

**SCENES FROM THE COURT OF PETER THE
GREAT. BASED ON THE LATIN DIARY OF
JOHN G. KORB, A SECRETARY OF THE
AUSTRIAN LEGATION AT THE COURT OF
PETER THE GREAT**

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JOHN G. KORB & F. L. GLASER

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Reise nach Rußland

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of Peter the Great

Based on the Latin Diary of *John G. Korb*,
a Secretary of the Austrian Legation
at the Court of Peter the Great

Edited by
DR. F. L. GLASER

NICHOLAS L. BROWN
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INTRODUCTION

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Two years before the birth of Peter Alexiewicz, better known to the world as Peter the Great and first Emperor of Russia, the ancient Kremlin of Moscow beheld a strange sight. Young maidens, the loveliest of the realm, drawn from every province and every class, entered the palace of the Czar on a day appointed. Assembled there in the cramped quarters allotted for their use, they spent their time in the manner of Muscovite womanhood of that age, their cloistered existence varied by some manual task relieved with song and tale. At nightfall the weary hours were forgotten and tense expectancy reigned, for every maiden knew that she was a pawn in a lottery and that the prize was supreme rank. When darkness came figures passed through the dormitories exchanging significant words and gestures as they examined the sleepers. The Czar Alexis Mihailowicz himself accompanied by his doctor was seeking a wife among these unknown beauties, "the woman," as the time-honored formula had it, "worthy to be the Sovereign's delight," perchance the daughter of the meanest serf who might at his word become the Czarina of all the Russias.

This custom, borrowed like so many other Russian traditions from the Byzantines, and maintained through centuries, had proved a useful device to escape the jealousy of noble families at home and the humiliation of rejection by foreign dynasties, by no means eager at that time to bestow their princesses upon the uncouth Czars of Russia. Thus the custom had become definitely established and preceded the betrothal of every Czar. The minutiae of etiquette were strictly observed in this proceeding. Ladies and gentlemen of the court were deputed to examine the young girls who journeyed to Moscow in answer to the call of the Czar. Their inspection was exacting and severe, extending to the most intimate details, and resulted in the selection of the finest specimen for presentation to the Czar.

This time, however, in 1670, the hopes of the fair candidates were doomed to disappointment, for the Czar's choice had already been made before their arrival in the Kremlin. Alexis, now thirty-eight years of age, had lost his first wife, of the family of Miloslavski, three years before. Of the five sons and eight daughters whom she had borne him three sons were already dead and two were sickly. A second marriage was therefore desirable. Alexis, while concerned with this serious question, met in the house of his minister, Artamon Matveieff, a beautiful brunette, Nathalia Nariskine, who had been brought up there in the atmosphere of western European cul-

ture and freedom. Alexis' choice fell upon Nathalia, but before she could become his second wife she was compelled to undergo the traditional ordeal of the Kremlin.

Of this marriage Peter I., called "the Great," was born on June 9 (N. S.), 1672, although no less an authority than Peter himself has thrown doubt on his paternity. Contrary to all the legends of his extraordinary precocity, history records that Peter was a singularly backward child. He was over two years old when he was weaned, and in his eleventh year still enjoyed playing with wooden horses. At that age he had barely learned to spell out the religious books on which the children of the Czars were brought up. During his early years Peter was surrounded by intrigues and rebellions, and his election as Czar in 1682 under the regency of his half-sister Sophia was but a signal for a fresh revolt. More than once he had barely eluded the grasp of death. One of his uncles was dragged from the palace and killed before his eyes. Artamon Matveieff was hacked to pieces as he caught the sleeve of the little Czar in a vain endeavor to find protection from a savage mob. It is to such experiences, which played havoc with the nerves of the young boy, that the convulsions may be ascribed from which Peter suffered in later years.

When Sophia attempted in 1689 to usurp the title and power of autocrat, Peter, now seventeen,