

Tanya

A Novel by Marianne Malthouse

By the Same Author Writing As Marianne Glenton

Farnham's Folly

Kerrigan's Curse

From poverty-stricken beginnings to untold riches, from the wilds of the Swedish Empire to the fabulous Court of Tsar Peter the Great, within the grim and fabled walls of the Kremlin, Tanya de la Verrière is swept along in a world where women are the pawns and playthings of men, where she must use her wits and her beauty to survive. Desired by many, she gives her heart to one man only, fighting against all odds to finally win happiness.

It is my great desire to reform my subjects, and yet I am ashamed to confess that I am unable to reform myself.

(Tsar Peter I)

Chapter 1

The weak sun filtering through the wooden shutters played across the sleeping girl's face, and she shivered, pulling the thin cover up around her ears. Tanya was reluctant to wake; it was bitterly cold, and the prospect of another day of hard work and meagre rations was uninviting. She heard her sister get out of bed, and she peeped between her lashes, hoping she would leave her alone a little longer. She studied Gerda covertly as the girl struggled into her shift and petticoats. At seventeen, she was already blossoming into a lovely young woman, rivalling the beauty her mother had once possessed. Humming under her breath, Gerda plaited her long flaxen hair, and once again, Tanya wished she possessed her sister's looks. She made the mistake of opening her eyes, and Gerda immediately frowned at her.

'Come, sleepy head, 'tis long past dawn, and there is work to be done.'

Tanya groaned and reluctantly sat up, teeth chattering, then catching her sister's admonitory eye, leapt naked from bed and threw on her clothes, her breath clouding in the freezing air. She moved lightly to the window, chipping at the ice that had formed on the inside of the thick glass, and pressed her nose against it to stare out wistfully.

The bleak, snow-covered landscape was hardly prepossessing, but Tanya was used to the barrenness of the Swedish countryside and barely gave it a glance. She was straining her eyes towards the far horizon where lay the village of Pattina, her whole being reaching out towards the life and excitement contained within those narrow twisting streets and dark alleyways. She had only visited it a few times in her short life, and it represented the sum total of her ambition – to actually live within its bustling streets, to be able to lean out of one of the gabled windows, and watch the people pass beneath.

'Tanya! Will you stop daydreaming!'

Her sister's sharp voice recalled her to her surroundings, and she dragged her feet across the room to pull a comb through her tangled copper curls. She studied her reflection apathetically in the spotted mirror, finding nothing to admire in the small pointed face and huge green eyes looking back at her. At thirteen, Tanya was still underdeveloped and thin, with the long-legged awkwardness of a young, untried colt. She leaned nearer the mirror, noting that the powdering of freckles that covered her straight little nose still had not disappeared despite the various remedies she had wheedled from their old nurse. She stuck her tongue out at herself and threw the comb down, rebellion rising within her. The longing to escape from the drudgery of life on the tiny farm, to spread her wings and find out what living was really all about sometimes became almost too much to bear.

Pulling on her boots, she clambered down the ladder into the room below. The plump figure of Maria bustled past, laying out the wooden platters on the table for their morning meal, and Tanya smiled perfunctorily at the old woman before crossing to kiss her mother dutifully on the cheek. She coughed as the huge stove set in the corner of the room belched out smoke and aimed a vicious kick at its scarred sides. The stove and the big scrubbed table took up most of their living space, and together with the two tiny bedrooms nestling in the roof comprised the whole of the small wooden house.

'Good morning, girls. Go and wash, then we'll break fast.'

Matilda de la Verrière pushed back a strand of hair from her forehead and watched her daughters trail out of the door to the pump. She loved both her children, but every time she saw Tanya, something tugged at her heart; the girl was so like her father in both looks and temperament.

Matilda had been born in Reval, the only daughter of a wealthy Swedish merchant, and had received an excellent education which included those scholarly subjects more usually reserved for the male sex. At sixteen, she had fallen head over heels in love with

Jean de la Verrière, the penniless younger son of a noble French family. Jean had been travelling to escape the more pressing of his creditors, but it was too late when Matilda finally discovered his true vocation – the fatal tendency to gamble away whatever money fell into his hands.

Olsen Svenson had not approved of his daughter's choice, but since the young man so obviously returned her feelings, and as he had always been unable to deny his daughter anything, Matilda had her way. He died two years later a broken man, just after Matilda had presented him with a granddaughter. His heart had been weakening even before he had watched his son-in-law slowly but inevitably gamble away his daughter's inheritance.

After his death, things deteriorated badly. Although Olsen's influence had not been great, it had nevertheless been some restraint; once Jean realised that what was left of the small fortune amassed by the old man over a lifetime now belonged to him, it went to his head. The fact that it took him almost two years to lose it was the only surprising factor. The large, comfortable house in Reval was now the only asset left, but before he had a chance to mortgage it, a trifling affair of honour leading to a duel, rather mercifully, prevented him. He was killed, and Matilda was left almost penniless with a daughter to bring up and another child on the way. She sold her father's house to pay off the most pressing of her husband's debts and shook the dust of Reval from her feet. Taking her small daughter and her servant Maria, she went to live with her father's brother who owned a small farm near Pattina, close to the Russian border, and there, Tanya had been born. Matilda had paid for her keep by cooking and cleaning for her uncle, who had never married, and on his death, the holding reverted to her, together with a small stipend.

Matilda was a strong woman who worked hard, and they managed to hold at bay the grinding poverty suffered by so many of their neighbours, but it was always a struggle, and

some days, she could not help but think that somehow she had failed her daughters. Gerda never worried her, she was placid and happy with her lot, but as Tanya grew, she could see more and more of her errant husband in her, and sometimes she feared for her. This wilful, tempestuous creature would never be happy with life on a farm such as this. She belonged to a different world, the one her husband had once enjoyed in France. To ensure that they at least had some advantage, Matilda had taught her daughters the subjects she had been lucky enough to learn in her youth, having brought with her such books as she had been able to save. Gerda never got much further than writing her name and adding a few sums, but Tanya learned avidly. Anything and everything was absorbed into that bright head bent diligently over her books. Matilda, who was fluent in French taught Tanya that language, and it was the only time her youngest daughter seemed really happy, wrestling with languages or mathematics, soon leaving her mother far behind.

Tanya herself somehow knew that learning would help her to shake off the shackles of poverty. In some dim, half-understood way, she knew only that one day she was going to make something of herself, be somebody. She had become sure of this after one of her forays into Pattina for more reading material. She had been picking her way through the garbage littering the streets, her little nose wrinkling in disgust, when she had heard the loud cries of 'Make way, scum, make way,' and a large carriage drawn by four plunging horses came careering towards her, the driver laying about him with his whip. As she flattened herself against the wall, Tanya had caught a glimpse of the occupants of the coach, seen in an instant, but etched upon her mind forever.

The sumptuous gown and haughty profile of the lady had taken Tanya's breath away. The bonnet, with its nodding plumes shadowed a face of extraordinary beauty, and no less beautiful was the man seated opposite, hair powdered and curled, a pomander held to his

thin nostrils to drive away the stink of rotting cabbage and unwashed humanity prevalent in the poorer parts of the town.

To the thin, poorly dressed child, cowering back to avoid the flailing hooves of the magnificent black horses, they might have belonged to another world. The flashing necklace glimpsed around the lady's throat would probably have kept Tanya's family and most of the surrounding district in food and clothing for the rest of their lives. The half-understood feeling of rebellion, of dissatisfaction with her lot, filled her mind long after the coach had disappeared. A longing to be part of that world permeated her being, a longing so strong she felt almost sick with it. Somehow she knew she belonged there, not married to some stolid, doltish clod like Karl, to whom her sister was promised. How Gerda could bear that round peasant face and slow stupid grin was beyond her, but as far as she could tell, her sister was quite satisfied with the future laid out for her.

'Well, I'm not!' muttered Tanya through clenched teeth. 'One day, I'm going to escape.'

She daydreamed about life in that other world all through morning prayers, as she did most mornings, but snapped out of her reverie in time for breakfast. Tanya was always hungry, and today was no exception. She dipped the black bread in her gruel, mopping up every morsel, but as usual, her stomach still felt empty. It always did.

Gerda was ordered into the corner with a pile of mending, and Tanya waited gloomily for her own allotment of tasks. How would it feel, she wondered, to have nothing to do, and to please oneself entirely?

Matilda eyed her youngest daughter's rebellious face and sighed inwardly.

'Tanya, go and milk the goat, then take some milk over to the Dakovs to trade for some dried meat. They have a new baby, yet again, and poor Helga hasn't enough milk to feed a sparrow. Ah, but times are hard.'

Nothing loath to spend the morning out of doors, Tanya pulled on her old fur coat, milked the goat with more energy than usual, then set off to walk the five miles to the Dakov's cabin, taking a short cut through the woods.

The air was bitterly cold as she drew it into her lungs, making her cough. The winter had been long and hard and seemed reluctant to give way to spring. The ground was iron hard beneath her boots as she strode out in a vain attempt to keep warm, impervious to the beauty of the tall pines far overhead, their dark branches intermittently speared by sunlight. The silence was all pervading, the only sound the crunching of pine cones under her feet and the occasional cry of a bird. Once, far in the distance, she thought she heard a cry, and she stopped in her tracks, ears straining, but the silence returned.

'Imagination,' she muttered under her breath and promptly forgot all about it. Humming softly, she picked her way through the last of the trees and made her way towards the Dakov's cabin. As she neared the rough wooden building, her steps faltered, then she stopped, puzzled. All was still and quiet, with no bevy of children tumbling out to meet her. Nothing stirred; even the birds had stopped singing. Feeling unreasonably apprehensive, she almost crept up to the door and knocked. It swung drunkenly on its hinges, and she pushed it open gingerly and stepped inside. The room was empty, but the table was laid for a meal, the bread and precious salt still in the centre. She put down the jug of milk and frowned. The room was still warm despite the open door, and as she walked around the stove, her heart jumped wildly. The huge cooking pot was turned over on its side, its contents still dripping slowly out and congealing in a puddle on the floor. Swinging round, her stomach churning, she noticed the absence of Dakov's huge wooden axe from its usual place above the door.

With a dry mouth and panic sending icy fingers up and down her spine, she tried to scold herself into action, and somehow managed to get her feet moving.

She peered out around the door, hesitating for a moment, poised for flight, but nothing moved.

She considered shouting, but something held her back. Instead, she moved around the back of the cabin and set off up the slope towards the forest, some vague idea of perhaps climbing a tree to see if she could spot anyone in her mind. She promised herself she would just have a quick look, then set off home to tell her mother what she had found. She tried to convince herself that perhaps the Dakovs had gone visiting or journeyed into town, but she knew this was most unlikely.

Leaving the clearing, she walked a few paces into the dim light beneath the trees, then stopped, nerves jumping as a splash of colour against the snow caught her eye. She couldn't quite make out what it was, but as she drew nearer, she saw it was a small carved wooden doll, tied around with a piece of red rag. She recognised it instantly as belonging to little Nikki, the Dakov's youngest daughter. The child never let it out of her sight, and almost unthinkingly, Tanya bent down to pick it up. As she did so, a small scream escaped her. Protruding from beneath a bush was a tiny white foot. As though in a dream, Tanya pulled the branches aside and knelt down by the pathetic little bundle huddled on the ground. It was Nikki, and the child was quite dead. Even Tanya, who had never met death face to face before, could see that. From the angle of her head, it looked as though her neck was broken.

'Poor baby,' whispered Tanya, cradling the cold little body in her arms. 'To die so young.' She crossed herself and sent up a prayer for the child's soul, then feeling strangely detached, she pushed aside the rest of the thicket and stepped through.

Sheer horror held her rigid for a moment; she recoiled and almost ran, then slowly, reluctantly turned back, unable to drag her eyes away. Scattered around the small clearing

were nine bodies. Dakov and his three sons had fought bravely and well and were horribly mutilated. Dakov himself has been decapitated, his blood congealing in the snow.

Beside them lay his wife and daughter, a strapping girl of Tanya's own age. Their pitiful, naked bodies lay broken and bruised, blood staining the snow between the young girl's thighs. With a low moan, Tanya turned away, then froze once more, her eyes riveted on the other three bodies. They lay in all their fierce splendour, arrogant even in death. Her horrified gaze took in every detail, from the scarlet damask trousers and blouse each wore, to the brutal swarthiness of their rigid faces. Although Tanya had never seen a Cossack, she had heard too many stories of these fierce, merciless men not to recognise them for what they were. Although officially Sweden was not at war with Russia, raids of this type across the border by bands of Cossack brigands were becoming more and more common.

She remained transfixed for a moment, quite unable to move, a queer dead look in her eyes, then she turned away suddenly, stomach heaving, and was violently sick.

When the spasm passed, she leaned against a tree, gasping. All her strength had left her, and she was trembling violently. For the first time, she noticed how the snow had been trampled by many feet and glanced around in sudden fear, crouching like a wild animal at bay. It was then that she saw the tiny body at her feet. It was Helga Dakov's newborn baby, and someone had dashed its brains out against the tree.

She gave one high, shrill scream that echoed around the clearing like the death cry of a tortured animal, then she turned and fled, sobbing violently. Her one thought was to get home, back to her own familiar world where she could cradle her head in her mother's lap and find some sanity again. She ran blindly, chest bursting, slipping and stumbling in the snow, impervious to the twigs and branches grabbing at her as though to stop her flight. She was almost through the forest when her foot caught in a root and her ankle twisted, sending her crashing to the ground. She lay for a moment, face pressed against

the ground fighting for breath, then struggled up to her hands and knees. Some inner strength forced her to her feet, and she set off again, limping now, the pain somehow bringing her back to reality. Never had the way seemed so long. Her heart was hammering, and she was almost at the end of her strength when she reached the edge of the trees. There was a mist before her eyes, and she shook her head to clear it. Strange. She was sure she could hear laughter. Why, of all things, should she hear laughter now? The mist cleared, and she stared down at the farm below her. Her brain took a while to register what her eyes had already focused on. The laughter was not inside her head. It was a coarse, male laughter, and it was issuing from the throats of some twenty or so fierce, gaily clad men gathered in her mother's yard. The cause of the laughter was a woman, tied by her ankles to one of the Cossack's horses. Its rider was galloping round and round in front of the cabin, the body bumping and twisting after it like a limp rag doll. The long blonde hair was matted with blood, the victim's screams echoing like the cries of a lost soul. Some distance away, another group of men held down a struggling form spread-eagled on the ground. They were queuing up, one behind the other, fumbling with the strings of their trousers. Tanya could hear her sister's despairing cries quite clearly, even above the weakening screams of her mother.

Smoke and flames were licking the sides of the cabin, and even as she watched, a figure burst out of the door, hair and clothes blazing, screaming, screaming . . .

Something snapped in Tanya's brain; it was too much for her to bear. She fell to the ground, froth coming from her mouth. Her body went rigid, her limbs twitching convulsively, and flecks of blood appeared at the corners of her mouth. A merciful wall of unconsciousness bore her away down a long, dark tunnel. She was vaguely aware of a dim figure bending over her and of being lifted up, then the darkness rushed back leaving

only a tiny pinpoint of light far off in the distance. Although Tanya did not know it, that light was her sole link with life and sanity, and it was going to be a long, hard fight back to both!

Chapter 2

Tanya walked down a long grey corridor. The grey was not uniform, but rather swirled around her in a moving, shifting pattern. Shadowy figures called out to her, stretching out supplicating arms, there one moment, insubstantial the next.

‘Come, Tanya,’ they cried in voices like the wind. ‘Come.’

‘It’s Gerda, Tanya. Come with me.’

Tanya tried to find her way out of the corridor, tried to find her way to her sister and mother waiting for her, just out of reach, but something seemed to hold her back. It was as though her feet took her forward towards the point of light at the end of the darkness, whether she willed it or not. Sometimes she struggled, sometimes she just let herself be carried forward, but the light remained steadfast in front of her. Suddenly, she was tired of the endless grey, and a passion arose in her to see again bright colours, to smell the scent of flowers, to feel the sun on her face. As the passion grew, so did the light, until it began to disperse the grey shadows fleeing before its onslaught. The light became brighter and brighter, until she had to shut her eyes to protect them from the glare. When she opened them again, she stared around her in astonishment, for she found herself in even stranger surroundings.

She was lying on a stone ledge cut into a rocky wall, covered with a pile of furs. She was in some kind of cave, large and airy with a covering of moss on the floor and odd pieces of furniture scattered around. Towards the opening, a fire burned, and over it hung a large pot from which a most delicious smell wafted. Tanya’s nostrils quivered, and she tried to sit up. Panic gripped her. She was straining every muscle, but she could not move! She couldn’t even lift her head.

‘Where am I?’ she tried to say, but only managed a dry croak.

‘Ah, my child, you are conscious at last. May Saint Peter be praised. I had my doubts that you would ever return to the land of the living.’

Tanya gathered all her strength and managed to turn her head towards the quavering voice, and her eyes dilated with fear.

A tall, painfully thin man loomed over her, his head on one side like a bird. He wore peasant clothes, but gathered around his shoulders hung a huge cloak, liberally embellished with the feathers of many varieties of birds, enhancing his birdlike appearance. Her eyes travelled up to his face, and some of her fear left her. The expression on the lined old face was one of great sweetness, the eyes that twinkled down at her of that shade of blue most commonly seen in sailors who have spent a lifetime searching far horizons. They seemed to see right inside her, searching out her soul. His hair was pure white and straggled down to his shoulders.

Becoming aware that she was staring open-mouthed at the man, she flushed, and once again tried to sit up.

‘No, no, my child, you must rest. That is what you need now more than anything. Rest, and plenty of good food – and iron. Yes, yes, iron is what you need to make your blood thick and rich again.’

Nodding his head, he hopped over to the pot, gave it a stir, and then ladled some of the contents into a bowl.

‘First, you must eat. By the Holy Martyr, you are all skin, bone, and eyes.’

He put an arm beneath her shoulders and raised her up, spooning the broth into her mouth.

‘Come on now, eat it up, every drop. It will make you strong again.’

Tanya swallowed the broth ravenously and then obediently drank the contents of the goblet he held to her lips. It smelled strange, and she wrinkled her nose.

‘Ah, ’tis not the sweetest mixture, but it will make you better very quickly. Iron and herbs, iron and herbs.’

Tanya sank back down with a sigh, and almost immediately slept again, but this time, it was a deep, normal sleep undisturbed by dreams.

When she awoke, she felt immeasurably stronger and even managed to struggle up a little, to take further stock of her surroundings.

It was dark now, but inside the cave, a smoking torch thrust into a bracket in the rock gave a fitful light. In the far corner, the old man hovered over a jumble of phials and bottles, some bubbling and giving off a pungent odour. Tanya stared in amazement and crossed herself nervously.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded and was surprised at how strong her voice sounded now. ‘Are you . . . are you a witch, or a warlock?’

A superstitious shiver ran up her back as she asked the question, and the old man chuckled.

‘No, child, I’m neither. Just an old hermit who likes to live alone out here in the woods, picking my herbs and making medicines to help the sick. Now spring is here, they grow fast, and I can start my work again.’

‘Spring!’ exclaimed Tanya. ‘I don’t understand. How long have I been here? What happened to . . . ?’

‘Peace, child,’ cried the old man sharply. ‘All your questions will be answered when the time is right. You have been very ill, little one, and have been as one dead for over a month. I have only managed to keep you alive by forcing my medicines through your lips, and thank God at least you swallowed them. It brings joy to my old heart to see the colour back in your cheeks again and to hear you speak.’

‘But how did I get here? My mother and sister will be frantic with worry, they will . . .’ She broke off and fell back against the pillows, holding her hands out as though to ward off

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