

## “Nikolai and Praskovia”

*The Story of the Serf Who  
Married Her Owner*

TV Series Proposal  
by Jan Wilson



### **The Passionate and Forbidden Love of Nikolai and Praskovia**

The tale of Nikolai and Praskovia is one of the greatest and most tragic love stories of our time. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia their love was strictly taboo. He was one of the wealthiest men in Russia, and she was his serf, his property. Yet they fell madly in love. He nurtured her talent as a singer by hiring the best coaches in the world for her. She became one of the most celebrated singers of her day.

But their forbidden love was always the gossip of St. Petersburg. The nobility never accepted her despite her talent, even after he had her emancipated and married her. Yet they stayed devoted to each other and lived their lives only for each other. But their love and dedication did not guarantee them a happy ending.

### **The Strange and Lurid Story of Serf Theater**

Catherine the Great revered Peter the Great, who was her grandfather-in-law. Though she never met him, she greatly admired him and modeled herself after him. However, she felt that she was a more enlightened ruler and thought Peter had too strong a hold over the nobility of Russia. After she came to power in 1762 she freed the nobility from their obligation to serve the state, and many nobleman took advantage of this new freedom to return to their country estates, which included serfs who worked the land for them.



Serfs were essentially peasant slaves that lived on the lord's land (hence the name "landlord") and took care of the crops and livestock. The landlords depended on the serfs' labor for income. The serfs were allowed to also tend crops and livestock for themselves for their own survival, but the landlord's crops came first. The serfs were considered property of the nobles, a.k.a. their "owners". The more land you owned the more serfs you were allocated. Your wealth and status was measured by how many serfs (also referred to as "souls") you owned.

The serfs stayed with the land. If you sold your land, the serfs were transferred as part of the purchase. Life for a serf was difficult and harsh. Only slightly better than being a slave. Many landlords were cruel and abusive to their serfs.

Since they were now released from their obligation to serve the state the nobility found themselves with more free time out on their country estates. Catherine the Great greatly enhanced Russia's culture, art, architecture, and entertainment. Theater was big, and many of the landlords built private theaters on their estates. Acting, singing or performing of any kind

was considered far beneath the aristocracy. They adored the theater, but would never stoop so low as to appear onstage themselves. So who would run these theaters and appear onstage? Why the landlords' serfs of course. They had to do whatever their owners asked of them.

Serfs would be forced to perform, learn lines, sing songs, dance for the pleasure of their landlords and their guests. If any serf showed any talent in any given area they would be forced to develop their talent in that direction. Famous singers, actors, and coaches were brought in from Europe to mold these rough, illiterate field-hands into finely trained performers. But no matter how wonderfully they performed or how famous they became, they still belonged to their owners and could be forced back into the fields to tend sheep the next day.



Serf theaters became quite popular and competitive. Landlords would try and outdo each other by having the biggest and best theaters created by famous architects with state-of-the-art features onstage. At one time there were roughly 170 serf theaters in Russia. Some of these privately owned theaters rivaled the royal court theaters, both in size and quality.

It was a contradictory existence for the serfs. They were sometimes freed from their menial tasks of farming or cooking and often gained an education they might not have otherwise

received, and some of the serfs became genuinely cultivated artists and performers. Yet their lives were also harshly constrained. Russian country manors were often miniature replicas of the autocratic state, with the lord acting as tsar and presiding over his people with absolute and arbitrary authority.

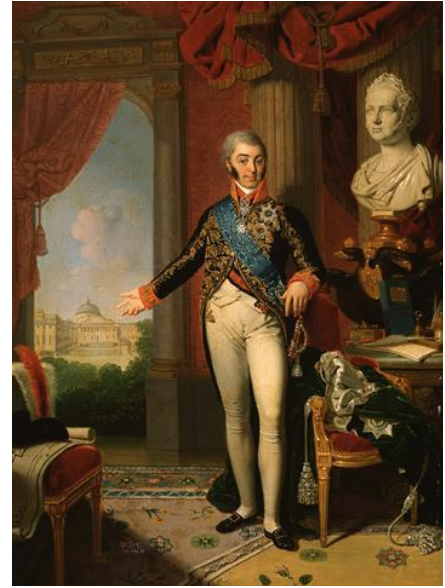
Women were especially burdened since they often doubled as concubines or staffed private harems. The line separating sex and dance was notoriously thin. For example, Prince Yusupov liked his female serfs to undress onstage at the end of performances and whips and canes were favored props given to male audience members.

If a performer did not perform up to the standards of the landlord, harsh punishment ensued. It was not uncommon to see serf actors chained up backstage during play intermissions after giving a performance that did not please his owner. This may have been a serf who was, up until the week before, only in charge of milking the cows or tending to crops. Some of the private theaters become very surreal fantasylands for the landlords, an opportunity to act out their fantasies with a captive cast.

Serf theaters were very strange and surreal places. But this was the beginning of theater in Russia, and it lives on in the great theaters of Russia today.

## And Our Story About Praskovia and Nikolai Begins...

In the late 1700s one of the richest serf theaters belonged to Count Nikolai Sheremetev. Nikolai's family was one of the richest families in Russia, in fact one of his childhood friends was the Grand Duke Paul (Catherine the Great's son and future tsar of Russia) and he grew up in Catherine's court. Nikolai's father had loved the arts and he passed this love onto his son. Nikolai was a gifted musician and even deigned to go onstage himself in plays.



He owned many serfs (thousands probably) but was one of the few landlords who treated his serfs very well. He built several theaters and brought the best teachers in the world to train them. One of his serfs was a young girl about age eight named Praskovia. He noticed that she had a beautiful voice, and he took it upon himself to train her to sing and he formed her into one of the most successful opera singers and actresses in Russia. Throughout her teens she sang for all of the highest aristocracy in Russia, received rave reviews. Her shows were always the most sought-after tickets in town. Even Catherine the Great visited Nikolai's theater for a performance and was so impressed with Praskovia that she summoned her to the palace and gave her a diamond ring.



Praskovia had been given special treatment and was relieved of her serf duties, so many of the other serfs were jealous and mean. She was no longer seen as a regular serf by her peers, yet she was not allowed to mingle with the aristocracy. She was adrift in a lonely middle ground.

But as she grew from a teenager into a woman she found herself falling in love with her owner. And, astonishingly, he also fell in love with her. This was beyond scandalous. A count could not be seen keeping company with a serf, let alone getting romantically involved with her.

Yet Nikolai and Praskovia did fall in love and were not going to be stopped. He was 17 years older than her, which didn't help matters. He was approaching 50 by now, she was in her 30s. All of St. Petersburg was consumed with gossip about these two. Count Nikolai, to his credit, never let gossip or the scorn

of polite society dampen his feelings for Praskovia. He wanted to marry her. He even went so far as to send a forger to Poland to plant secret fake documents that would "prove" that Praskovia actually came from a noble family in Poland. And he did marry her, though they kept this secret for a while.

Praskovia developed tuberculosis and her health was not good. Nikolai was such a decent and loving man, he didn't want his wife to be kept as a dirty secret, especially given her tenuous health. He went to the tsar, Alexander (Catherine the Great's grandson), and admitted that he



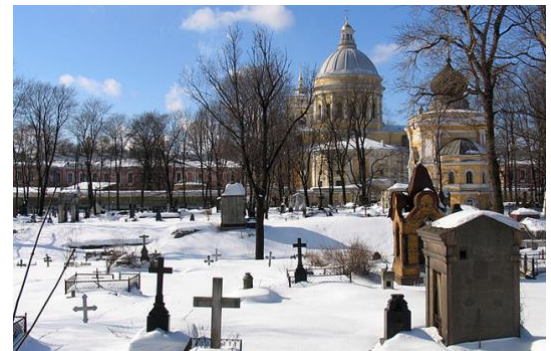


had married his serf, he loved her wholeheartedly and asked that the tsar emancipate her. He did. But this did not wash away the scandal. The aristocracy never forgave Nikolai for marrying his serf. He was ostracized by society, but their love never faltered. They made their love nest in a wing of Nikolai's ancestral estate, Kuskovo.

Soon Praskovia was pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy, Dmitri. But three weeks after the happy birth Praskovia died. The stress of childbirth and tuberculosis was too much for her.

To add to the drama and stress, Nikolai's two nephews, the Razumovsky brothers, had planned to inherit their uncle's vast fortune, and upon hearing that they were to lose it all to the newly born son of a mere serf they planned on murdering the infant. Luckily they were thwarted.

Nikolai arranged a lavish funeral for the love of his life, but as the grand procession proceeded down the avenues to the cemetery, there was no one in attendance. The other nobility stayed away as a way of showing their disapproval. And in fact, even Nikolai himself did not attend her funeral, he was too heartbroken to get out of bed.



Nikolai died only several years later, eaten away by sadness and grief over the loss of Praskovia. But before he died he arranged that someday when his son was older he would be given all of Nikolai and Praskovia's letters so that Dmitri could know his parents' story and how they loved each other even though society never accepted them.

In Nikolai's will he gave instructions for a very simple funeral, in a simple board coffin, with the money intended for a funeral distributed instead to the poor and monasteries.

The grand theater he built for Praskovia at his estate at Ostankino still stands, it is a much-visited estate-museum. It is a grand monument to the enduring love of Nikolai and Praskovia, the gentle nobleman and his beautiful muse.

