tears, Catherine left the room. Then Menshikov stepped forward and successfully conducted the night meeting. When it became known that the dying Peter had neither written nor said anything regarding his successor, everybody was anxious. In such cases, following the old Russian tradition, the new autocrat was to be appointed by a "state" general assembly, implying a council of the highest civil and ecclesiastical dignitaries. However, this type of collective decision would be a grave disadvantage to Catherine's faction, since the majority would probably speak for transfer of the throne to Grand Duke Peter. Therefore, Menshikov and his supporters began to persuade all those present that the throne belonged to Catherine, the emperor's widow, who had already received the imperial crown from Peter the Great in the spring of 1724.

He failed, however, to convince the opponents of the humbly born empress. Seeing that many were vacillating, the grand duke's faction began to

Empress Catherine I. From the journal *Russkaia starina* (Russia of Old) (St. Petersburg, 1890), tip-in plate.

persuade those assembled in the hall to swear allegiance to Peter Alekseevich, for there could be no doubt of his right to occupy the throne. Tempers flared; it seemed that no compromise could be reached. And then Menshikov's faction resorted to their secret weapon—the Most Serene Prince had summoned the Preobrazhenskii and Semenovskii Guards Regiments. The roll of regimental drums was suddenly heard in the street outside the Winter Palace. Everybody rushed to the windows and saw through the windowpanes covered with frost the Guards in full-dress uniform. Prince Nikita Repnin, president of the College of War and supporter of Grand Duke Peter, tried to find out who dared to summon the Guards without his order, but he was rudely cut off, and the excited soldiers filled the hall. The proposals made by the grand duke's faction could not be heard, for the Guards shouted triumphantly in favor of their "Mother-tsarina" and threatened impudently to "break the heads of boyars" should they not obey Catherine.

Seizing an opportune moment, Menshikov's voice rose above the crowd: "Long live our most august sovereign Empress Catherine!" "Viva Empress Catherine," cried the Guards. As Bassewitz writes in his book, "these last words were immediately resounded by all those present, each wanting to appear to the rest as if he were joining in of his own free will, and not merely imitating the example of others."[4] It all ended quietly and without bloodshed. Catherine I succeeded to the throne, and by 8 A.M. a manifesto had been issued proclaiming her succession, and the Guards were given vodka.

Thus it was that on January 28, 1725, the Guards played a political role for the first time in the drama of Russian history. Peter the Great created the first two Guards regiments in 1692 in opposition to the *strel'tsy*, the privileged infantry regiments of the Muscovite tsars, who by the end of the seventeenth century had begun to interfere in politics. Peter referred to the strel'tsy scornfully as janissaries. He did have reason to hate them—all his life he remembered one terrible May morning in 1682 when he was ten years old—obeying the order of Peter's elder half sister and rival Sophia, the strel'tsy, intoxicated with blood and a sense of impunity, hurled Peter's closest relatives and faithful servants down from the high Kremlin porch onto the spears of their bloodthirsty comrades crowded below.

But no sooner had Peter, the founder and first colonel of the Preobrazhenskii Guards Regiment, passed on than his favorites in green full-dress uniforms turned into the new janissaries. The history of the Russian Guards of the eighteenth century is full of contradictions. Well-equipped, expertly trained, and armed with the latest weapons, the Guards became the pride of the Russian throne and its source of support throughout the century. The outcome of battles, campaigns, and entire wars had often been decided in Russia's favor thanks to the courage, steadfastness, and selflessness of the Guards. Many a generation of Russians felt deep patriotic pride when they saw the severe splendor of the Guards regiments as they marched

Aleksandr D. Menshikov. From A. V. Morozov, *Katalog moego sobraniia russkikh gravirovannykh i litografirovannykh portretov* (Catalogue of My Collection of Engraved and Lithographed Portraits), vol. 3 (Moscow, 1913), folio CCLXII.

across the Field of Mars, the main venue of military celebrations in St. Petersburg in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Yet there exists another, less heroic page in the chronicles of the Imperial Guards. The Guards—handsome blades, duelists, and dandies, spoiled by the attention of urban and provincial ladies—constituted an especially privileged military group within the Russian army, which had its own traditions, customs, and mentality. The Guards' primary responsibility was to maintain the peace and security of the court and royal family. Posted outside and inside the tsar's palace, the Guards saw the seamy side of court life, which appeared magical to millions of simple subjects. They saw the favorites stealing by into the royal bedroom suites; they heard the gossip and

outrageous quarrels that were an inherent part of life at court. The Guards did not tremble in reverence before the dazzling courtiers and all their gold and diamonds. Having grown accustomed to all this, splendid ceremonies bored them, and they had their own opinion about everything.

Also of note was the Guards' exaggerated idea of their role in life at court, in the capital, and in the fate of Russia. Meanwhile, it became known that the "fierce Russian janissaries" could be controlled through flattery, promises, and bribes. Smart weavers of court intrigue and adventure sparked the Guards' passions and directed them so skillfully that the handsome men with mustaches did not have the slightest suspicion of their pitiful role as puppets.

The Guards were equally dangerous to those who made use of their services. Quite often the power of emperors and their top dignitaries was taken hostage by this uncontrollable and capricious crowd of Guards. The ominous role that the Guards were to play in Russian history was well understood by the penetrating Jean-Jacques Campredon, the French envoy in Petersburg, who wrote to his ruler, Louis XV, immediately following Catherine I's succession: "The decision of the Guards is law here."[5] And that was the truth. The eighteenth century went down in Russian history as the century of palace coups. The Guards carried out the overthrows, as the reader will see while reading the stories of the heroines in this book. And this dubious tradition began on that dark January night in 1725.

The day of January 28, 1725, saw St. Petersburg under the rule of a new sovereign. Who was she, this Empress Catherine I?

"Catherine is Swedish!" asserted the historian Natalia Belozerskaia.[6] In her opinion, the future empress of Russia was born in Sweden into the family of an army quartermaster, Johann Rabe. When she was baptized into the Lutheran faith, she was christened Martha. After Rabe's death, the family moved to Livland, a Swedish province at that time, and settled in Riga. Martha's mother soon died, and she was placed in an orphanage. Later she was taken in by Pastor Glück, a person well known in the small Livland town of Marienburg (now Aluksne, located on the road between Riga and Pskov).

There are several facts which support Belozerskaia's opinion. In one of Peter's letters to his wife, while congratulating her on the anniversary of the taking of the first Swedish fortress in the Northern War, Nöteborg on the Neva River, in 1702, he writes jokingly that with the capture of the fortress "the Russians have gained a foothold in *your* lands."[7] In 1725, during a conversation with Campredon, Catherine, not wanting those nearby to understand the subject of their conversation, abruptly switched over to the Swedish language, in which the French diplomat was fluent.

The opponents of Catherine's Swedish origin argue with reason that there is nothing necessarily of Swedish nationality in the above facts: Livland had been a Swedish province for about 100 years, the Swedish language being the official language on its territory; and Martha-Catherine was technically

a subject of the king of Sweden. This explains both Peter's joke and Catherine's knowledge of the Swedish language. Most historians are now convinced that Catherine's name was Martha Skavronskaia and that she was born on April 5, 1684, in Livland, a region inhabited by the Latvians, and descended from Latvian peasants. When she became an orphan she was taken into Pastor Glück's home.

We do not know much about Martha's early life. We do not know how she was brought up and what education she was given in her childhood and youth. She probably had only a rudimentary knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Catherine's literacy is open to question—she learned only to speak Russian, not to write it. Her letters to Peter, even the most intimate ones, are all written by the hand of a court scribe. One thing is clear, though: the orphaned girl was a maid in Pastor Glück's house; she worked in the kitchen and at the laundry. Nature had endowed her with physical stamina, and by the age of eighteen she looked healthy and beautiful, attracting the attention of young men aspiring to take her hand in marriage.

In fact, Martha's youth coincided with a sad epoch in the history of Livland. In 1700, the Northern War broke out; Russia set out against Sweden, and in 1701, the Russian army, under the command of Field Marshal Boris Sheremetev, moved like a thundercloud across southern Livland. Peter had no thoughts of annexing the Swedish provinces at that time. Therefore, the objective of the Russian army in 1701–1702 was to destroy this traditional breadbasket of the Swedish kingdom. Refugees from the Russian-Swedish border brought bad news to Marienburg: the Russians had destroyed everything in their path—farmsteads, buildings, crops. They took cattle and people to Russia. The principal forces of Charles XII, the king of Sweden, were concentrated in Poland, which turned into the main theater of war; the weak corps of General Schlippenbach defending Livland was unable to protect its inhabitants from the invasion of a large and cruel enemy army.

Yet despite the dangers of invasion, life went on. In the summer of 1702, Martha married a Swedish soldier, a trumpeter. They were not destined to partake in familial happiness. In August, when Martha's husband was on a mission in Riga, Sheremetev's forces approached Marienburg intending to besiege it, and the war, which was to change Martha's life, was now right on the threshold of her home.

Before the Russian forces had time to besiege Marienburg, Major Til, the commandant of this old, weakly defended fortress, having appraised his unenviable position, decided to surrender, appealing to the mercies of his conqueror and stipulating honorable conditions of capitulation, namely, free withdrawal for the garrison and the town's people. Sheremetev accepted these terms. Til came out of the fortress and signed a treaty of surrender. The Russian forces began entering the town just as the citizens were leaving their homes. Everything was going well, quietly and peacefully, until an unforeseen

event occurred, which changed drastically the fate of thousands of people, including Martha.

Let us take a look at Peter the Great's journals or daily notes, which contain entries about even the most minor events of the Northern War of 1700–1721: "The Commandant, Major Til, accompanied by two captains, came out to our supply train to surrender the town, under an agreement according to which the citizens started to leave. Meanwhile, Artillery Captain Wolf and a lance-cadet entered the fortress powder-magazine (the cadet had also forced his wife to accompany him), where they set fire to the gunpowder and blew themselves up. Many people from both sides were killed by the explosion, and as a punishment for this, the garrison and the citizens were not released under the treaty but taken prisoner instead."[8]

The deafening explosion shook the earth, and sent fragments of the fortress structures hurling onto the heads of the Russian soldiers. Sheremetev tore up the treaty of voluntary surrender of the fortress. This meant that henceforth Marienburg was considered a town taken by storm and thus given to the conquering soldiers for plunder. The citizens and the garrison, one and all, were considered war prisoners. Russian soldiers rushed into the town. Cries and shooting were heard here and there. The soldiers pillaged the houses, seizing all their inhabitants—men, women, and children. They took the stolen goods back to camp, and the prisoners as well. Brisk trade and interchange of captured spoils took place immediately.

The fate of war prisoners in Russia in those days was a sad one. According to an old custom they became the slaves of those who captured them. Here is an account written in Moscow by de Bruin, a foreign traveler and diplomat, when the Livland campaign ended: "About eight hundred Swedish prisoners, men, women, and children, were brought to Moscow on September 14. First they were sold for three and four guldens per head, but in a few days the price was raised to twenty and even thirty guldens. With prices so cheap, foreigners gladly bought the prisoners, the latter being very pleased with this, for foreigners bought them to make use of their services only during the war period; after that the prisoners would be set free. Russians also bought a lot of these prisoners, but the most unfortunate were those who fell into the hands of the Tartars, for the latter would take and hold them in servitude—a miserable state indeed."[9]

Martha found herself among the Livland captives. But she was not among those who were taken to Moscow as live goods to be sold dirt-cheap to Tartars. Another destiny awaited her . . .

* * *

"Catherine is not Russian," Vasilii Kobylin, a retired corporal of the Ingermanland Regiment, told his friends (among whom there was naturally an informer) in 1724. "And we know how she was taken into captivity and brought under a flag with nothing on but a shirt, and put under guard, and

our sentry officer dressed her in a caftan. Together with Prince Menshikov she must have used magic roots to bewitch His Majesty [Peter]."[10] Such remarks were quite typical and often repeated among the simple people. As often happens with any rumor circulating in a crowd, there was some truth to it.

Martha, together with other prisoners, was brought to the center of the regiment camp. Here, near the regimental banner, with the guard on duty, the booty was being piled up, and the spoils from the captured fortress were being exchanged and sold. The soldiers who had no *pomest'ia* (service estates) hurried to get rid of their captives, selling them for almost nothing to their well-to-do comrades and officers. One contemporary, relating the words of an eyewitness, states that a certain Captain Bauer got Martha as a present from a brownnosing soldier who figured that in doing so he would be promoted. Thereupon the captain himself, for the same reason, presented the beautiful girl to Field Marshal Sheremetev. We do not know how Martha felt about it, being not so very long ago a free person, but we can presume her plight was not very pleasant.

Martha spent about six months in the household of Boris Sheremetev, who was fifty years old, an aged man in those days. She was registered as a laundress, but actually she served as a concubine. In late 1702 or early 1703 she ended up with Aleksandr Menshikov. We do not know how Peter's bold and bright favorite obtained Martha; but it is quite likely that he simply took away the attractive girl from the field marshal, and probably even put the old man to shame for such indecent voluptuousness at his venerable age. Menshikov rarely wasted time with explanations to his sovereign's subjects; he was known for his curtness and impudence.

Martha did not stay long at Menshikov's. By that time the Most Serene Prince had decided to settle down, and had chosen a bride, Dar'ia Arsen'eva, from a respectable noble family. Any connection with a Livland concubine might do harm to Menshikov, who had set his mind on a respectable future. In short, Peter, a regular visitor to his favorite's home, was introduced to Martha; their eyes met, and Russian history took an entirely new direction.

Let us once again digress for a moment and ponder the vicissitudes of life and fate. The reader cannot yet have forgotten the crazed Captain Wolf, who had blown up the powder-magazine in the fortress of Marienburg. This unconscionable act cut short the lives of many people, but it also had a direct effect on the fate of Russia. We must always remember and keep in mind that every moment of history is latent with several possible versions of its continuation, and our choice of paths often depends on mere chance, on favorable or unfavorable coincidence. There is, of course, a strong and stable "wind of history" that blows in a certain set and often even predictable direction. But still much depends on chance. Indeed, if Wolf had changed his mind at the last moment or had not found the keys to the powder-magazine, then the citizens and the garrison would have peacefully left the fortress and

moved, in a crowd, along the dusty road toward Riga to reach it in two or three days' time. Here Martha would have found her husband and in 1710, when the Russian forces approached the walls of the Livland capital, she would probably have moved together with hundreds of other refugees from Riga to Sweden or elsewhere, and her ordinary fate would have been dissolved in thousands of similar fates of soldiers' wives and widows. However, either by accident or by the will of God, things turned out differently: Wolf performed his senseless act; Martha became the prisoner of the Russians and later their empress.

Corporal Kobylin suggests that Catherine charmed the tsar with the help of Menshikov and witchcraft. Of course, there was no love-potion whatsoever, yet there are two facts that deserve our particular attention. First, Catherine and Menshikov remained close friends throughout their lives. Later on, when Catherine joined the tsar on his campaigns, she left that which she treasured most of all, her children, daughters Anna, Elizaveta, Natalia, and son Peter, under the charge of the Most Serene Prince and his family. And she did not have to worry about them, for reliable Menshikov had never let her down: in his rich and comfortable palace, in the company of his daughters and a son, under the supervision of his wife Dar'ia and her sister Varvara, Catherine's children felt at home; they were surrounded with good care and attention. Each time she opened a letter from St. Petersburg, Catherine learned that her children "are in good health." The empress never forgot Aleksandr Menshikov. She wrote joking letters to him and gave him presents. One time when she was with the tsar abroad she sent Menshikov a present, a camisole, and in the accompanying letter wrote: "I am sending to Your Worship a camisole of the latest fashion that has appeared here. Only four persons have such camisoles in their possession; they are: His Majesty the tsar; the Austrian King Charles VI; the King of England; and you yourself." This old friend of a stableman's son knew how to flatter ambitious Aleksandr, who dreamt of a small and modest but real ducal crown.

When the light-fingered Menshikov was caught in an act of theft from the state treasury, and the gallows were already looming over him, the empress came to his aid and dissuaded the tsar from punishing the majestic embezzler of public funds. And Menshikov repaid Catherine in kind, bowing his head before the tsaritsa, and executing her imperial will attentively and with due respect. She always had his reliable shoulder to lean on.

Their bond was not based on hidden romance, nor on fond recollections of a past romance. What united Menshikov and Catherine was their similar fate. Both of common birth, they were despised and condemned by the envious nobility, and survived only by helping one another.

As for Menshikov, so for Martha-Catherine the tsar's affection was abiding. According to Corporal Kobylin's account, Peter had such a fervid and lasting love that many contemporaries believed it to be the effect of some love-potion. How could it be otherwise? How else could a Livland prisoner

lure the formidable tsar, who later jokingly wrote to this effect in a letter to his wife: "That's what you, Eve's daughters, do to old men!" However, for everything there is a non-supernatural explanation, and this explanation is found in the life Peter had led up to that very day when he met Martha at Menshikov's.

Peter's family life had been a total failure. In 1689, at the age of seventeen, he was married, without being asked his wishes, to Evdokia (Eudoxia) Lopukhina, who was then twenty years old. It was a marriage of convenience arranged by the court advisers serving Peter's mother, the widowed Tsaritsa Natalia. Tsaritsa Natalia was at that moment engaged in intrigue against the party of the current ruler Tsarevna Sophia, who sought to block Peter and his side of the family from power. From the onset, the newly married couple became puppets in the hands of court intrigues and naturally nobody gave much heed to their feelings.

Peter and Dunia (this was the Tsaritsa Evdokia Fedorovna's diminutive name) lived together for about ten years. Dunia gave birth to three sons, of which only one, the Tsarevich Aleksei, grew to adulthood (to his own misfortune). Peter and Dunia's marriage was not a happy one. It was obvious that Dunia was not a suitable match for Peter; they seemed to be living in different times, in different epochs: Peter lived in eighteenth-century Europe, characterized by its freedom, openness, and pragmatism, while Dunia was brought up in the traditions of a patriarchal Orthodox family and remained in seventeenth-century Russia, where God-fearing women meekly adhered to the traditions and commands of the Domostroi.

Peter and Dunia's family drama reflected the social and moral rupture resulting from radical reform and revolution. Like an earthquake, this breakup cleft every class of society in Russia, even splitting the very souls of the Russian people, filling them with mounting uneasiness, anxiety, and fear of the future. Russian families, including that of the tsar himself, were rent. The values inherent in Dunia's world view clashed with her husband's changing values.

The spouses' personalities did not match up, either. Peter's impetuous, unceremonious, and self-centered nature collided with the stubbornness and resentfulness of the arrogant, obstinate, and strong-willed person that Dunia was. Peter left the palace more and more frequently, visiting shipyards, participating in battle drills, setting out on long journeys, while Dunia, unwilling to change the centuries-old lifestyle of a Russian tsaritsa, stayed behind in Moscow waiting for her husband's return. As the years passed, the gulf separating Peter and his wife grew wider and wider. Taking into account Peter's interests and tastes, he could only be happy with a different type of woman, one who dressed fashionably (by European standards) and was a lively dance partner and a courageous companion during exhausting campaigns, as well as a helpmate in his incessant toils to change Russia. Dunia could not fulfill this role, and in fact was not the least interested in trying to do so.

They broke off their relations in 1698. Returning from his European travels, the tsar gave orders that the wearisome Dunia be sent to a monastery and never again set foot in Moscow. The patriarch and several of Peter's closest associates were to carry out this tough mission. With great difficulty, practically by force, Dunia was transported to Suzdal' and confined in the Pokrovskii Monastery there.

Twenty-nine years old and full of strength, Dunia desperately resisted being buried alive in the crypt of a monastery cell. She wanted to live. Every day for two and a half months a special envoy from Peter visited Dunia, trying to persuade her to take the veil. At last, with extreme reluctance, she agreed and became the nun Elena. However, she did not resign herself fully to this fate and almost immediately refused to wear monastic clothing and to lead the life of a nun.

In 1710, she began a love affair with Major Stepan Glebov, who was assigned for a time to Suzdal'. Later on, the authorities intercepted Dunia's love-letters, full of flaming passion and melancholy, which testify to her energetic, ardent, lively, and sensitive nature: "Have you forgotten me so soon? Have I failed to please you? Did I not shed enough tears on your face, your arms, and every part of your body, your wrists and ankles . . . You are my light, my soul, my joy! The cursed hour of our parting must be near. I wish my soul would leave my body! Oh, my light! How can I live on this Earth without you? How to stay alive? God alone knows how much I care for you. Wear my ring, my darling, love me, I'll have another just like it made for myself . . . I shall not leave you till the end of my days."[11] This affair did not last long: Glebov left Suzdal' and forgot Dunia. However, in 1718, when Peter learned of this secret love, he punished them most cruelly: following excruciating torture at the tsar's decree, Glebov was impaled. The former tsaritsa was transferred to a monastic cell in Ladoga, a small town near Lake Ladoga.

The tsaritsa's dramatic story, banished, disgraced, and placed in a monastery, had left an impression in people's memory. The political police had arrested many people who had expressed sympathy for Evdokia, declaring that she was the one legitimate wife of the Russian tsar and that the time of her liberation would eventually come. Among the Secret Chancery records there is a song about Evdokia, which people sang at the risk of being sent into exile to Siberia, having their tongues cut out, or being executed. Here are some words from the song: "A young maid I am and sitting near my love/My dear friend's scolding me, reproving me/He's ordering me to join a monastery." The song ends with the young nun's words in answer to the question asked by noble travelers who have come to the monastery: "I have been made a nun by the tsar himself/Forced to take the veil by Peter the First/Through his fierce snake."

"The fierce snake" lived in Kokui, the Foreign Settlement in Moscow. She was beautiful and convivial. Her name was Anna Mons, or Anchen. She was

the daughter of a wine merchant, and Peter had long been having an affair with her. She was the one Peter began visiting openly after his return from abroad. Anna had been introduced to Peter one day by his closest friend, Francis Lefort from Switzerland, a jovial, kind, and gregarious man. When Peter no longer considered it necessary to conceal his liaison with Anna, he got rid of Dunia.

Life with Anchen, however, failed to bring Peter happiness. A charming, fair-haired beauty, only her appearance matched Peter's ideal of a woman whom he could love. And although she could sing German songs merrily and dance the minuet gracefully, she lived essentially in another world, one that was far away from that of Peter.

Anchen was a rather uncultured burgher who sought a well-off, prosaic, and quiet life in a comfortable home. She probably dreamed of growing beautiful flowers in window boxes, of looking after the children, of running an efficient household (the traits of a practical housewife can be seen in her letters to Peter). Her goal seemed to be to sit by the fireplace knitting and waiting for a Michael or Klaus to come home from work or the pub.

I want the reader to believe me: I am far from being ironical or condemnatory of Anchen's choice. Each is free to choose his own fate. Admittedly, Anchen was a remarkable woman. She was clever enough to understand that Peter's love would open for her the way to fame, wealth, and honor. She could even become the Russian tsaritsa! Peter did have serious intentions. In 1707, several years after breaking up with her, Peter confessed disappointedly to the Prussian envoy Keiserling, who was asking the tsar's permission to marry Anchen, that he "had been bringing Miss Mons up for himself with the sincere intention of marrying her."[12] And this is credible, for he did actually marry the ignoble Catherine, making her, a former laundress, tsaritsa. In short, the liaison with the tsar was a fantastic chance for Anchen, but she did not take advantage of it.

I believe the secret is simple: Anchen did not love Peter, and she could not accept his rather wild habits and difficult nature. She did not want to share with the tsar the wild, restless, often drunken and dangerous life of an eternal wanderer in his own country. For a long time Peter refused to understand this. In 1702, the Saxonian envoy to Russia, Königseck, drowned, and among his papers were found love-letters from Anchen. The tsar was beside himself with bitterness and vexation. On his orders, Anchen and her relatives were placed under house arrest for several years.

After 1702 Peter no longer paid visits to Anchen, but we know for sure that it took Peter a long time to get over his first love. Martha-Catherine had become part of Peter's life with the help of her patron Menshikov, who did everything he could to prevent rumors about Anchen's new flames from reaching the tsar so as not to reopen old wounds and create vain illusions. Menshikov's efforts had even caused a great diplomatic scandal when the prince physically threw Keiserling out when the latter came to see the tsar

about his marriage, the servants roared with laughter at the sight. The reason for Menshikov's uneasiness is clear: Martha, who by that time had received the Orthodox name of "Catherine," was still a newcomer in Peter's heart, and her position was therefore still unstable.

Catherine had nothing in common with Dunia and Anchen. Being uprooted all too early from the land to which she was accustomed, having experienced both good and evil, she possessed the rare ability of adapting herself to life. She could just as easily have remained the faithful wife of a Swedish trumpeter, the uncomplaining laundress of an old field marshal, or Menshikov's lover. With the same calmness she accepted her predestination to become tsaritsa. Everything in her life had depended on circumstances. Her humble tree of life grew by submitting to the contours of life, putting forth in any poor soil her strong roots, and eventually coming to bloom.

Adaptability to life's circumstances is an important character trait, but obviously this was not enough to win Peter's heart as Martha-Catherine did. The tsar had never been a gloomy misogynist. He was always surrounded by plenty of those who, in Petrine Russia, were called *metressy,* that is, mistresses. He took them with him on his travels and enjoyed their company in his leisure. Many of these undemanding women would probably have gladly adapted themselves to the manners and habits of their austere ruler, but it was not that easy.

The history of Anna Mons reveals that the great tsar, a cruel and awe-inspiring man, was in many respects helpless and vulnerable. A man of sincere, simple, and deep feelings, he was at the same time austere and distrustful, paying no heed to others' words and deeds. In order to penetrate his iron soul, to win his trust, it was not enough to put on airs, be obsequiously accommodating, and undress obligingly. Martha intuitively had found the one true way to Peter's heart, and starting out as one of his mistresses, she slowly but surely allayed his distrust and fear of making another mistake, and ultimately did achieve her goal.

The first mention of Catherine's name occurs in a letter which Menshikov wrote in the spring of 1705 during his stay with Peter in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania. War was raging. In that letter sent to Moscow and addressed to his fiancée, Dar'ia Arsen'eva, Menshikov conveyed Peter's order to send to Kovno "Katerina Trubachova and two other girls immediately" so that they could put the tsar's modest wardrobe in order, and to "wash and mend" some of his clothes.[13] As we see, Catherine, whose surname was derived from her first husband's military profession (he was a trumpeter, and the word *Trubachova* means "trumpeter's"), is mentioned among others. But noteworthy is the fact that girls for mending and washing were to be sent from Moscow. Apparently, either girls were not available any nearer, or these girls were better at washing and mending. That Catherine was Peter's former servant is clear from one of the empress's jokes in a letter written many years

later hinting at the tsar's new mistresses, wherein she wrote that she, an "old washwoman," might be useful to him one day as well.

Around 1705, Catherine's position began to change. Peter—and this needs to be emphasized—officially recognized the children she had borne. In March 1705, the tsar wrote to Dar'ia Arsen'eva and her sister Varvara, Catherine's girlfriends: "Be so kind as to look after my Petrushka; see to it that *my* son receives clothing, drink and food."[14] In the fall of that same year, Catherine gave birth to a second son, Pavel; in one of her letters she ordered the following signature to be put: "Along with two others" (*Sam-tret'*), which meant she and the two children. This was an allusion to the ancient Russian saying at harvest time: you plant one seed and reap three. Peter and Pavel died in infancy from children's diseases that, in those days, mowed down children like soft grass all over the world. These losses, however, had no ill effect on relations between the tsar and his Livland captive. His affection for her grew ever stronger and he always found time to send her a small present or a short note about his life. He addressed his letters to Preobrazhenskoe, a Moscow suburb, where Catherine spent her first several years in the royal palace.

Preobrazhenskoe was Peter's paternal home. He had spent his childhood and youth in the Kremlin, from which Tsarevna Sophia ousted him. His mother, Tsaritsa Natalia, lived in Preobrazhenskoe until her death in 1694. His rise to power and glory had started there. In the early years of the Northern War, Preobrazhenskoe became home for Peter's sister, Natalia, the person he felt closest to after his mother's death. Born in 1673, Natalia was one year younger than her brother, and had nothing in common with her sister-in-law, Tsaritsa Evdokia. Natalia was the first of the vast Romanov family to accept not only without resistance but with obvious pleasure all that Peter's reforms offered—European clothes, finery, fancy hair, unusual customs, and entertainment. Tsarevna Natalia did not lock herself in her chamber and she did not enter a monastery, as was usual for unmarried tsars' daughters in the seventeenth century. Instead, she lived freely in Preobrazhenskoe in "an open house," an expression used at that time for one that received guests and foreign visitors. Contemporaries viewed Preobrazhenskoe as an island of new European lifestyle and genteel manners. Everyone in Moscow knew about the court theater in Preobrazhenskoe, a rare and unusual thing in those days. Its creator and director was Peter's sister.

There is a portrait of Tsarevna Natalia Alekseevna painted after her early death in 1716. In it, we see a stately, fair-haired, dark-eyed woman with a large nose, round chin, and high hairdo fashionable in those days. She was not beautiful, but she was intelligent, a quality that Peter admired in his younger sister.

The old Preobrazhenskii palace had a cozy and lived-in atmosphere, and life there was quiet and calm. The thunder of the Northern War did not reach the peaceful gardens and meadows where Natalia and her chambermaids used to stroll. Peter's gregarious and benevolent sister united around herself a group of young women with similar attitudes and interests. Among them were Anna Tolstaia and the two Arsen'ev sisters, Dar'ia Arsen'eva being Aleksandr Menshikov's fiancée. Menshikov's two sisters were there as well.

It was no coincidence that Peter sent his Livland captive Martha to Preobrazhenskoe to stay with his sister and the other women in her circle. In the calm and friendly company of new friends, and under the protection of the tsar's sister, Martha received instruction in Russian customs and in the language in which she was finally able to say the ritual words pronounced in Russian during the Orthodox rite of baptism. At baptism she received the name Catherine Alekseevna. The second part of the full name, the patronymic, that is, the father's first name, she received from the person playing the role of godfather during the baptism ceremony. This was the tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich, the son of Peter and Tsaritsa Evdokia.

At first Peter did not write to Catherine personally. Instead, he asked Natalia, Anysia, or the Arsen'ev sisters to convey his regards "to those who carry weapons and to those who ply the needle." Catherine was implied in the latter group. Everybody could clearly see who lured the tsar to Preobrazhenskoe, where he hurried upon return from his long campaigns. Catherine's life at Preobrazhenskoe was a sort of probation period, and she passed the test. Her sweet and delicate nature, unpretentiousness, and liking for hard work pleased all around her, and eventually one of the tsar's close relatives advised him to give up his wanderings and marry Catherine.

In fact, they should have wed much sooner. Peter and Catherine were practically married already. Only theirs was not a church-sanctioned union, and, as such, was considered illegal and sinful in the eyes of the Orthodox Church. On the other hand, it did appear that it was a real and lasting bond. In January 1707, while away on a campaign, Peter received news of the birth of a third child, a daughter, Catherine. In her letter, Catherine senior wrote jokingly that the birth of a daughter was a good omen—a sign of peace. The Northern War was then entering its most difficult period; the Swedes had driven the Russian army from the Polish lands they had occupied, and Charles XII was about to invade Russia. The situation was critical. Peter sought peace but Charles, bellicose and sanguinary, ignored Peter's outstretched hand. The tsar responded to Catherine's joke: "If that's how things are, then I will probably be more happy to have a daughter than two sons."[15] Keeping in mind that a male monarch always dreams of having male heirs, we can only assume that Peter was grateful to Catherine for her opportune jest, for a gentle and keen understanding of his problem.

But the peace for which he so longed seemed no closer in January 1707 than at any other time since the beginning of the war in 1700. The tsar could not know then that the war would last another fourteen years. In January 1708, when Charles launched an all-out offensive, the situation looked desperate—Peter fled Grodno a mere two hours before the Swedes seized the town. It must have been then that the tsar hastily wrote the following note, which sounds as if it were meant as a last will and testament: "Should something, by the will of God, happen to me, then give the three thousand rubles that are now at Prince Menshikov's house to Catherine . . . and the little girl."[16] That was all that he, a soldier preparing for mortal combat, could do for the woman dearest to him.

In those troubled years their letters resembled the hasty notes of two lovers fixing dates they have to continuously postpone or cancel; telling how much they miss one another; expressing their worries when the other neglects to write for a long time; catching traces of vague rumors, and rereading time and again the short, fragmentary lines sent by chance couriers whenever the opportunity arose. There's no time for meetings, and if they do meet, it's at odd moments, for the war, like a hot flame, devours all of his time and strength. In a letter dated 1712 to Catherine, Peter wrote: "You know very well—in one hand I hold both a sword and a pen, and I have no helpers." Neither could Catherine help him. All she could do was to sympathize with him and support him: "My darling, my joy, and my hope! I wish you health for many years to come. I thank you for your kindness in sending me a letter which I was very glad to receive and which caused me to weep plenty while I was reading it. I had the feeling I had just met with you in person. In the future, my hope, do not trouble to write to me anymore—you have enough work to do. Now I, your milk cow, humbly implore you not to delay your return home, for all is better with you here."[17]

Then came the year 1709, the year of the illustrious victory of the Russian forces over the Swedes near the Ukrainian city of Poltava, where Charles XII met total and irrevocable defeat. The wheels of war were now rolling westward from the east; everything changed at one go. Peter, the victor over the Viking-King, regains confidence and composure. The tsar worries no more about his young city and future capital of St. Petersburg, which he founded in 1703. He decides to settle there permanently; he transfers state offices to the new city, carries out intensive construction, and fortifies the naval fortress Kronstadt on the mouth of the Neva River. Here, in St. Petersburg, his favorite place, far away from his foes and envious people in Moscow, he sets out to build the home, the eagle's nest, which he, the ruler of so vast a country, has never had. He moves to St. Petersburg members of the Romanov family, but only those whom he considers to be close relatives, among them his sister Natalia; Praskovia Fedorovna, his sister-in-law and the widow of his elder brother the tsar Ivan V, who died in 1696; and Ivan V's

three daughters, Anna (the future empress, whose life is described in the next chapter), Praskovia, and Catherine. And the tsar brings his own Catherine to St. Petersburg. She is seen more and more often with him.

Still, they have only bad luck with children who die one after the other in infancy. The parents react calmly, as it was a common thing in those days: "God giveth and God taketh away." New children will come, the tsar reassures Catherine in one of his letters. There was every reason to be optimistic: in 1708 Anna was born, and on December 18, 1709—Elizabeth. Six months later, on May 1, 1710, when Peter was sailing the Finland skerries aboard a new ship, the *Lizetta*, named after his daughter, he wrote a letter to Catherine conveying his regards to his large family, such a drastic turnaround in the former bachelor's life of the tsar: "Bow for me to my sister, sister-in-law, nieces, and other people at home. Kiss the little ones, and give my special regards to the four-legged darling."[18] That was what he called his youngest and favorite daughter, Elizabeth, who had just started to crawl.

One more year passed, and in the spring of 1711 the hearts of Peter and Catherine were again filled with anxiety. War had broken out with Turkey, Russia's powerful southern neighbor. It was a hard war for Russia, for to fight on two fronts—with the Swedes and the Turks—was a dangerous undertaking. So Peter concentrated his efforts in the south in order to keep the war with the Turks away from the Ukraine and Poland, which were the principal theater of operations in the Northern War.

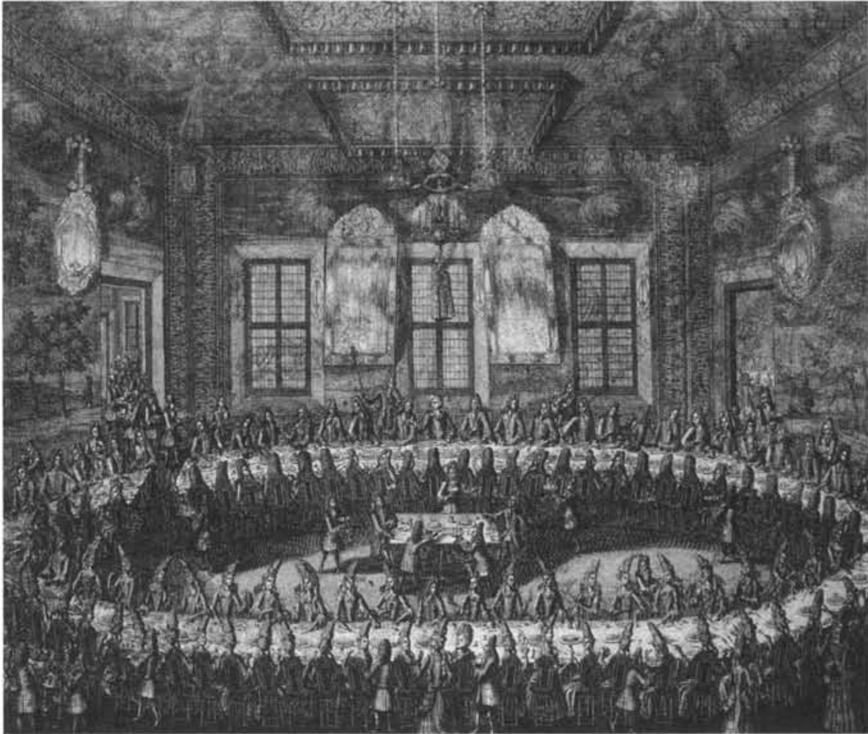
Ominous forebodings troubled the tsar when he embarked on this campaign, "the outcome of which is known only to God," he wrote to Menshikov, who remained behind, in St. Petersburg. Just prior to his departure—and he took Catherine with him—he did what he had been preparing to do for a long time: he declared his engagement to her, and, already in transit, he requested faithful Aleksandr Menshikov, in whose charge he had left his daughters Annushka and Lizan'ka, to take care of the girls should they happen to become orphans. Yet if God is merciful and grants victory or at least a safe return home, then they will have a chance to celebrate the wedding of Peter and Catherine in "Paradise"; that is what the tsar called his St. Petersburg, at that time still a modest little city on the shores of the Neva River. Peter's intuition did not mislead him. In early July 1711, the Turks managed to surround the Russian army on the Pruth River in Moldavia. The Turks' numerical superiority and continuous dense fire, the Russians' lack of ammunition and inadequate food and water supply, and the broiling Moldavian sun had turned a few days of siege into an absolute hell for the victors of Poltava, who had counted on an easy victory here. The night of July 10 was the most dramatic of all. After long negotiations and correspondence, when Peter had despaired of concluding an acceptable peace treaty with the Turks, he interrupted the long meeting of the War Council and ordered the generals to get ready to make a breakthrough the next morning. It was a mortally dangerous plan; an attempt by the weakened Russian

army to break through the positions of the Turks might end in catastrophe with the destruction of the best forces, the death or capture of the tsar himself, and the ruin of that which had been achieved by the new Russia as well as all hopes for its future. A stray bullet or cannonball might just as stupidly and ruthlessly alter the course of history as had Captain Wolf from the Marienburg garrison.

And at this critical moment Catherine displayed courage, will, and resourcefulness. While Peter was having a rest before the morning attack, she reconvened the War Council and reassessed the extreme danger of the planned breakthrough. Then she woke Peter and persuaded him to write one more, final, letter to the Vizier Baltaa Mehmet-Pasha, commander in chief of the Turkish forces. As legend has it, with this letter Catherine sent, without the tsar's knowledge, all her jewelry: memorable heirlooms, presents from Peter. It's possible that this helped to solve the problem, for in the morning the Vizier gave consent to enter negotiations and signed a peace treaty with the Russians. For the Russians the Pruth nightmare had ended.

On November 24, 1714, when rewarding his wife with the new Order of St. Catherine, Peter announced that this order "has been instituted to commemorate Her Majesty's participation in the battle with the Turks on the Pruth River, where, in such dangerous circumstances she had proven herself to everyone not as a weak woman, but as a brave man."[19] Later, in his 1723 decree regarding Catherine's coronation, Peter again recalled the ill-fated battle at Pruth and the courage of his battle companion.[20] By that time Peter and Catherine had been together on many campaigns and had just returned from a long and dangerous military campaign to Persia, where Catherine had again displayed her calmness, perseverance, and good sense. She did not fare well on naval campaigns, apparently suffering from seasickness. So Peter often went to sea alone, but he sent notes regularly to his wife, who would be waiting for him on shore, in which he informed her of his endeavors and health, and thanked her for sweets, a bottle of good wine, or strawberries.

Upon their return from the Pruth campaign, in February 1712, the long-awaited event took place, the engagement and wedding of Peter and Catherine. It was unlike traditional royal weddings with pompous and long ceremonies; rather, it was the modest wedding of the rear admiral Peter Mikhailov—under this name Peter served in the Navy. Peter, as a respectful subordinate, invited his direct Naval chief, the Norwegian vice admiral Cornelius Cruys, to play the role of the proxy father, and other admirals and high-ranking officers were guests. Among the close circle of people invited to the wedding ceremony, which took place in the small chapel in Menshikov's palace, there were mostly sailors, shipbuilders, and their wives. Two winsome and graceful creatures, cognizant of their important role, made an appearance as bride's attendants, carrying Catherine's train. One was four and the other two years old; they were her daughters—Anna Petrovna and



Wedding of Peter and Catherine. From A. G. Brikner, *Istoriia Petra Velikogo* (History of Peter the Great) (St. Petersburg, 1882), p. 660.

Elizaveta Petrovna. After walking around the lectern, a rite performed in the Orthodox Church wedding ceremony, they would become the legitimate children of the spouses. "However, as the whole ceremony would have been too wearisome for the very young princesses, they appeared only briefly, and then were replaced by the tsar's two nieces," remarked with sincere disappointment Charles Whitworth, the English envoy.[21]

Many diplomats wrote of the extraordinary behavior of the Russian tsar, who showed his subjects, by personal example, how one should serve his country in battle, on the captain's bridge, or in the shipyard. All these graphic models of behavior were supposed to convince the lazy Russian noblemen that one must follow the tsar's example and gradually climb up the ladder. For Peter had started his service as a drummer boy, and by the end of his life he had attained the high rank of general-admiral. However, one must admit it was one thing to swing an ax in the shipyard or climb agilely on the ship's shrouds for pedagogical purposes, and another thing entirely to marry a former laundress and to acknowledge her children as heirs. For the wedding of Peter and Catherine was no farce; it was quite real. It was an

incredible event in the history of the Russian dynasty. Peter violated all the conceivable and inconceivable mores and precepts of his regal ancestors.

The decisive act of violating accepted customs required a lack of inhibitions, internal freedom, and pluck. Thus, for the tsar-reformer who had been shaking the old foundations of life in Russia, it was a natural act. Also, such a mésalliance was impossible without deep and sincere feelings, that is, without love. Unlike the majority of his royal ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants, Peter was marrying for love, and he did not give a damn about anything else. An admiral's comparatively modest wedding suited him in every respect. He strove to separate his private life from the public life of the Russian tsar. According to his contemporaries, Peter used to tell his boyars that "the life of an English admiral is much more happy than the life of the Russian tsar."

That memorable February day in 1712 the tsar spent the way he had always dreamed. He was married in a cozy church in the presence of close friends, then hurried on ahead of everyone to his palace, where the wedding table was already laid; and assisted by his servants, he hung a six-candle chandelier made of ebony and ivory, which he had been turning on his lathe for many months. When all the guests were seated at the table he probably looked up and, as any skilled craftsman would have done in his place, proudly boasted more of his handiwork than of all the victories over his enemies, or his progress in legislative reforms, with his young wife in a beautiful dress smiling approvingly by his side.

"The occasion was splendid," commented Whitworth in his message describing the Russian admiral's wedding. "Fine wine from Hungary, and what was most pleasant is that no one was forced to drink to excess . . . The evening ended with dance and fireworks."[22] But the guests were unaware that the money spent on this celebration had not come from the counter-admiral's modest salary. An edict had been sent to every city with instructions to collect money for a wedding present for the tsar. And Russia has always been known as "a country of cities."

* * *

Thus, Cinderella became queen. No one had the right any longer to address her in any way other than "Your Royal Majesty," and all subjects, regardless of distinction, were considered her slaves and required to bow their heads in her presence.

Catherine was not a belle in the strict sense of the word, and this fact is confirmed by numerous portraits made by her contemporaries. She had neither the angelic beauty of her daughter Elizabeth, nor the refined elegance of Catherine II. Broad-shouldered and stout, her dark complexion gave a tinge of vulgarity to her appearance. The Markgravine Wilhelmina of Bayreuth looked at Catherine in vexed bewilderment when the latter visited Berlin in 1718: "The tsaritsa is a small, stumpy, very dark-complexioned,

unimpressive and ungraceful woman. It's enough to look at her to see her humble origins. Her tasteless dress seems to have been bought at a junk dealer's: it is old-fashioned, covered with silver and dirt. A dozen orders are pinned on her and the same number of small icons and medallions with relics; all these jingle when she walks so that you have the impression that you are being approached by a pack mule."[23]

But we need not pay too much heed to the opinion of this catty woman: she was only ten years old when she saw the tsaritsa. Other contemporaries also left behind testimonies regarding Catherine. They remember her, splendidly dressed, dancing gracefully, easily, and merrily at balls; and one could not imagine a better pair than the tsar and Catherine.

Those who had seen Catherine were impressed by her endurance, patience, and strength. One eyewitness recalls a wedding party at which the Austrian envoy disgraced himself by losing to Catherine in a test of strength that involved lifting with one hand the wedding marshal's heavy baton. Another observer, Henning Friedrich von Bassewitz, after noting how naturally yesterday's laundress behaved amid St. Petersburg's high society, heard the tsar say that he himself was surprised by the ease with which Catherine was turning into a tsaritsa, meanwhile never forgetting her own origin. All these observations led Bassewitz to the conclusion that Catherine's success in life was due "not to her upbringing and education, but rather to her mental qualities. Having realized that the only thing she had to do was to carry out her important predestination, she rejected any other type of education except that based on her own experience and contemplation."[24]

Undoubtedly, Catherine possessed an inherently flexible mind and a sense of intuition which enabled her to act naturally, simply, and with dignity. For many years she enjoyed Peter's love. More that one hundred of their letters have survived. More than two hundred fifty years have passed, yet one cannot read them merely as historical documents: one still feels the intimate warmth and deep mutual love that united Peter and Catherine for two decades. Hints and jokes, often bordering on the obscene, touching concern for each other's health and safety, and most of all continuous melancholy and loneliness without the other close by, these are the universal themes about which lovers write all over the world. "I miss you so," "For God's sake, come soon; if, for some reason, it's impossible to be here soon, write, for I am sad not hearing your voice, and not seeing you," "I hear that you are lonely, and I feel lonesome, too." The tsar's letters are laced with such frank admissions of love. Catherine is just as lonely without Peter. "Whenever I go out," she writes about strolling in the Summer Gardens, "I regret that I do not have you by my side." He responds accordingly: "I believe you when you write that you feel lonely while walking alone in the Summer Gardens, though it's a beautiful garden, for I am feeling the same way. Just pray to God that this summer be the last one that we will be apart, and thereafter we will be together." And she picks up on this topic again in her let-

ter: "Let us pray to God that He make it thus as you desire, that this summer be the last that we are apart."

Throughout all the ages this is what has been called love, and its traces have been preserved on faded and brittle paper. In 1717, while traveling in Brussels and wishing to make his wife a truly grand present, Peter decided to order some famous Brussels lace. He wrote to Catherine asking her to send him a pattern for the Brussels lace-makers. Catherine replied that she required nothing special, "only there should be two names worked into the lace, yours and mine, interwoven together."[25]

We cannot say that the tsaritsa Catherine led a serene life, and that the spouses, like two turtledoves, billed and cooed in love's blind raptures. This was not the case, for Peter was a man of difficult and even cruel character, and Catherine had to think constantly about how to maintain his affection. In keeping with the traditions of that time and his own temperament, the tsar never missed an opportunity for romance and, as before, he took mistresses with him wherever he traveled.

Catherine found the best possible solution for herself in this situation: she did not trouble her husband with useless jealousy and personally selected mistresses for him. On June 18, 1717, Peter writes to his wife from Spa, where he was taking mineral water treatments: "There is nothing to write to you about, only that we arrived here yesterday safely, and as doctors prohibit domestic fun [i.e., sex—E.A.] while drinking the water, I have sent my mistress back to you, for I would not have been able to resist the temptation if I had kept her here."[26] In her letter of July 3, Catherine answers that the reason for sending the mistress away was evidently not associated with the doctors' orders, but with the fact that the mistress had contracted an unpleasant disease "and I have no desire (and Heaven forbid!) to have this mistress's lover come home in the same condition as she."[27]

The existence of such an aspect in the spouses' relations tells us a lot about Catherine's character. Although she accepted and even encouraged Peter's marital freedom, yet it was as if she had drawn back the bed curtains of secrecy behind which her potential rival might gain power by using the tsar's weakness for women. Intimate liaisons often presuppose secrets of the heart. This was the last thing that Catherine wanted, and therefore she legalized the institution of mistresses in their married life.

But what worried Catherine more than mistresses was the future of her children. Years went by, some children died, new ones were born (Catherine gave birth to eleven children altogether), and as a mother she could not help thinking about their future. And their future was obscure, for Tsarevich Aleksei, Peter's and Dunia's son, had remained the official heir to the throne all these years. He was born in 1690 and at the age of eight was separated from his mother. This separation caused him great anguish; he even traveled to Suzdal' secretly to visit his mother. Peter did not love his oldest son, who was a stranger in the tsar's new family and lived all by himself, receiving no

affection or attention. Nor did Catherine display any excess affection toward her stepson. Among the hundred or so letters exchanged by Peter and Catherine, the name of Aleksei is mentioned only two or three times, and there is not a single letter in which even so much as a greeting was conveyed to him. Peter's letters to Aleksei are cold, short, and impassive—lacking any words of approval, support, or affection. Whatever the tsarevich did was bound to result in his father's displeasure. Absorbed in the tumult of the wars, the fever of drunken pleasures, the long chain of urgent matters, Peter brushed the boy aside, entrusting him to the care of strange and petty people. As a result, ten years later, Peter had an enemy at his back, who accepted none of those things that his father was doing or striving for.

The tsarevich was not a limp and timorous hysteric as he is sometimes described. The son of his great father, he had inherited Peter's strong will and obstinacy, and he responded to the tsar with tacit disagreement and an impudence which he kept hidden behind a demonstrative obedience and formal respect. But they were enemies of the same stock. The ancient ghost of fate hovered over them. Like the heroes of Sophocles and Euripides, they could not live together on one earth. Yet the tsarevich believed in his lucky star, he felt absolutely certain: he was the sole legitimate heir, and the only thing he had to do was to clench his teeth and await the hour of his triumph.

In October 1715, the tragedy reached a climax. By that time, Aleksei, in keeping with Peter's will, had long been married to Charlotte Sophia, the princess of Wolfenbuttel, and on October 12 she gave birth to a son who was named after his grandfather Peter. Sixteen days later, Tsaritsa Catherine gave birth to a long-awaited boy who was also named Peter. He was a healthy and lively child. *Shishechka* (little pine cone), *Potroshonok* (particle of my blood)—these are the nicknames Peter and Catherine use in their letters when referring to their son. Just as a newly married couple admires their first son, so the not-so-very-young royal parents observed with pride the first steps of their son. "Could you, my master, stick up for me, for he quarrels a lot with me over you: he doesn't like to hear it when I tell him that papa has gone, but he is happy when I tell him that papa is here."[28]

The parents dreamed of their son's bright future. Having learned that Shishechka has cut his fourth tooth, Peter writes: "God grant that his others will cut through just as successfully, and God grant us the joy of seeing him a grown man in reward for all our previous sorrows over his dead brothers."[29] They vested all their dynastic hopes in Peter Petrovich. Catherine even called her son "the master of St. Petersburg," and she believed that she would have still more children. In the aforementioned letter of July 3, 1717, from Amsterdam, she added a joking postscript: "As to congratulations on the name-day of the Old Man and Shishechka [i.e., the name-day of the tsar and his son], I think that if that old man were here, then another 'little pine cone' would ripen for next year." It is clear from the letter that this particular name-day celebration does not include the third Peter, the tsar's grandson. The

Tsarevich Peter Petrovich, son of Peter the Great and Catherine. From A. G. Brikner, *Istoriia Petra Velikogo* (History of Peter the Great) (St. Petersburg, 1882), p. 363.

happy parents seem to have forgotten about Tsarevich Aleksei, the future master of Russia, and his little son, the same age as Shishechka, who were also living in St. Petersburg.

But actually Peter never forgot about them: it was not his style to leave problems unsolved, especially when it came to matters concerning the fate of Russia. And from the tsar's letters to Aleksei we can see that after the birth of Shishechka Peter's claims against his eldest son became more serious and accusations more grave. Peter demands the impossible from Aleksei: he wants him to "change his disposition," to become a reliable, eager helpmate in promoting the tsar's arduous cause. Otherwise, threatens the tsar, "I shall disinherit you; I will sever you like a limb infected with gangrene, and do not think that you are the only son I have and that I am writing this as a warning: I will really do it; I spared not nor do I now spare my own life for my native land and people, so why would I take pity on an indecent creature such as you?"[30]

This threat had revealed Peter's true and sinister intent of transferring the throne and his "St. Petersburg legacy" to Shishechka. But Aleksei was to be prevented from being his rival. Peter demanded that the tsarevich abdicate his right to the throne, and Aleksei obeyed the tsar. Then Peter demanded that his son join a monastery. And again Aleksei gave his consent. But the

Tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich, son of Peter the Great and his first wife, Evdokia Lopukhina. From A. G. Brikner, *Istoriia Petra Velikogo* (History of Peter the Great) (St. Petersburg, 1882), p. 331.

tsar was still restless, he knew all too well that Russia was a country of traditions wherein the statement of abdication was merely a piece of paper, and, unlike a grave, one can leave a monastery. So as long as Aleksei was alive he was a danger to Peter's children by Catherine. Having left St. Petersburg for Copenhagen on a military mission, the tsar quite unexpectedly summoned Aleksei to join him there. As Aleksei feared Peter's fits of violent fury and a possible attempt upon his life on the road (in his letter, the tsar demanded that Aleksei specify in detail the places he would be passing through on the way to Denmark and the dates of arrival at each), he fled to Austria.

A few months later, using false promises, the tsar lured Aleksei back to Russia, where the torture chamber awaited him, with Peter personally pulling out his son's nails. Then a trial took place in which the tsar's son received the death penalty. One of the Guards officers who executed this verdict,

Aleksandr Rumiantsev, recalled that on the night of June 26, 1718, Peter had sent for them and, breaking into tears, gave the order to kill Aleksei secretly. According to Rumiantsev, when he entered the tsar's apartments he saw the following scene: Peter was seated and standing around him were Archbishop Feodosii, his personal confessor and the head of the Synod; Count Peter Tolstoi, the chief of the Secret Chancery (political police), which had made the case against Aleksei; Tolstoi's deputy, Major Andrei Ushakov; and Catherine.[31]

We do not know what she was thinking about or what she said in that awful hour that made Peter, like Ivan the Terrible, a slayer of his own flesh and blood. Of course, Catherine was there to ease the terrible lot of the tsar, who was about to sacrifice his own son on the altar of his Fatherland and free himself of an internal enemy. But we must keep in mind that at this late hour, not far from the room where the killers were meeting, Shishechka was sleeping soundly, and it was she, Catherine, the mother of "the master of St. Petersburg," who needed Aleksei's death. Besides, the tsaritsa was in the late stages of pregnancy, and the parents were probably thinking that in August of 1718 they would have one more son (but a girl was born that time, Natalia).

The murder was committed: the tsarevich was strangled in one of the casemates of the St. Petersburg citadel, the Peter and Paul Fortress. Peter and Catherine breathed a sigh of relief: the problem of succession had been resolved. Peter Petrovich was announced heir to the throne. The parents were moved as they watched him grow up: "Our dear Shishechka often speaks of his dear papa, and with the help of God, at this age, he is already enjoying perfecting his skills in play with toy soldiers and cannon fire,"[32] writes Catherine to her husband shortly after Aleksei's death. The soldiers and guns for now were made of wood, but the tsar was happy: the heir would grow up to be a soldier of Russia.

But Aleksei's death cries that night, as he struggled to break loose from his secret executioners (according to Rumiantsev, this was a horrible and revolting scene), turned into a curse which hung over Peter's home. In April 1719, the spouses were deeply shaken by a grave misfortune: their joy, their hope, dear Shishechka fell ill and died a few days later. He was not yet three and a half. This event rocked the very foundation of the family's future prosperity. Catherine's grief knew no bounds. When she herself died eight years later, Shishechka's toys were found among her things; there were no toys that had belonged to Natalia, who died later, or to any of the other children who had died in infancy; only those that had belonged to "the master of St. Petersburg." The items recorded in the Registrar's list are quite touching: "A golden cross, silver buckles, a whistle with bells, a glass fish, a jasper case of drawing instruments, a toy flint-lock rifle, a miniature sword (with a golden handle), a tortoise whip, a child's cane . . ." The inconsolable mother must have fondled again and again these priceless little objects.

An ominous event occurred during the funeral service in the Trinity Church in St. Petersburg on April 26, 1719. Stepan Lopukhin, a relative of the disgraced Tsaritsa Evdokia, said something to some bystanders and then laughed blasphemously. Later, witnesses testified to the Secret Chancery that Lopukhin had said the following: "The flame of his, Stepan's, candle has not gone out yet, there will be a future for him!"[33] Under torture, Lopukhin confessed that when he was talking about his burning candle he had meant the Grand Duke Peter Alekseevich. And that was the truth: although the light of life had died in the beloved Shishechka, this same light was thriving in the Grand Duke Peter, who was Shishechka's age. The orphaned grand duke (his mother, Charlotte Sophia, had died in 1715), deprived of anyone's love, was growing up; and this fact gave heart to those who were awaiting the tsar's death, that is, to the Lopukhins and other opponents of the reformer.

What consolation could Catherine find in this cruel turn of fate? She had two lovely daughters, Anna and Elizabeth, and a third, Natalia, was born in 1718. But still no son came. Actually, in 1723, Catherine did give birth to one last child—a son, Peter—but he died very shortly after birth. Catherine was approaching forty, the maximum age in those days for childbirth, so Peter had little hope of getting a male heir. But the tsar did not give up: he had no intention of transferring the throne to his grandson, the son of Aleksei, whom the tsar had cursed. On February 5, 1722, Peter issued the "Charter on the Succession to the Throne." The idea was clear to everyone: violating the tradition of transferring the throne from grandfather to father, son and grandson, the tsar had secured the right of appointing the successor from among *any* of his subjects. This was the boldest demonstration of absolute power yet. From that time on the tsar not only had full charge of Russia today, but assured himself a voice in ruling Russia tomorrow.

And on November 15, 1723, a manifesto announced Catherine's upcoming coronation. Peter had been proclaimed Emperor and Father of his Native Land earlier on November 22, 1721, in a celebration marking the end of the Great Northern War. (By the Nystad Peace Treaty, Sweden ceded to the Russians the Eastern Baltic countries, the region in which the cities of Riga, Revel [Tallinn], and Petersburg were located.)

At last on May 7, 1724, Catherine became empress. The event took place at the Assumption Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin, in the presence of the highest-ranking government officials and a multitude of spectators. The cathedral, with its shiny gold domes and luxurious interior created by the fifteenth-century Italian architect Ridolfo Fioravanti, had long been the traditional site for coronation of the Russian tsars. Gold, velvet, gem-embossed armchairs, Persian carpets, a gold brocade rug leading from the tsar's place to the Holy Gates—all this Byzantine, Eastern splendor shone brightly and sparkled in the light of the hundreds of candles lit on that day, just as it had during the times of Ivan III or Ivan IV, known as the Terrible. Only never

before had the cathedral seen such a variety of fancy European costumes, in which the men and women present were attired, and never before in Russia had the crown been bestowed on a woman of such common ancestry.

On this day even Peter himself, usually preferring to wear everyday clothing, stockings darned by his wife, and worn-out shoes, was dressed as finely as a French king—a sky-blue caftan embroidered with silver thread by Catherine and a hat with a white feather. Our heroine looked very beautiful. She was wearing a gold-trimmed purple dress brought from Paris, and diamonds sparkled in her tall hairdo. The bells of all Moscow cathedrals were pealing, salutes were firing, and army bands were playing as Catherine, surrounded by stately officers of household cavalry with golden eagles on their shoulders entered the cathedral, a sacred place for any Russian.

The ceremony was festive, long, and tiring. Peter and his attendants covered Catherine with an ermine-lined brocade mantle, which lay like a heavy weight across the strong shoulders of the emperor's comrade-in-arms. Then Catherine knelt and Peter placed the crown on her head, adorned with pearls, diamonds, and a huge ruby of marvelous beauty larger than a dove's egg. At that moment feelings of gratitude welled up in the heart of the Livland captive, and overcome, she began to cry and then tried to embrace the feet of her ruler, but he stepped away from her as this was not the time nor the place for such sentiments.

The celebration was followed by receptions, dinners, massive public feasting on roast beef, fireworks, and a salute. Watching the fireworks flashing against the blue May evening sky, many Muscovites must have thought the same as the Holstein courtier Bergholtz, who wrote in his diary: "One cannot help wondering at God's Providence whereby the empress has been elevated from the lowly position into which she was born and in which she lived to the pinnacle of human honors."[34]

Bergholtz, like most of the guests at the celebration, did not know of one important fact, namely, that on the eve of the coronation Peter destroyed the old will and testament and wrote a new one, in which he named Catherine his heir. This event was kept a dark secret and only the penetrating mind of the French envoy Campredon sensed the implications of the festive coronation not evident to the uninitiated. He alone understood the true meaning of what was happening under the vaulted ceiling of the cathedral: "Especially noteworthy is the fact that contrary to custom the ritual of anointing of the tsaritsa was also performed, which meant that she was acknowledged ruler and sovereign after the death of her spouse, the tsar."[35]

The decision to write the new will was the result of long contemplation on the part of the tsar, a whole chain of transformations that had taken place within him as well as in the world in which he lived. It is well known that Peter never intended Catherine to be either his successor or a politician. In all the tsar's many letters to his wife there is not a trace of his political matters ever being discussed by them. At no time had Catherine ever directed

anything in Russia besides the royal kitchen. Even managing the populated land holdings to which she was entitled as tsaritsa was delegated to other people. Peter had his own plain and simple human reasons for this. He himself was obliged to live continually in the nervous, all-consuming world of politics, and had to consciously strive to separate his private life from his public affairs. In the evenings he would return to his small Dutch-style palace in the Summer Gardens, and awaiting him there was his thoughtful wife, surrounded by children and servants. Peter would have supper, meticulously checking a mark that he had made earlier to find out whether the impudent cooks had eaten too much from his favorite Limburger cheese. His wife would darn his underclothes, blazing firewood would crackle in the fireplace, the wind would howl outside the windows, the waves of the Neva would be lapping, and inside the small room all was warm and cozy. And suddenly this abrupt turnabout: he makes his humble affectionate housewife the heir to the imperial throne! Yes, it's understandable that his own cruel fate had compelled him to do so, but it was not just fate alone which guided his hand as he wrote the will.

"Katerinushka, my dearest friend, hello!" Dozens of Peter's letters to Catherine begin with these words. As the years pass these letters become warmer and more cordial. During the last five years of his life, Catherine's influence on Peter increasingly grew. She was able to give the tsar that which his entire external world, so complex and hostile, was unable to give. Peter, a severe and suspicious person, was transformed in the presence of Catherine and children. At balls guests would see how the tsar, excited by the last fast dance, would tenderly kiss his wife, a tireless and sensitive dancing partner. They also recalled startling scenes, when Catherine would drive a demon out of Peter. It is known that Peter suffered from bouts of deep depression, which could turn in a flash to fits of raving, all-destructive fury (one well-known story tells of how the tsar nearly killed a page with a naked dagger for having accidentally pulled the tsar's hair while removing his night cap one morning). These fits of rage were accompanied by muscle spasms in the face and convulsions of the arms and legs. Bassewitz recalls that upon first notice of the symptoms of a seizure (the tsar would begin to shake his head and make strange faces), those around would send for Catherine.

She would come immediately and even as she approached she would begin saying quiet and affectionate words to her husband; "the sound of her voice instantly calmed him, then she would seat him and hold his head gently stroking it and running her fingers through his hair. This had a magical effect on him and he would fall asleep in just a few minutes. In order not to disturb his rest she would hold his head on her breast and sit motionless for two or three hours. After this he would awake completely refreshed and in good spirits."[36]

Catherine knew to the last detail all of Peter's predilections, whims, and human weaknesses. She was sensitive, attentive, and knew how to please and