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PETER THE GREAT



PETER.

BY

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P R E F A C E .

THE life of Peter the Great, so long the sport of legend, has been reduced to solid fact mainly by the labours of Ustriálof and Soloviéf. These have been made accessible to German readers by Brückner and to English readers by Schuyler. The present writer does not claim to have gone much beyond these two last authorities in the composition of his work. The brilliant essay of Waliszewski did not come into his hands until half the present book was in type.

OSCAR BROWNING.

KING'S COLLEGE,
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October 1897.

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LIFE OF PETER THE GREAT.

CHAPTER I.

PETER'S BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD.

PETER the Great was born in the Kremlin at Moscow at one o'clock in the morning on Thursday, May 30th (O.S.), 1672, being the festival of St. Isaac of Dalmatia. He was the son of the Tsar Alexis, and of Natalia Kirillnovna Narýshkin, whom the Tsar had married as his second wife on January 22nd, 1671.

The father and grandfather of Peter were not remarkable either for intellect or strength of character. They were not strong personalities like Michael the son of Philaret, the founder of the House of Romanof. Alexis, the son of Michael, ascended the throne as a child, and died at the age of forty. He was of a soft and gentle character, and was called by his subjects "The Most *Debonair*." He was served by unworthy favourites whom he had not the moral courage to get rid of. His subjects detested his advisers, but loved the man himself. He took part in the operations of war, and was devoted to the chase. He was fond of theological arguments, but was lax in the ceremonial of the Court. He wrote verses, and was not averse to music and the drama. He did something

to break down the dull ascetism of the almost monastic life to which the Tsars had been hitherto condemned.

Alexis had been married in his early youth to Princess Mary Ilinitchna Miloslávsky. She had given birth to thirteen children in a married life of twenty-one years, and she herself died in childbirth on March 1st, 1669. Three months later Simeon, the fourth son, died; and half a year after, at the age of sixteen, the eldest son, Alexis, heir to the throne. Two sons only now remained, Theodore, whose health was very weak, and Iván, or John, who, besides being almost blind, had a defect of speech and was nearly an idiot.

The chief minister of Alexis at this time was Artémon Serghéievitch Matvéief, one of the most enlightened of the Russians, and a warm advocate of Western progress. His father had been ambassador at Constantinople and in Persia. Matvéief himself had held diplomatic appointments at Paris and Vienna, at The Hague and in London. He had assisted Alexis to add Little Russia to his dominions. He had done good service to his country at decisive moments, both in peace and war. His house was furnished with all the luxurious appointments of Western Europe, and interviews with foreign ambassadors were frequently held there. He was much devoted to natural science, then regarded as closely akin to the art of the black magician. His wife was said to be of Scotch origin, which added to the unconventionality of his household. He was the head of the Court Pharmacy, and thus came into intimate connection with the surgeons and physicians employed in it.

Two of these, Sigismond Sommer, a surgeon, and a Greek named Spartari, who had been an ambassador in China, were companions in his researches. The latter of these two instructed the son of Matvéief in Greek and Latin, and the young man became such

a marvel of culture as to attract the attention of Leibnitz. The Tsar was so devoted to Matvéief that when he was absent from Moscow he wrote to him and said that he and his children felt themselves like desolate orphans without him.

There is a tradition that the Tsar Alexis, left a widower, as we have described, at the age of forty, met in the house of Matvéief the beautiful Natalia Narýshkin, the daughter of an old comrade of Matvéief, Cyril Narýshkin, who was living with him as ward. The stories related of their lives rest upon report alone, but are probably not devoid of truth. However, it was entirely contrary to the ordinary practice that the Tsar should of himself seek a bride in a private house. The custom was to assemble in the palace all the most beautiful girls of the country, to the number of several hundreds, and from them the Tsar made his choice.

The stake at issue was a large one. The friends and relations of the selected bride attained honour, riches, and influence. It was a triumph of one family over another, so that the struggle for the hand of the Tsar led not only to cabals and jealousies, but to infamous intrigues.

This ceremony was not omitted in the case of Alexis. But the choice had been carefully rehearsed beforehand. Natalia was amongst the candidates, and she was chosen without hesitation. This result was of course attributed to the black arts of the magician Matvéief. Two anonymous letters brought the accusation. Every effort was made to discover the writer of them, but in vain. They had, however, the result of delaying the marriage of the Tsar for nine months. As we said above, it took place on January 22nd, 1671.

After the marriage everything went happily. The spring and summer were spent in the numerous villas and palaces which surrounded the capital of Moscow.