

# The Empress's Apprenticeship

**"The Memoirs of Catherine the Great,"** edited by Dominique Maroger (Macmillan, 400 pp. \$5), contains the recollections of the fabulous Russian empress's first thirty years, bringing the story down to three years before her accession to the throne. Professor Ernest J. Simmons of Columbia University, who reviews it here, is the author of a number of studies of Russian literature.

By Ernest J. Simmons

IN AN age when published accounts by rulers, famous statesmen, and public figures of their lives and activities have become a commonplace, Dominique Maroger's English-language version of the eighteenth-century "Memoirs of Catherine the Great" forces comparison with them in the dangerous art of autobiographical self-revelation. Catherine writes more in the intimate spirit of the "Confessions" of a Rousseau rather than as a maker of history, which is the approach Sir Winston Churchill employs in his remarkable post-war memoirs. Further, Catherine is everlastingly aware that she is a woman in a man's world, in which feminine weaknesses are not easily tolerated by the foible-ridden swaggering lords of creation.

The "Memoirs," unfortunately, covers only the first thirty years of Catherine's life, ending three years before her accession to the throne. And since the manuscript was written over several periods during her long reign, hindsight no doubt plays a part in the motivation which she attributes to herself and others for political behavior and actions during the years of her marriage to the future Peter III. Historians, to whom the "Memoirs" has been accessible in the original French, have long since recognized this possibility and thus have tended to question the veracity of Catherine's account on various points.

Nevertheless, Catherine's story has the ring of truth as one of the frankest exposures of a great sovereign on the stage of history. Contributory evidence has largely supported the unflattering picture she gives of her husband, so utterly unfit to rule an empire, though she deftly avoids im-

plicating herself in the events that led to his death or murder. Nor does she solve for posterity the legitimacy of her son the Emperor Paul, though it seems to me that the evidence of the "Memoirs" points pretty clearly to her lover Serge Saltikov as the father of this first child.

These unsolved problems, however, do not detract from the principal achievements of the "Memoirs"—the remarkably frank portrait that Catherine draws of herself, and the brilliant historical picture she provides of Court life in eighteenth-century Russia. Here the high literary skill of Catherine the writer of plays, essays, and scintillating letters is everywhere manifested. As a girl of fifteen she journeyed from the tiny principality of Anhalt-Zerbst to faraway Russia, the destined bride of the future heir to the throne, a dissolute buffoon who spent his time playing with toy soldiers and training scores of dogs in their nuptial quarters. With a wisdom beyond her years she set out at once to prepare herself for a lofty destiny. In a revelatory passage in the "Memoirs" at the time of her betrothal to Peter, she wrote, "I felt little more than indifference towards him, though I was not indifferent to the Russian Crown." She cultivated her mind by omnivorous reading, strove to gain the friendship of all around her, learned the Russian language and the customs and manners of the people, became more devout in her adopted religion of Russian Orthodoxy than the natives themselves, and trod warily among the vicious intriguers who beset her on every side. When the time of crisis came she was fully armed to take her place as the head of an empire which her faltering husband almost willingly abdicated. And the subsequent achievements of her reign testify both to the thoroughness of her preparations and her natural abilities.

THE "Memoirs" barely lifts the curtain on that aspect of Catherine's character which historians have denominated her greatest weakness—her sensuality. For only three lovers, of the fifty-five which one historian has attributed to her, appear in these pages—Saltikov, Poniatovski, and Gregory Orlov. She herself declares that if she could only have had a husband who loved her she would



—Frontispiece from the book.

Catherine—"high literary skill."

have been faithful to him. Circumstances, however, prevented this. She gave a great deal of herself to those whom she sincerely loved, such as Gregory Orlov and Potemkin, but to the parade of temporary favorites who marched through her life, up to her death at the age of sixty-six, she gave only the moments she snatched from her multitudinous daily tasks. One of them said that he was for her a sort of male courtesan. For the most part she worked and loved like a man.

Certainly no future ruler ever underwent a more trying and discouraging apprenticeship than Catherine. The "Memoirs" presents a stark picture of her trials. The winds blew through the rooms she occupied, and they were often infested with vermin, rats, and mice. The demigorgons the Empress Elizabeth placed over Catherine tormented her with their cruelty, suspicion, and spying. No sooner did she find affection in one of her ladies-in-waiting than the Empress would remove her. Catherine's children were torn away from her at their birth and she never saw them for weeks on end. And her weak-minded husband's harsh scraping on the violin which alternated with the howling of the half-dozen spaniels he trained for hunting lasted from seven o'clock in the morning until the small hours. "I admit," writes Catherine, "that I was driven half mad and suffered terribly as both these musical performances tore at my ear-drums from early morning till late at night."

In such a setting Catherine grew to queenly stature, and the "Memoirs" reveals this process with a wealth of detail and a literary flair that make this work absorbing reading.

# A Mellow Therapy

**"Bottoms Up!" by Cornelia Otis Skinner** (Dodd, Mead. 208 pp. \$3), is a new collection of light and reminiscent pieces by the daughter of a distinguished actor who has made her own way in the world.

By Helen Beal Woodward

TO OPEN a brand-new, gaily jacketed book by Cornelia Otis Skinner and find that one has already read much of it before in *The New Yorker* or *The Reader's Digest* is a little disappointing, but inevitable. Book royalties being what they are today, any author who can pull off the trick is justified in collecting as much magazine cash as possible prior to publication. Fortunately, Miss Skinner's humor is almost as enjoyable taken à la carte as it was the first time you read it, served up on a table of contents.

But Skinner reprinted is one thing, Skinner repeating herself is another. When a couple of pages from "Hearing Voices" in Miss Skinner's new book, "Bottoms Up!" turn out to be a rewrite of "The Captain's Table" in her old book "Excuse It, Please!"—when that joke about using the broad *a* on words like "hand" crops up once more, as it did in, for instance, both the widely anthologized pieces "The Body Beautiful" and "It's a Wise Parent"—then even a loyal Skinnerite may feel the lady is getting over-thrifty with her material.

With these captious preliminaries out of the way, I can go on to say what does not need saying: that Cornelia Otis Skinner is a wit who can

write agreeably on practically any subject, and who is particularly adept at treating the genteel moment of inadequacy or the small social dilemma. She goes on examining affections, her own most of all, but even when apparently busiest at making herself the central figure of fun she is slyly evening scores with the people who embarrassed her. (Come to think of it, what a wonderful form of self-therapy! To be able to wash away the memory of one's embarrassing moments and then sell the results to *The New Yorker*!)

In the new book, "Where to Look" will probably be top favorite. Where to look while sitting across from a stranger at a table for two; where to look while the gypsy violinist is playing at you, or while waiting for the elevator, or when you keep running into people to whom you have already said an animated goodbye. Most of us have been in one or more of these tiny predicaments, and will recognize our own discomfiture while we enjoy Miss Skinner's.

While this chapter is in Miss Skinner's familiar vein, "Bottoms Up!" is quieter, mellow, and more reminiscent in mood than the author's previous books. Here she comes as close as she has ever come to sentiment. Looking back on her distinguished stage career, she writes of her famous father, of her job-hunting days, and her summers on the straw-hat circuit. (There is a fine yarn in this one, about the time she played La Cavallini in Edward Sheldon's "Romance," and had to have a live monkey to carry on her muff.)

Her problems seem at once more special and more stylish than they

used to be, which is not to be wondered at. Once she essayed skating and rumba lessons, and found herself stranded horizontal on beaches with amateur astronomers intent on pointing out Cassiopeia. Nowadays she copes with retriever trials, or wonders where to refrigerate a surfeit of wild duck, or has a hard time getting a book at the Bibliothèque National. She is still blithe and vague, however—or convinces us that she is—and if, with years and success, she should run out of embarrassing moments altogether we can at least look forward to some delightfully unstuffy memoirs.

## Notes

**BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE:** Those of us who cut our sophistication eye-teeth on the early novels of Evelyn Waugh often paused to wonder if such improbable people as Angela Runcible, Father Rothschild, and Basil Seal could possibly exist. In "*Mercury Presides*" (Harcourt, Brace, \$5) some light is shed on the Runcible type, if not on the others. For its author, Daphne Fielding, was a genuine member of the Bright Young People who lived out Mr. Waugh's clever fancies by attending Mrs. James Corrigan's Stunt Parties, playing follow-the-leader over the counters at Selfridge's, and swooning over American jazz. The Waugh-like antics of the Hon. Daphne (and somehow they leave the novelist with an imagination not so fertile as it seemed) today seem a bit silly. Far more interesting are the factors, aside from postwar madness, that made her that way. For one thing, she never saw her mother, but was brought up by a succession of nanas, one of whom nightly asphyxiated her to sleep by putting a tube from the gas fire into her mouth. Her father—the best-etched figure in the book—was Lord Vivian, a man of titanic temper who gave his children the same orders he



—By Alajalov, from the book.