INTRODUCTION

P. 11

38 in 1900
41 in 1903
46 in 1907

died in 1916
1862
54

RASPUTIN WAS BORN in the early 1860s, which makes him about ten years older than Churchill, some fourteen years older than Lenin, and nearly twenty years older than Stalin. He was born in the reign of the Tsar-Emperor Alexander the Second, absolute ruler over an empire occupying a sixth of the world's land mass, its inhabitants numbering some hundred million, consisting of over fifty different nationalities and speaking nearly two hundred different languages or dialects. The empire stretched from the Prussian border to beyond the Pacific Ocean—Russia sold Alaska to the U.S.A. in 1867. The tsar's wish was absolute; he was the Autocrat, who ruled by his will alone, free to appoint and dismiss ministers as he wished. It was Tsar Alexander himself who, in the early 1860s, initiated the most radical set of reforms that the Russian people had ever known. By far and away the most important of these was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, which conferred personal freedom upon the thirty-seven percent of the population that had hitherto been state or

private property. Emancipation was accompanied by grants of land made collectively to individual peasant communities, to be redeemed by payments extending over half a century. Other reforms included the creation of an independent judiciary, trial by jury, elements of local government in both town and country, and the liberalisation of the universities.

Although the emancipation may have anticipated the abolition of slavery in the U.S.A. by a few years, the reforms came too late and granted too little to satisfy the radicals. The 1860s saw the rise of a revolutionary intelligentsia, fierce, uncompromising and with a stern belief in science, socialism, materialism and the emancipation of women; a generation whose sincere enthusiasms were not always matched by the intellectual sophistication required to understand the German and French philosophers they read so avidly. Impatient with reforms and the liberals who wished to bring change about gradually, they clamoured for immediate results, and believed that, in order to secure them, all means were justified. Their objective was the destruction of the existing system of government in its entirety, their chief weapon was assassination, their ultimate target was the tsar.

Alexander II survived a first attempt in April 1866, when a young student named Karakozov shot at him and missed from close range. One of the more bizarre consequences of his action was an attempt by the reactionaries to check the spread of higher education by making university entrance depend upon a knowledge of Latin and Greek. Seven years later, virtually to the day, in April 1873, Alexander survived a second attack, by A. K. Solovyev, who also shot and missed, and was subsequently hanged.

Alexander was preparing a second round of reforms, which would include elected elements in the process of government, another major step forward. He had indeed just signed the substantive proposals when, on March 13, 1881, the "Tsar-Liberator," as he was known, was blown up by a terrorist bomb, which destroyed his legs, tore open his stomach and disfigured him. "Home to the palace, to die there" were his last words, and all hope of further reform went with him.

He was succeeded by his son, Alexander III, a man of huge physical strength (he liked bending and straightening horseshoes)

and reactionary temperament. His faith in the crack of firm government was encouraged by his old tutor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, now over-procurator, or minister for religion. Alexander's abhorrence for reform was based upon his lack of faith in human nature and the possibilities of human intellect. This made him opposed to liberalisation of any kind, as he believed that any change was probably for the worse. During his reign the tightest hold was kept upon public opinion, the press and the universities.

However, in other important respects Russia was stirring. She was rapidly becoming an important industrial country. Vast deposits of iron and coal had been discovered in southwest Russia, in the Donets basin, and iron production grew at tremendous speed. The textile industry had also developed rapidly after the American Civil War had checked the import of cotton. Industry developed faster still in the nineties, thanks largely to the work of one of the great ministers of the age. Sergei Witte had begun life as a railway clerk in Tiflis, and worked his way up to become head of the South Western Railways. He was subsequently appointed minister of communications and did much to develop the imperial railway system, helping to initiate the Trans-Siberian Railway in the early 1890s. In 1892 he was appointed minister of finance, in which post he helped to create the vast influx of foreign capital which funded Russia's industrial expansion, giving her the highest industrial growth rate in Europe from 1890 to 1914. Major European and American companies began to invest generously in Russia. On St. Petersburg's Nevsky Prospekt, the smartest street in the empire, one could see advertisements for Singer sewing machines and International Harvester. Some years later the consortium of Shibayev, Nobel, and Rothschild were the principal exploiters of the Baku oilfields, where oil could be seen seeping out of the ground in puddles. Rothschild also owned all the petrol stations between Moscow, Kiev and Warsaw.

Alexander III, who was married to Princess Marie, daughter of the king of Denmark, had a temperament to match his physique. He was a man of great determination, a hard-working ruler who always knew his own mind. Although narrow in outlook and determined to fight the revolutionaries who had murdered his father, rather than isolate them by judicious reforms, absolute power suited him. He had the strength of character and determination needed to make it

work. Unhappily for the Romanov dynasty, these were not characteristics which he succeeded in passing on to his eldest son. Alexander died unexpectedly in his Crimean residence in the autumn of 1894, a death which left the twenty-six-year-old tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich singularly ill-equipped to succeed to the throne as ruler of all the Russias and master of the Russian land. The last of the Romanovs would rule for just twenty-three years before dying, with his wife and five children, at the hands of a Bolshevik firing squad.

* * *

Russian peasants used to have a revealing saying: "God is on high and the tsar a long way off." It implies that while they look to God and the tsar for protection, they recognise that neither protector is readily available. Yet although the saying is a warning not to expect help from anyone, it also reminds us that the great mass of the population of old Russia felt that their lives were, at least in theory, regulated by the two great powers of the autocracy and the church.

The Eastern, or Orthodox, church differs in many ways from Western counterparts as we know them today. The Eastern church, which came to be centered in Constantinople, grew steadily away from Rome between the sixth and eleventh centuries, a final break coming in 1054. Unlike the Catholic church, which places itself under the supreme authority of the pope, the Eastern church consists of a series of more or less autonomous bodies, or patriarchates, of which there were originally four—Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—to which have since been added those of Cyprus, Russia, Roumania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Bulgaria, Poland, Georgia, Albania and Sinai. There also have grown up a series of other independent, or autocephalous, churches—Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Czechoslovakia. When the Russian grand dukes of Kiev assumed the Christian faith in 989, the patriarch of Constantinople was considered the senior or ecumenical patriarch.

Unlike the Western churches, which would undergo continuing theological development from the beginnings, through the Middle Ages, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation to the present day, the Eastern church had resolved all its major theological issues by the time of the Kievan conversion. Strict adherence to traditional

patterns is one of its most important characteristics, and is even reflected in the name; Orthodoxy, in Russian *Pravoslavie*, meaning "correct worship." Central to the faith is the liturgy, or mass, and by participating in its correct forms of worship the Orthodox Christian joins in a communal ritual that unites him with all other Orthodox throughout the world and throughout time, reaching back to the earliest days of Christianity.

Where the Roman Catholic mass was until recently said in Latin, the Orthodox liturgy has tended to be performed in the vernacular. Today it may be heard in Old Church Slavonic, Greek, Georgian, Arabic, Roumanian, Estonian, Lettish, various Finnish and Tartar dialects, Japanese, Chinese and English. There are flourishing Orthodox communities both in the United Kingdom and the United States, and these are by no means limited to persons of Greek or Russian antecedents. Yet despite its obvious claims to universality as a faith, the history of the Orthodox church is closely associated with nationalism. Situated on Christendom's eastern frontier, and frequently under attack from non-Christians, it has often happened that keeping the faith and remaining true to one's country have become bound up with one another. This is very much the case in Russia. For more than two hundred years, from 1237 to 1448, while first Italy and then northern Europe were experiencing the intellectual and scientific renewals of the Renaissance, Russia was occupied by a foreign and heathen power, an occupation which ensured that Russia would remain cut off from the crucial developments of European civilization and go a very different way. To give one example, Moscow's first printing press was established a century after the invention of printing in the West.

Throughout the period of the Tartar occupation the church had provided an important rallying point for both Christian and patriotic values, although it must be said that it frequently cooperated with its Tartar overlords, rather as it does with the regime of today, although the Tartars were more tolerant of Christianity than the Communist party. After the Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, Russia, which had just rid itself of the last vestiges of Tartar rule, assumed leadership of the Eastern church. Although Russia was autocephalous even then, it was governed not by a patriarch, but by a metropolitan or senior bishop. It was at this time that there emerged

the heady doctrine of "Moscow the Third Rome." Two Romes (i.e., Rome and Constantinople) had fallen to barbarians; Moscow was the third and last citadel of Orthodoxy. "Two Romes have fallen, and a fourth there will not be," wrote a monk, Philotheus of Pskov, in 1510. Henceforward Russia would consider herself the champion of Orthodoxy, defender of the faith. Religion and nationalism became bound up with one another for rulers and ruled alike. It was this that gave the Russians their unshakeable belief in their own superiority over all other races, a superiority that would always be with them, whatever their superficial shortcomings and failures, and which would ensure that one day Russia would save the world.

Moscow's identity as the Third Rome was confirmed in 1589, when, with the approval of the patriarch of Constantinople, the Russian church was granted a patriarch of its own. However, the office only existed, in the first instance, for a little more than a century. When the post fell vacant in 1700, during the reign of Peter the Great, the tsar did not make a new appointment. Instead, in 1721, he established a governing body that would endure up to the revolution, when once more it was replaced by a patriarch. Peter's Holy Synod was a collective governing body, consisting of three bishops and nine monks or members of the married clergy. It was supervised by a government official, the over-procurator, who was in effect minister for religion. The result of Peter's reform was to turn the church into a branch of the state, and destroy its independence. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century, during the reign of Nicholas I, the "gendarme of Europe," the political role of the church was fully recognised. Nicholas advanced the doctrine of "Official Christianity," which stated that the basis of Russia's greatness lay in acceptance of an ideology founded on the "joint spirit of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality."

It is from the belief in the moral and political rightness of Orthodoxy and Nationality, i.e., Russianness, that tsarist anti-Semitism was derived. This was religious, as opposed to racial by nature. Practising Jews were denied a whole range of rights. The vast majority of the Empire's Jewish population were required to reside within the so-called Pale of Settlement in southwest Russia, and had to live in cities and towns, being forbidden to farm. There were further restrictions; admission to institutes of secondary and

higher education was on a quota system: five percent for high schools and three for universities in the capital, ten percent for schools and five for universities in the rest of Russia, except for the Pale, which admitted fifteen percent to its high schools, ten percent to the universities. Jews were not allowed to become civil servants, and although subject to conscription in the army they could not become officers. No Christian could enter a legal marital bond with a person of the Jewish faith. However, these restrictions only applied to practising Jews; conversion to Orthodoxy sufficed to entitle the convert to all the freedoms enjoyed by those born Christians. Yet the convert had to pay a terrible price. Every Jew was brought up to believe that by betraying the faith of his fathers he would bring disgrace to his family and community. A father who refused to sever all links with a daughter converted to Christianity would be driven from his community. In such circumstances conversion was understandably rare. In the early twentieth century fifty percent of the world's Jewish population lived within the boundaries of the Russian Empire.

The Orthodox clergy are divided into two groups, the "white" or married clergy, which provides the church's parish priests, and the "black" or monastic clergy. Those intending to marry must do so before ordination; others become monks. In prerevolutionary Russia the white parochial clergy formed an independent class, or rather estate, with priests' sons habitually marrying priests' daughters. They were usually persons of relatively limited education, who frequently lived a life that differed little enough from that of their peasant parishioners, supporting themselves in part at least by cultivating the plot of land allotted them. Scope for advancement was limited to one rung of the ladder, from priest to archpriest, unless the priest were to be widowed, and become a monk.

Monasticism has always had a vital part to play in Orthodoxy. Eastern monasticism is essentially contemplative and inward looking, whether the monks lived alone, as hermits, or in loosely knit communities. It does not have the emphasis on active works that is found in many Western orders. Above all the Eastern monk seeks, through prayer and contemplation, for knowledge of God. For over a thousand years the heart of Eastern monasticism has been Athos, a rocky peninsula in northern Greece that ends in a six-thousand-foot

mountain known as the Holy Mountain. The whole peninsula consists entirely of monasteries, and in its heyday it contained over forty thousand monks, although by 1930 there were scarcely more than a tenth of that number. Early in this century Russian monks were very much in the majority, although this is no longer the case. The entire population of the Holy Mountain is male, no females of any kind, including animals, being allowed upon it, although in latter years a relaxation has been made in the case of hens.

Monks and holy men have always been prominent in Russian Orthodoxy. In 1914 the empire contained no fewer than 1,025 monasteries, although the number is sadly reduced today; one of the very few still functioning is the famous Trinity St. Sergius monastery at Zagorsk, just outside Moscow, a massive establishment and fortified place that has been a bastion of faith, and sometimes of resistance to foreign powers too, for some four centuries. Before the revolution itinerant monks and ordinary pilgrims from every walk of life, literally in the thousands, could be seen wandering across the face of Russia, going from one holy place to the next, worshipping at the shrines of saints, or visiting a particularly holy icon, in fulfillment of a vow or in search of salvation. For the great majority of the population, religion was still a vital driving force that brought people of every level together as they observed the patterns of ritual and of worship, the Lenten fast that culminates in the Easter celebrations, the supreme moment of the Orthodox year, with the joyous announcement that "Christ is risen, He is truly risen." Orthodoxy was then, as it has remained for many within and outside Russia, a truly active faith, one which does not seek to maintain contact with the faithful by "keeping abreast of the times" and pandering to modes and fashions. It offers a community of faith and worship that embraces its faithful, providing them, by its magnificent rituals, with a glorious mediation between man and God.

CHAPTER 1

My country, O my country
Distant Siberia
You are rich in forests,
Your animals are countless.
Your people, O my country,
Come from all over Russia,
From the Don and from the Volga,
Came people bold in spirit,
Came people rich in courage.

SIBERIAN FOLK SONG

P. 19

IT IS SAID that if you stand on top of a certain hill more or less in the middle of England and look east, the next piece of high ground you see will be the Urals, the mountain range that marks the eastern boundary of Europe. Anyone travelling in that direction might suppose, after passing through Germany, Poland and European Russia, that he knew all there was to know about monotony; the monotony of unrelieved flatness, unrelieved, unaltering vistas that stretched endlessly away from the carriage window, expanses of flat, grey, thinly wooded countryside, crossed now and again by a muddy road. Yet however oppressive and overpowering European Russia might appear to a visitor, once across the Urals and into Siberia even European Russians were overpowered and oppressed by the sheer scale, uniformity and sense of unchecked expanse that they encountered in the land that lay before them, reaching four thousand miles to the Pacific Ocean, its total area exceeding that of the United States of America combined with Europe, less European Russia and

Poland. The Western Siberian province of Tobolsk alone, only one among nine, was larger than France, Germany, and Great Britain put together.

In the early twentieth century it took about three and a half days to travel from St. Petersburg to the Urals, a distance of some fifteen hundred miles. The journey was not without charm, as the train moved sedately along the line. One reason the train moved so slowly, averaging about eighteen miles an hour, was the primitive signalling system that stretched from St. Petersburg to the Pacific. Every *verst* (.66 of a mile) there was a yellow-painted log cabin, with a signaller and his family. They would display a green flag by day to show the line was clear, a green lamp by night. The train actually moved at rather more than eighteen miles an hour between stops, but these could be protracted, thanks to the excellent refreshment rooms to be found at each station. As an English traveller of the time wrote:

> If ever the Muscovite thanks the Great White Czar for anything he should thank him for the food on the railways. Foreigners grumble about the slowness of the Russian trains. They are not particularly slow, the time is spent at the railway station while the passengers eat.[1]

As you entered Siberia by train the first, indeed the only thing to be seen was forest, the *taiga*, three million square miles of boggy woodland; Siberian poplars, spruces, Scotch pines, alder and birch trees, growing close together and reaching out in all directions as far as the eye could see. In Western Siberia, and close to the railway line, there were occasional villages and signs of agriculture; forest would be interrupted by the odd ploughed field, usually with a tree or two left standing in it. Even to Russian eyes man's impact upon the environment appeared unimpressive. Even to Russian eyes it all appeared hopeless and run down, particularly since the cultivation of a particular patch of land was usually a short-term affair. A field of black earth would be cleared of forest, farmed intensively for five or six years, and then left to lie fallow for another decade. Animal husbandry was also conducted on a fairly haphazard basis, the cattle being allowed to fend for themselves without additional feed, which made them poor in quality, ill-favoured and bad milk producers.

The climate was no help. From May to September the boggy

taiga, with its swamps and its mosquitoes, produced bad water and all manner of fever and disease. Although the first signs of winter came with the nightly hoar frosts of late August, heavy autumn rains made the roads impassable until the snows came in October, shortly to be accompanied by frosts of up to −50° Fahrenheit, which would remain for the next six months before melting to render travel impossible again until the end of April. The Siberians are proud of their cold but dry winter. "One of our winters is worth nine summers," they boast.

Russia first began to settle the huge eastern territory in the sixteenth century, when a cossack adventurer, Ermak, in dangerously bad standing with Ivan the Terrible, led a series of expeditions into Western Siberia, allegedly regaining the tsarist favour by presenting him with new-won territories, as an Elizabethan pirate might present new conquests to his queen. From then on there was a steady drift to the east of adventurers, soldiers, trappers, traders, runaway serfs and anyone anxious to escape the heavy hand of the central government, for reasons of politics, or as we shall see, more often and more significantly, religion. It would long be possible for whole communities to up and migrate east to settle deep in the *taiga,* without the authorities even knowing that they were there. In many respects Siberia was to European Russia what the West was to Eastern seaboard America, creating its own version of the frontier mentality—but with important differences in treatment of the native population, for example. Thus, although by 1900 more than eighty-five percent of the population of Western Siberia was European, Europeans and the indigenous population had lived together in harmony for centuries, without the need for reservations. Yet there were "reservations" of a different kind. While the tsarist government's penal settlements may never have matched the scale of the USSR's gulag archipelago, which includes several areas the size of France devoted exclusively to camps, there can be no doubt that the steady stream of convicts that had been trudging east without interruption for nearly four centuries, to the tune, by 1885, of nearly twelve thousand a year, had left its mark upon the land. Moreover, to prove that in Russia some things do not change, descriptions of prison conditions on *étape,* that is, on the road to Siberia, could well have been written by Solzhenitsyn.

George Kennan, a Western Union man turned journalist from Ohio, describes conditions in a Siberian forwarding prison in 1887:

> "You see how it is," said the warden, addressing me. "This cell contains more than four times the number of prisoners it was intended to hold, and the same condition of things exists throughout the prison." I looked around the cell. There was practically no ventilation whatever, and the air was so poisoned and foul that I could scarcely bring myself to breathe it. We visited successively in the yard six cells essentially like the first, and found in every one of them three or four times the number of prisoners for which it was intended . . . In most cells there was not room enough on the sleeping platforms for all of the convicts, and scores of men slept every night on the foul, muddy floors, under the *nary* (plank beds), and in the gangways between them and the walls.[2]

Siberia, then, was at one time a refuge and a place of penal servitude and exile. The land was settled by pioneers, fugitives and ex-convicts, and it evolved a peasant culture and cast of mind that differed markedly from its Russian counterpart, and for good reason. Throughout Russia the entire peasant population had known increasingly severe degrees of servitude from the beginnings until 1861. Some serfs were private property, to be bought, sold, flogged within an inch of their lives, if not further, by their owners. Others belonged to the state, working on state farms or in state factories. Centuries of servitude had left their mark, in the shape of a passive acceptance of authority, however cruel or unjust, since authority could no more be avoided than a force of nature, and justice was a long way off. This fatalistic acceptance of cruelty and misrule was accompanied by a capacity to endure conditions of physical hardship that any other European would have found intolerable. The attitude was assisted by the Orthodox religion, which encourages the faithful to "accept suffering" as a God-sent burden. The preposterous capacity for submission and endurance found in the people has helped to shape an important characteristic of Russian public life—a feature found in tsarist times, and still found today—namely a disregard for the interests, well-being or indeed life of one's fellow men, together with a resigned tolerance of administrative incompetence at every level; attitudes shared by governors and governed alike.

The Siberian peasant was different. He lacked the *pokornost'*—meek submission—that marked his Great Russian counterpart, and this because although there had been factory serfs aplenty in Siberia, agricultural serfdom, and more especially serf-owning landowners, or *pomeshchik*, were unknown. The Siberian peasant had always owned his own land and was immensely proud of the fact: "Siberia never knew the *pomeshchik*, here all is from God and for the people,"[3] as one peasant saying went. To Great Russians, Siberians appeared dour, uncommunicative, awkward and highly insular, displaying little interest in anything taking place west of the Urals. They were conscious of being a people apart, and would describe crossing the Urals as "going to Russia." The peasants were stubborn and independent-minded, they never fawned before authority and "addressed highly placed officials as equals, not superiors."[4]

As one might expect from a huge decentralised agricultural society, Siberia abounded in different dialects, varying in accent and in idiom, although to Great Russian ears there is a certain manner of speech that sounds specifically Siberian; low in pitch, soft, with dark booming vowel sounds, very different from the singsong Moscow accent that is the standard spoken Russian of today.

Siberian peasants were generally more prosperous than their Russian counterparts. Like them they lived in village communities, and it was the community as a whole that controlled the allocation of land to individual farmers. Each village would be surrounded by several hundred acres of communal grazing. Rather than fence off individual fields, the Siberians preferred to leave then unfenced, simply enclosing the common pasture. Thus each village was ringed with a fence, and at the point at which it crossed the road on each side of the village there would be a gate and gatekeeper's hut. All farm buildings were contained within the villages, so that it was possible to drive for hours through cultivated land without seeing a single building of any kind.

The villages themselves were of miserable appearance. They consisted of two long rows of houses built of undressed and unpainted logs, caulked with moss. They would have elaborately carved window frames, however, and the shutters would often be brightly coloured. When there was not enough glass to fill the frames, the deficiency would be made up with birch bark. Cottages

would be separated from one another by yards, containing sheds and stabling, and the houses were said to smell "like all the cats in the province."[5] Anyone getting his first glimpse of a Siberian village street would be entitled to think that it was a depressing, run-down affair:

> The wide street has no sidewalks; it is sometimes a sea of liquid mud from the walls of the houses on one side, to the walls of the houses on the other; and there is not a tree, nor a bush, nor a square yard of grass in the settlement. Bristly, slab-sided, razor-backed pigs lie here and there in the mud, and wander up and down the street in search of food, and the whole village makes an impression of shiftlessness, poverty and squalor.[6]

In a sense the impression was erroneous. The inhabitants might well be quite prosperous, but on the whole Siberian villagers saw little point in exerting themselves to improve the quality of public village life, as long as they found that life tolerable. Yet this is not to say that they led a cheerless existence, or one that lacked colour. On the contrary, not only did they like to fill their houses with flowers, they liked to dress as brightly as they could:

> Some of the peasant women had a strength of mind sufficient to carry a green bodice over a purple skirt, while red and pink, or heliotropes and browns of every shade, were largely fancied. Their dress is very uniform. Outside of all is an ordinary apron; below that a print skirt, often held up by two bands of the same material passing over the loose bodice, one over each shoulder. The men are content with a brightly coloured shirt, velveteen or cloth trousers, jack-boots and peak-cap, and a short pea-jacket in the cool evenings.[7]

Village life had its own steady agricultural rhythms; spring and summer in the fields, with harvest coming quite late in the year, and then the long winter months, when there was nothing to do but look after the animals. Some of the menfolk would go to work in the nearest towns as artisans or labourers. Others would have their cottage industry, wood carving mostly, or hunt and trap. Others still, like Rasputin's father, drove a horse and sleigh for the state.

The rhythms of the peasant year were not just seasonal, they were also set by saints' days and religious festivals, which were often

accompanied by customs that were manifestly pagan in origin. On New Year's Eve unmarried girls would go to listen at the closed door of a neighbour's house; those who heard a man's name would be married by the end of the year. Midsummer's Day was an unashamedly pagan festival. Bonfires were lit, as they used to be all over Northern Europe, along river-banks wherever possible. Young girls would weave wreaths, which they donned before jumping over the fires and into the river, letting the wreaths float down the stream. The next morning they would go in search of them, hoping to tell from their position and condition whether or not they would get married that year.

For all the charm of such practices, they were really incidental to village life proper. In European Russia this centred around the inn, but since inns were less frequent in Siberia, entertainment usually began in private houses. However, as in the rest of Russia, the chief source of entertainment came in bottles. Drunkenness existed upon the scale of the land itself; long winters together with a staple of grain spirit saw to that. To get the feeling of a Siberian holiday one needs to imagine the sound of a wheezing accordion, sometimes drowned by loud voices shouting and cursing, accompanied by the hot reek of vodka, salt fish and raw onions, as the village drunks, in need of a little fresh air, tumble out of the house and move onto the streets:

> I saw a whole crowd of women singing and dancing, some of them had red ribbons pinned to their headscarves, some wore their sheep-skin coats inside out, others wore comic headgear and hats: they carried sticks and wreaths of flowers, one of them had a bale of straw. As they came to side streets they would set a handful of straw alight, jump over it, stamp out the fire and go on their way. They threw snow at any man they encountered and tried to knock him to the ground; they were all perfectly drunk, stumbling into one another, falling over, four or five at a time, slipping over together shrieking on the ice, throwing up their legs and revealing the most remarkable sights. Their songs made use of words that are not to be found in any dictionary . . . The following day, and a terrible snowstorm notwithstanding, crowds of drunken and frenzied women were still staggering about the village.[8]

The Siberian judicial code laid down that the penalty for assaulting the humblest civil servant could be as harsh as two years

hard labour—unless it could be established that the culprit was drunk. The worst a drunken aggressor could expect for, say, doing physical violence to a judge was three days in the local prison.[9]

Yet it should never be forgotten that this disregard for life's finer things went along with other qualities no more familiar in the West: that capacity for emotional warmth, tenderness, and spiritual cosiness which made Siberians describe convicts as "the unfortunates." This benevolence was reflected more tangibly in the dish of food and bowl of milk which most peasants would leave outside their well-bolted doors each night for vagrants and men on the run; the fact that they would not dare admit them into their homes did not mean that they were willing to let them go hungry.[10]

There was also to be found considerable practical intelligence or peasant cunning, which was restricted in its scope by the almost total lack of formal education, and the limitations of a society that had remained virtually unaffected by the culture of the West. The Siberian peasant of the early twentieth century was narrow-minded, conservative, with a deep and often less than Orthodox religious faith, and was frequently profoundly superstitious. He might have been born into this age, but at least until 1914 he was not a part of it. Siberia was altogether removed in time from the Europe of the twentieth century. The first motor car to be seen in Siberia, the property of a Danish agriculturalist, was also the cause of Siberia's first traffic accident—when an old woman who saw it took it for the chariot of Antichrist and died of a heart attack. When Siberian units first went into action in East Prussia in 1914 they panicked at the sight of enemy aircraft, taking them as the sure and certain sign that God was fighting for the other side.[11]

It is appropriate that the most famous and powerful Siberian of modern history, Grigorii Efimovich Rasputin, should have been a peasant, who, along with his own remarkable qualities and powers, preserved a peasant's intuitive cunning and narrowness, a peasant's love of drink, dance, and unbridled celebration, a peasant's capacity for warmth and for superstition, and above all, perhaps, the Siberian peasant's readiness to address his superiors as equals—a readiness Rasputin took to unheard-of lengths, when, wearing his peasant boots and embroidered blouses, he addressed the tsar and tsarina as "Papa" and "Mama." Rasputin died as he was born, a peasant of

Western Siberia, only the second of his class to get close to the Russian throne. The first man to do so, Patriarch Nikon in the seventeenth century, can be said with some justification to have destroyed the unity of the Orthodox church forever.[12] The second, Rasputin, may be said with more justification still to have destroyed the dynasty. In neither case was the destruction intentional.

* * *

The village of Pokrovskoe, Rasputin's birthplace, is in Western Siberia, not far beyond the Ural Mountains, and some sixteen hundred miles from St. Petersburg. The village lies on a river, the Toura, which forms part of the Ob basin, a network of navigable rivers that played an important part in the Western Siberian communications system. Especially in spring and autumn, when the roads were impassable, axle-deep in mud, the wide, fast-flowing rivers of Siberia, which had the draft to accommodate steamers of considerable size, offered the only means of long-distance travel in the area. Since the Trans-Siberian Railway passed well to the south, a traveller from the capital wishing to journey to Pokrovskoe would take a train which would bring him in three-and-a-half days to the end of the line, the Siberian town of Tyumen. Before the laying of the Trans-Siberian Railway all exiles from northern and central Russia travelling east to Siberia used to pass through Tyumen, and Baedeker's guide for 1914 estimates that in the sixty years preceding the opening of the railway an astonishing total of 908,266 persons had passed that way.

How the traveller would continue his journey depended on the season. If it was winter, and the rivers were frozen, he would have the misfortune to go by road, along the so-called Trakt No. 4. It was a miserable journey and all images of sleighs gliding smoothly over a carpet of snow, sleigh bells jingling and cheerful driver calling to his galloping horses, should be put aside. The *trakt* was in constant use by convoys of heavy transports, and the journey was slow and anything but smooth:

> Bump jolt, bump, jolt, over huge frozen lumps of snow, and into holes, and up and down those dreadful waves and furrows made by the traffic. Your head seems to belong to every part of the sledge! It is first bumped at the top; then the conveyance gives a lurch, and

> you get an unexpected knock against the side . . . Bright memories of asphalt and the omnibus spring up to diversify your thoughts. Little gleams of light which you pass on your way seem to come from tiny hut windows in the forest.
>
> "Driver, can't we stop a minute at one of those huts, where the lights are?"
>
> "Lights! they're wolves."[13]

The river journey was easier:

> The S.S. *Irkutsk* plied its way between Tyumen and Tobolsk. In the first class there were Russian officials and officers on their way to take up positions in the far North, Siberian merchants dealing in dairy produce, fish and skins, and by no means least important, furs, squirrel, fox, sable, etc. In the steerage, there was a motley collection of peasants, soldiers and workers, and, among them a group of extremely distinguished-looking young Russians who were students of both sexes, on their way to serve terms of penal servitude in the far North, for political offences . . . For hours the ship passed enormous pine forests on the port side and an endless wilderness of wild steppe on the starboard, with cultivation only at rare intervals.[14]

Anyone wishing to reach Tobolsk, the capital of Western Siberia, would travel 257 *versts* along the *trakt*, or 403½ by river. It was by the latter route that the imperial family went on their last journey east in 1917, before retracing their steps west as far as Ekaterinburg, some two hundred miles west of Tyumen, where they met a Bolshevik firing squad. One hundred and five miles to the east of Tyumen, just before the Toura River joins the river Tobol, it makes a wide curve to the south. The northern bank rises steeply at that point, and, as the boat moves slowly round the bend, there is plenty of time to observe the village of Pokrovskoe standing above the river. Pokrovskoe was a village of considerable size. It was a river stop, between the villages of Monastyrskaya and Podbulyga, and also a staging post or station upon the *trakt*, between the stations of Yuzhekovskaya and Sazonovskaya. A contemporary travel guide to Western Siberia describes it as a village, *selo*, as opposed to a hamlet, *derevnya*, and one can gain a sense of its relative importance from the fact that of the seventy-five stops along the river between Tyumen and Tobolsk, only eight are accorded *selo* status.[15] As the steamer moved slowly round the Pokrovskoe bend, the imperial family made

the most of this splendid opportunity to inspect the birthplace of their murdered friend, healer, and councillor as they took their last journey back along the river, thereby fulfilling a prophecy of Rasputin's. In 1916 he had announced to an astonished lady-in-waiting that the imperial family would see his village before they died.[16]

Pokrovskoe consisted of several streets of spacious wooden houses of one or sometimes two stories, with ornately carved and painted beams and window frames. The village was dominated by a large white church with a gilded dome. All the streets met at the church, which was set on a slight prominence, and was easily seen from the river. In most respects it was an ordinary village, more prosperous perhaps and more lively than most since it was on both the road and the river. It was also distinguished by another feature that has survived to this day; Pokrovskoe is part of an area known as *Zatatarskoe Boloto,* "The marsh beyond the Tartars," which was, and remains, well known for its wealth of legend and enduring superstition. Today, as an ex-resident told the author, the spot is famous for a particular kind of hunter, known as a *khvostitel'* or "tailer"; they are said to be able to transport themselves to different parts of the forest by teleportation, unpowered flight, although their name suggests that in earlier times they probably relied on broomsticks. The village, as one would expect from the name of the region, is surrounded by marshland, with thick growths of black, dank conifers on slightly higher ground, the trees growing at all angles, and the space between them littered with fallen branches and tops broken off by lightning.

A description of the village published in a Petrograd newspaper in 1915, part of an attack upon Rasputin, describes Pokrovskoe as a poor village, a wretched boggy place, remote and wild, inhabited by dour Siberian *"zhigany,"* or rogues, a race capable of anything.[17] Nevertheless there is nothing to suggest that Pokrovskoe's record of drunkenness, violence and horse stealing was worse than that of any other Siberian village. Siberia was, after all, Russia's Wild West.

* * *

We do not know when Rasputin was born, for peasant culture keeps no records, and it must be admitted that we know next to nothing about the first forty years of his life, because he lived in a world

beyond the reach of the written word. There are a few landmarks, one piece of official testimony, and apart from that virtually nothing but hearsay evidence from various prejudiced sources, such as a daughter and a number of old men trying to reach forty years back in time. Yet however unsatisfactory this might appear at first glance, there is a strange propriety about this lack of hard factual framework. The part Rasputin played in Russian history has little to do with facts; it derives from the tangled mass of hearsay and innuendo in which he was wrapped. It was not so much what Rasputin did but what he was rumoured to do that mattered. In this respect he was, literally, a legend in his own time. The legend was known to the whole of Russia, the man to very few. Even the manner of his death was legendary, nor do the legends end with his death.

In many respects the life of Rasputin resembles the life of a saint, in the sense that hagiography is a stylized form of narrative that only touches on those aspects of the saint's life that pertain to saintliness: anything else is irrelevant. The man is hidden by his legend. It is out of this accumulation of legend and rumour, none of which can be believed without question, although none can be altogether discounted, that we must watch the real, the historical Rasputin gradually emerge.

CHAPTER 2

Ra Ra Raspoutine,
Lover of the Russian Queen.
POP SONG 1979

IF BY LEGEND one means the smothering of hard fact by fantasy, the projection of what people want to believe upon a core of truth, then the legend of "the mad monk" (he was neither a monk nor mad), "lover of the Russian queen" (he was not her lover and the lady in question was an empress), is already contained in the very name of "Russia's greatest love machine." To Russian ears "Rasputin" has an uncannily appropriate ring, tailor-made for the sexually hyperactive peasant who brought down the dynasty. In "Rasputin" he will immediately hear *"rasputstvo,"* or debauch, sexual licence. The association sounds too good to be true, and strictly speaking it is incorrect. There are two other words close to "Rasputin," each of which, however, also has a certain relevance: *rasputitsa,* a word used to describe the state of roads in spring and autumn, when they were and often still are rendered impassable by mud and melting snow, and also *rasput'e,* which describes a fork in the road. It is from the latter word that "Rasputin" is probably

derived, and the name is a common one in Western Siberia, presumably describing the inhabitants of villages located at such spots. Thus, today there is a Soviet Rasputin, an author who is a well-known member of the so-called "village prose" school. Yet inevitably it is the name's sexual connotations that are the most striking, and this was the case even in Grigorii Efimovich's lifetime; for in 1907 he made a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to modify his name to Rasputin-Novykh, Rasputin-Newman. (*Novykh* is a plural form of the adjective *noviy,* or new.)

We know little about Rasputin's family background. The most detailed account of his father, Efimii or Evimii Andreevich, suggests that he came to Siberia from Saratov, where he had had trouble with the law. A carter working for the state, he had passed out dead drunk by his horse on the way back from a fair, only to find when he came to that the horse had been stolen. As the animal was state property he was imprisoned for a year and subsequently moved east to Pokrovskoe. The author of this account gives a convincing description of how he established himself there, stopped drinking, won the respect of his neighbours, and began to prosper. However, after the death of his wife and two of his children, he took to drink again and his affairs went into a decline. He took to thieving and was frequently beaten senseless by his fellow peasants in retribution. This altogether plausible story loses some of its credibility when we go on to learn that one day he was beaten so badly that his young son was obliged to take him to hospital in Tyumen, where he died, leaving the future mad monk an orphan in the late nineteenth century. Rasputin's father actually lived well on into the next century, dying less than a year before his son. Besides, Rasputin himself liked to claim that he came from old Siberian stock: "There were Rasputins living in Pokrovskoe before Ermak conquered Siberia for Ivan the Terrible," he used to boast.

All versions agree that Evimii was indeed a carter, driving a sleigh in winter, a *telega* or springless cart in summer along the east-west highway, Trakt No. 4. He was employed by the state once more, driving between the post stations set some sixteen miles to the east and west of Pokrovskoe. His official status was betokened by a badge tied to his left arm bearing the imperial eagle, and a round metal plate with the same device attached to his cap. By all accounts

he was fairly prosperous, but not rich. Together with his driving he farmed on a modest scale. As was the local custom, he took care of the grain crop, leaving his wife, Anna Egorovna, to do the rest of the household and agricultural work. The family house was large, with a gently sloping roof and double wooden walls, but it was not the house of a wealthy peasant, having only one story. Made of thick dressed logs it had a hall and two rooms, the *izba* and the *gornitsa,* the former containing the stove, which reached to the ceiling except for an area on which one could stretch out. Close to the stove and just under the roof was a platform that served as the family sleeping area. The room was lined with wooden benches, and the left-hand corner, looking from the door, the so-called "red" or beautiful corner, had an icon hanging there. This was the room in which the family lived, slept and ate. The smaller *gornitsa* was for guests. It held a bed and a much smaller stove. Beside the house was an enclosed yard with stabling for two horses, a bathhouse and a small cellar.[1]

We do not know the exact date of Rasputin's birth. One fairly reliable source suggests 1864 or 1865,[2] another claims that it was 1863.[3] Rasputin himself said that he was aged twenty-eight in 1892, so that it would appear that he was born after 1862 and before 1865.

The little we know about his childhood has more than a slight ring of legend to it. It seems that his mother died when he was quite young, though we cannot say when. The biographer who killed his father off gives him an elder sister, Maria, who was an epileptic and who died young. While walking beside the river Toura she had a fit, fell in and drowned. This version of the legend may well be a convenient way of slipping epilepsy into Rasputin's family background. However, nothing in his own life suggests that he was epileptic, and had there been the slightest suggestion that he was, one may be certain that his detractors would have made the most of it. The only plausible element in the story is the name Maria. That was the name of Rasputin's own daughter, whom he could have named after a dead sister, just as he named a son, Dmitri, after his brother, who certainly did exist, and who really came to grief in the Toura.

Dmitri was two years older than Grigorii. All we know about him is that he died young. It would seem that the two brothers were playing by the river when he fell in. Grigorii allegedly jumped to his

rescue, and they were both fished out by a passing peasant. Grigorii was none the worse for his immersion, but Dmitri caught pneumonia and died soon after. This much is a matter of well-attested fact, but hereafter legend, or something closely akin to it, takes over. Grigorii was deeply affected by his brother's death. He was about eleven years old at the time, and it was now that he first began to reveal his powers of second sight.

The delicate question of Rasputin's "powers" has to be faced. Powers there certainly were, although they were less extensive than has usually been supposed. Matters are complicated by the fact that it is hard to keep an open mind when dealing with paranormal phenomena. Those who want them to exist clutch at anything that supports their belief, while those who take the opposing view are consistently dismissive. As we shall see, two kinds of "extrasensory" power have been attributed to Rasputin: healing and precognition. Since it is important that the reader know where his author stands on such issues, suffice it to say that I believe that both faith healing and precognition are possible, in the sense that I do not reject evidence of their existence *a priori*, as being against nature. But in the case of Rasputin I have been careful throughout, in so far as is possible, to separate fact from hearsay, and to allow the facts to speak for themselves. There are, as we shall see, well-attested instances of "miraculous" healing, and some instances of something close to prophecy, but the account we have of Rasputin's childhood clairvoyance is not among them. Whether he was indeed clairvoyant as a child we cannot say, but what is certain is that the account of these powers has a ring of hagiography about it, and must be treated with the utmost caution.

The story of Rasputin the clairvoyant child comes from his daughter Maria, who has written three books about her father. The first two are on the whole sober if obviously sympathetic accounts, while the third and most recent is more sensational in tone and content, and differs in some of its detail from the earlier works. We cannot verify her description of her father's childhood and youth: she is the sole source and there is no possibility of cross-checking. This is particularly the case in her description of Rasputin's childhood powers. It would seem that after the death of his brother the boy became strangely withdrawn. He spent a great deal of time with the

animals in his father's yard, and established an uncanny degree of rapport with them. He was especially good with the horses. Throughout his life Rasputin had the power to calm troubled minds with a few soothing words and gestures, displaying the kind of gentle authority that wins the trust of a nervous animal even more readily than that of humans. Anyone who could calm the hysterical ladies of St. Petersburg as easily as Rasputin would have had little trouble with the most highly strung thoroughbred filly, let alone the stocky Siberian ponies in his father's yard. However, according to his daughter, who sounds as if she is relaying a family tradition, it was not just a question of the eleven-year-old Rasputin having a strange hold over animals. She says that he also possessed second sight. When something about the house was missing Rasputin would regularly be able to see where it had got to and recover it. He was also able to apply these powers to people. According to his daughter, he said of his childhood: "I used to play with the children of Pokrovskoe and quarrelled with them, but I never dared to steal the smallest thing. I used to believe that everybody would at once see that I had stolen something, since I, myself, was aware of it as soon as one of my comrades had stolen. Even when he had stolen in a distant place and hidden the object I would always see that object behind him."[4]

He claimed that at the time he attached no importance to his gift, assuming that everybody could do as much. As we shall see, he soon came to realise that this was not the case, and that it was quite possible to take other people's property and get away with it, provided that one was not caught in the act.

The most famous instance of his childhood power concerns a theft. In the course of an evening gathering in the Rasputin house a villager announced that someone had stolen his horse. The young Rasputin was lying on the stove with a fever. He interrupted the discussion and pointed to one of the most prosperous peasants in the village, quietly observing that he was the culprit. Such an implausible charge was indignantly dismissed. However, later that night some of the villagers followed the accused to his home and saw him lead the horse in question out of his yard. They promptly fell on him and administered the standard Siberian justice for horse thieves, beating him as close as they could get to death. There is no way in which the story can be verified, but it has become an integral part of

the Rasputin legend—the first time the great man revealed his powers.

It must be said that in later life Rasputin did not often reveal specifically clairvoyant powers. He tended to have more generalised intuitions, and in that sense the episode does not accord with what we know of him. In years to come he did not go in for the recovery of lost property, and there is no doubt that had he possessed that talent in any degree, both he and his admirers would have made much of it, although it may be argued that this was a faculty he possessed as a child, which waned as he grew older. There is, however, one feature of the story that does ring true: throughout his life Rasputin would possess an uncanny ability to read character and make instant assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of a personality; to smell out guilt. He was by no means infallible, or he could never have accepted an invitation to the Yusupov palace late on the night of December 16, 1916, yet his remarkable rise from a small Siberian village to closest proximity to the throne was largely founded on his capacity for instant and accurate reading of others.

The picture Maria Rasputin paints for us of an introverted boy with strange psychic powers does not accord well with other accounts of his youth and adolescence—which is perfectly understandable, since Maria was very much the loyal daughter. In 1917 the Provisional Government set up the so-called Muravyev Commission to look into the abuses of the last years of the imperial regime. The poet Alexander Blok acted as its secretary. The commission interviewed a great many figures prominent in tsarist politics, and other less distinguished persons. The six volumes of its findings, and certain supplementary sections published later, provide an extraordinary picture of the age.

In the course of its work the commission interviewed a handful of Rasputin's village contemporaries, who recalled what they could of his childhood, looking back over a span of some forty years. The picture they paint is of a turbulent, dirty and sexually precocious boy, unruly, disagreeable, and widely known as *soplyak*, or "snot-nose." As adolescence came on, Rasputin grew wilder still, began to drink and tumble girls, and fast acquired the reputation of a drunk and a lecher. Although it may be a case of peasants telling their superiors what they might want to hear about the "evil genius," the stories ring true. Rasputin possessed to a high degree the Russian

capacity for wild indulgence of appetite, which transcends mere coarseness by the exuberant quality of its excess. It comes as no surprise to find him pushing his celebrations beyond the norms of acceptable peasant behaviour from an early age. His contemporaries remember that already at the age of fifteen he was a drinker of vodka.

* * *

Where Western culture distinguishes between drinkers and non-drinkers, peasant Russia distinguishes between vodka drinkers and the rest. "My man never touches vodka" was the peasant woman's proudest boast. Whereas wine or beer usually made for an acceptable degree of intoxication, vodka provided its consumer with the quickest possible path to oblivion. The point of the stuff was to get falling-down drunk as quickly as possible. Throughout imperial Russia the state had a monopoly upon the sale of vodka, which played a vital part in balancing the annual budget. It was sold at state liquour shops, and its consumption, just off the premises, was something of a ritual:

> A crowd of drunken carters and barefoot vagrants were opening their various sized bottles. This is how it was done: first of all the wax had to be scraped off the top by means of a tin grater driven into a tree trunk in a spot where the drunks would not spoil the town's flora. The bearded carters with transparent blue eyes and red noses, in oilskin or cardboard hats with side buckles, and blue cloaks down to their ankles, together with barefoot tramps, literally bare footed, or occasionally wearing some kind of incredible bast shoes tied to their feet with strings, in denim trousers and torn shirts, through the holes of which one could see their naked bodies . . . crowded round the grater and scraped the wax off till the grater seemed to be covered in blood. Then, after a skillful knock on the bottom of the noggin with the palm of their hands had shot out the cork, they threw their heads back and poured the pure liquid, which had a sweet, slightly narcotic smell . . . straight down their thin throats. When satisfied they wiped their hairy mouths on their sleeves and bit into appetising, yellow-green salted cucumbers, from which brine and the colourless seeds sprouted profusely.[5]

Drinking vodka encourages ruthless pursuit of a "high," and shortly after this is attained the vodka drinker is frequently known to fall

over. In Rasputin's case it had other no less unfortunate consequences, for it would seem that he took to thieving in order to satisfy his thirst. E. I. Kartashev, a neighbour some fourteen years his senior, remembers for the commission:

> I caught Grigorii stealing pieces of my fence. He broke them up and put the sticks on his cart and was about to tie them up and take them away when I caught him and ordered him to come to the village elder with the stolen property. When he refused, and in order to get away tried to hit me with his axe, I gave him such a blow with my pitchfork that the blood poured from his nose and mouth and he fell to the ground unconscious. At first I thought I'd killed him, but when he began to move I brought him round and took him to the elder. He didn't want to go but I hit him a few more times in the face, and then he went of his own accord. Shortly after the theft of the fencing I had a pair of horses stolen out of the meadow. I'd had my eye on them on the night of the theft and noticed that Rasputin had been nearby with his friends Konstantin and Trofim, but had paid no attention until I discovered the loss of the horses some hours later. I immediately went back to see if Rasputin was at home. He was back by morning but his friends were nowhere to be found.[6]

Kartashev describes the young Rasputin as guileful, insolent, but possessed of a wild excess-seeking and expansive temperament—all words which in Russian have a ring of grudging admiration to them, since Russians consider moderation and caution to signify a meanness of the spirit. It is with a blend of reproof and covert admiration that Kartashev portrays him staggering drunkenly about, harnessing his horses and going for wild whooping drives through the village, or using the foulest language and fighting with friends and family alike. Frequently he would come to drunken blows with his father, and continued to do so for the next thirty years, conducting himself like a peasant version of Dmitri Karamazov. His neighbours held him in fairly low regard. They considered him a fool and suspected him of being a *varnak* or horse thief, a crime Siberian peasants took very seriously. As an adolescent Rasputin was already sexually active. He would always be attractive to women, projecting an immediate and unspoken authority over members of the opposite sex, making them feel that compliance to his demands was a pleasure in itself. However, on the whole he dissociated sex from feeling. Making love

for him was part of the quest for totality of experience through excess, like drink or the gypsy music which he grew to love in later years. Yet although his physical relations with women were almost invariably transitory and purely carnal, they seem to have left remarkably little bitterness in their wake. He had the rare capacity to love and leave women without making them feel rejected. It is true that in later years we shall find women complaining, in a state of bemused retrospective shock, that he had taken advantage of them, but his women never seem to have felt scorned. It says much for his natural authority that he could make his lovers feel that to sleep with him once or twice was enough in itself. He had the gift of making women happy when he was with them, and the still greater gift of soothing away complaints when he moved on.

We know of only one serious emotional attachment in Rasputin's life. At the age of nineteen he met Praskovia Dubrovina, a slightly older girl from a neighbouring village, strikingly good-looking, with the unusual combination of fair hair and dark eyes. She also had remarkable strength of character, resisting all Rasputin's attempts to seduce her, and obliging him to court her assiduously for over six months before she would agree to marry him. The marriage took place in 1883 or 1884. They made a handsome couple. The young Rasputin was very good-looking. A young man of a little over medium height, he held himself very straight, and there was great strength in his broad shoulders. He was beardless in those days, with an open, somewhat weatherbeaten face without a hint of weakness. Everything about him radiated health and physical force, down to his massive callused hands.

In its way the marriage was a great success. Praskovia was a practical-minded woman, and Rasputin remained attached to her, in his fashion, for the remainder of his life. She kept the household going during his frequent absences, and remained calmly tolerant of his sexual excesses. "Grigorii has enough to go round for everybody," she was known to observe in later years. In due course she gave birth to three children, Dmitri in 1897, Maria in 1898, and Varvara in 1900.

Marriage did not make Rasputin settle down. He had married Praskovia because he desired her, not because he felt that it was time to mend his ways. According to his neighbour Kartashev he

grew wilder still and stepped up his drinking appreciably. In fact it would seem that it was as a married man that he was knocked senseless for stealing fenceposts. The villagers' view of him as a fool and a wastrel was no different from Rasputin's own; looking back on his youth he once observed: "I was a drunkard and smoked tobacco, but then I repented and just look what I made of myself."[7]

There can be no doubt that at some time in early manhood Rasputin underwent a genuine spiritual transformation. Now transformations and turning points are the very stuff of hagiography; whether it be Saul's encounter on the road to Damascus, or St. Julian the Hospitaller's killing of his parents, lives of saints regularly feature critical events that turn hitherto ordinary mortals onto the path to sainthood. However, no attempt to de-mythify the man, to separate him from his legend, can escape the fact that something very similar seems to have happened to Rasputin.

> The Russian is never settled; he is so frequently stung with the mania for travelling that it seems to be the call of the blood. He will sometimes rise up suddenly, start off as if in response to a mystic impulse, and wander for days or months or years. The lower orders are oftener possessed by this overmastering passion than their superiors. They are constantly changing their places of abode . . . Thousands of them flit from Western Russia to Eastern Siberia, others pilgrimage to Jerusalem and back again to their respective hamlets, then after an interval they trudge off to Kiev, afterwards to Svyatye Gory, next to the northern shrines, and so on, they keep roving until they lie down and die.
>
> Sectarians scour the countryside in every direction preaching, teaching, proselytising. One sect has a rigid rule forbidding its members to tarry longer than three days in one place . . . A well-to-do Russian whose sons were grown up would often distribute his property among his children, take a wallet and a staff, and spend the remainder of his days pilgrimaging from shrine to shrine.[8]

A regular stream of pilgrims or *stranniki* (wanderers) passed through Pokrovskoe along the *trakt:* some travelling east to visit the Abalatsky monastery near Tobolsk, where there was a famous icon of the Virgin, others going some 260 miles northwest to Verkhoturye, one of the most famous monasteries in Russia, which held the relics of St. Simeon the Just. In the previous century it had been immensely

wealthy, with an income of over one hundred thousand roubles a year, but in recent years it had declined. However, it was still well-known for its extraordinarily restful atmosphere, quiet, clean and set in a beautiful wood of pine trees and magnificent cedars.[9] Wandering pilgrims were an essential feature of Russian life; they could be seen on any major road, with a bag on their shoulders and a staff in their hands, going from one holy place to another, in expiation of a crime, to render thanks to God, to fulfill a vow, or just to save their souls. As late as 1914 Russia was still predominantly a country of illiterate peasants who lived in a way that in some respects appears closer to the Middle Ages than the twentieth century.

Pilgrims were accorded hospitality as a matter of course, and many of them stayed in the Rasputin household, paying their way by telling stories of their wandering. On the whole these people were sincere and devout, but there were always a fair number of rogues and opportunistic vagabonds who preferred life on the road to a settled existence, and who could expect a crust of bread and a dry place to sleep in the next village.

Legend would have it that as a boy Rasputin was stirred by the pilgrims' accounts of holy places, and it was their tales that developed his religious sense at an early age. His daughter claims that he went to the monastery of Verkhoturye at the age of fifteen, and paid regular return visits over the ensuing years. This is perfectly possible, if only out of curiosity and an urge to wander that would grow stronger and stronger as the years went by. That he should have been womanising and drinking vodka at the age of fifteen was not in itself proof that the young Rasputin lacked a spiritual sense. For someone of Rasputin's temperament riotous living was perfectly compatible with aspiration towards spiritual excellence. Yet whether or not he made such pilgrimages they did not constitute any kind of turning point, encourage him to mend his ways and cease to be a drunkard and smoker of tobacco. The turning point came later.

It came as a direct consequence of the encounter with his neighbour Kartashev, whose horses he and his friends Konstantin and Trofim had stolen. The affair blew up into a major scandal and there was talk in the village of sending the three lads away to eastern Siberia. In the event only Trofim and Konstantin had to go; Rasputin

escaped. However, matters did not rest there. He was summoned to appear in court on charges of stealing wood and possible complicity in horse stealing. The case went onto the record, although it was never heard, for Rasputin felt that the moment had come to spend a little time away from Pokrovskoe. He went to the monastery of Verkhoturye for three months, and on his return he was unrecognisable. No longer the wild young man of the village, he had abandoned tobacco forever, and would not touch vodka again for many years. His manner too had changed, so much so that Kartashev concluded that his beating had affected his brain, which may indeed have been the case. He no longer spoke normally, but held forth in sudden nervous bursts, as he discoursed on spiritual topics in garbled, jerky and frequently incomprehensible phrases. He never looked his interlocutor in the eye, kept turning away and leapt nervously from topic to topic.[10] An eyewitness recalls that he conversed not in sentences but in disjointed, syntactically incomplete fragments,[11] and as he talked he twisted his fingers nervously through his sparse beard and kept casting glances at his listeners,[12] all characteristics he would retain for the rest of his life.

Friends who saw him on his return found him mentally disturbed, in a state of high nervous stress. Another neighbour, named V. K. Podshivalov, met him on the homeward journey:

> Some time after Rasputin went to Verkhoturye my mother and I went to Tyumen, and we met Rasputin on his way home. To me he seemed not in his right mind. He was walking home bare-headed, his hair had grown long, and as he went he kept singing some sort of song and waving his arms about.[13]

When he got home he made a similar impression on others: another villager, V. K. Raspopov, recalls seeing him in church. He too felt that the young man was disturbed, singing in a "wild voice" and staring around with an unsettling expression.[14] Not only did he give up drink and tobacco, he also became a vegetarian, and never again would he touch meat, although in later years he would happily eat fish. He also became a recluse, and whereas before he had been totally illiterate, he now proved able to read fairly easily and even to write a little, although he would never learn to spell and his handwriting was no more than an illiterate and barely legible scrawl.

He also attempted to study Old Church Slavonic, the Southern Slav language of the Orthodox liturgy, although there is no evidence that he ever got far with it. His personality was altered in other respects; no longer consistently wild and lecherous, he seems to have taken a manic turn, with rapidly alternating moods of nervous exaltation and deep depression, as if he were permanently under some kind of stress while experiencing the urgent need to come to terms with himself.

Rasputin had clearly experienced some kind of conversion during his three months' stay in the monastery. Whether this was the culmination of earlier surges towards the Good we cannot say. Moreover, the conversion seems to have caused considerable emotional disturbance, setting the erstwhile sinner, who had retained his powerful appetites, very much at odds with himself, and inaugurating a struggle between spirit and flesh which would continue for the rest of his life; a struggle in which the flesh would frequently but by no means invariably triumph.

Verkhoturye was not renowned for its relics alone. It had other distinguishing features, one of which was the number of hermits who lived in tiny wooden huts in the forests surrounding the monastery. We have a glimpse of the kind of life such persons continued to live right up to the revolution:

> The hermit lived in the heart of the forest and his hermitage might easily be taken for a poultry farm. He was surrounded by fowls of all descriptions. Perhaps he considered fowls akin to holiness; he gave quantities of eggs to the monastery, but we supped frugally off cold water and black bread. The hermit had no use for beds so we slept miserably on the hard unyielding floor of dried mud, and I must confess that I was very glad when we returned to Verkhoturye where we were able to sleep and bathe in comfort.[15]

It was such a man who gave Rasputin his sense of spiritual vocation, while also teaching him an important lesson in self-discipline, the nature and exercise of authority. The hermit was named Makarii, and he was what is known in the Orthodox church as a *starets*, or elder. Readers familiar with *The Brothers Karamazov* will recall Dostoevsky's description of the *starets* Zosima, a character based upon Dostoevsky's own experience. The *starets* is a monk, who functions as an unofficial spiritual guide, outside the monastic

hierarchy. He tends to live on the outskirts of the community. He is especially graced by God, having the power to see into the hearts of men and explain their secret selves to them. Sometimes he is credited with extraordinary powers, notably precognition. Essentially he gives men the additional strength of self-knowledge to assist them in their struggle for spiritual improvement. The *starets* has disciples, as Zosima had Alyesha Karamazov, and the authority he exercises over them is total. He absorbs their will into his own, commanding abdication of the self; the aim being to attain eventual liberation through obedience. He could be a person of the humblest origins, or, like Zosima, an ex-officer who had changed his ways. Acting as an individual, and impelled by the grace of God, he assumes responsibility for his disciples' quest for perfection. He possesses an extraordinary power to bring comfort and lift burdens from those coming to him heavily laden, and to remit sins. He is a healer of the spirit. Makarii was a *starets* of very considerable repute, who in earlier years had travelled extensively over Russia, and had even been received by the tsar and tsarina at Tsarskoe Selo. It is just possible that it was Makarii who sowed in Rasputin the first seed of his future ambition, or at the very least gave him an inkling of just how high a peasant man of God might aspire.

There can be no question of Rasputin's actually becoming Makarii's disciple. Three months would never have sufficed for that. However, he would say in later years that it was Makarii who gave him his sense of vocation and who brought about his transformation. More important still, perhaps, was his experience of the nature of spiritual authority and the manner in which it was exerted. His daughter suggests that it was to his experience of *starchestvo* that he:

> owed his gradual acquisition of that authority which many people completely failed to understand, that strange force of will, and that almost magnetic glance to which all who knew him well have subsequently testified.[16]

It is important to realise that Rasputin did not undergo any long period of spiritual training. Mystics, holy men, gurus, indeed certain kinds of creative artist, devote years to the disciplined development of their gifts; a sense of the spiritual alone is not enough. The power requires training and guidance to be brought to the peak of its

fulfillment. Rasputin had little guidance. He was always to remain something of a snapper-up of holy trifles—a line or two of the Scriptures here, a flash of wisdom there, developing a ragbag of garbled pieces of theology and doctrine. Essentially he was a self-educated peasant possessed of a confused jumble of facts and occasional insights. Mental discipline would never be his strong suit, any more than he would prove capable of sustaining a coherent framework of ideas. His talent lay elsewhere, in surges of intuition and healing power, and above all in his capacity to bring comfort and reassurance to others.

CHAPTER 3

I have never met anyone who understood Russians.
GRAND DUKE ALEXANDER MIKHAILOVICH

P. 46

ALTHOUGH THE TRADITION of *starchestvo* was not universally approved of by the Orthodox church it was in no sense considered heretical. It fell within the bounds of official Christianity. Nevertheless official religion was not the only or even the strongest spiritual force in the Russia of Rasputin's time, and Verkhoturye itself was a centre for a religious movement of a very different kind, so different that it has been suggested that it was not Christian at all, but pagan. Russia's unofficial Christianity had its origins in the seventeenth century, when Patriarch Nikon destroyed the unity of the Orthodox church forever through the imposition of certain reforms, creating a division of faith and allegiance from which it has never recovered.

Nikon sought to revise ecclesiastical ritual and the Old Church Slavonic liturgy, which was full of inaccurate renderings from the original Greek. To many devout Russians this seemed nothing less than sacrilege. As obstinate fundamentalists, they believed in the

supremacy of the letter of the law over its spirit. Nonetheless the reforms were accepted by the state, thereby creating a schism or *raskol* in the church, which endures to the present day. Thousands of Christians stayed with the old ways; rather than accept seemingly trivial adjustments, such as making the sign of the cross with three as opposed to two fingers, or an alteration in the spelling of "Jesus," schismatics ran away, fleeing to the lower Volga or the wilds of Siberia, underwent martyrdom, or burnt themselves alive, literally in the thousands—twenty thousand within the first five years.

The Old Believers were schismatics, not heretics. They refused to accept the official church with its reforms and stuck to the old ways with obstinate devotion. Although the schism was not based on class divisions initially, in latter years the Old Belief came to be associated with the arch-conservative merchant class, especially in Moscow, and with communities that had fled to the Siberian forests to escape authority. It is vital to the understanding of their mentality to appreciate that they believed that with the reforms, first of Nikon, later of Peter the Great, the reign of Antichrist had arrived, and that any deviation from their rigid observance of the old ways would imperil their immortal souls; a belief held so profoundly that martyrdom or self-immolation was deemed preferable to any form of compromise.

The conflict between the Old Belief and Orthodoxy was very much alive at the beginning of this century.

> In the early years of the last tsar's reign they were treated with a harshness that smacks of the persecutions of a bygone age. These pillars of conservatism and religious faith, fervent supporters of so much that the old regime stood for, were treated like public enemies and given a harder time than many a future Bolshevik.
>
> An Old Believers' monastery was seized by an Orthodox archimandrite [abbot] who, at the head of fifty cossacks, drove out the monks and took possession of their dwelling. One of their bishops . . . was thrown into prison . . . The Orthodox archimandrite dug up the tombs of two Old Believers held to be saints . . . and breaking their coffins he saturated the boards with petroleum and then burned the remains of the Holy Men to ashes. . . .
>
> Bishop Methodius, one of the pillars of the Old Believers . . . administered the sacraments to a man who, born in the State

> Church, had joined the community of Old Believers . . . Methodius was denounced, arrested, tried, found guilty and condemned to banishment in Siberia. And the sentence was carried out with needless brutality. With irons on his feet, penned up together with murderers and other criminals of the worst type, he was sent by *étape* from prison to prison to the government of Yakutsk. [He was then sent on to a still further place of exile.] The aged bishop—he was 78 years old—was set astride a horse, tied down to the animal, and told he must ride thus to his new place of exile about 700 miles distant. "This sentence is death by torture," said Methodius' flock. And they were not mistaken. The old man gave up the ghost on the road [1898] but when, where and how he died and was buried has never been made known.[1]

R wearing the many devils of death on a horse.

It was not until 1905 that the Old Believers were accorded legal freedom of worship, and long after that they were ostracised by the official church and subject to much illegal official harassment. Often living in almost complete isolation, they were closer in spirit to the unchanging world of a Tibetan monastery than to modern Europe, as can be seen from the following account of a provincial governor's visit to an isolated Old Believers' community in 1912:

> After a pleasant journey along a forest road the police chief and I came to the monastery. We were greeted from afar by the sound of bells. The abbot met me and took me to the church, which was old, of crude design, made of wood and undistinguished. Bishop Militii met us at the steps, dressed in his vestments, together with a double file of monks in cowls and habits decorated with representations of the instruments of Christ's torture and the face of Adam. They were all hundred year old *startsy*, with long white beards, heavy brows over faded eyes, looking like figures from Byzantine icons, having long observed vows of silence and the strictest asceticism. As I approached they fell to their knees and bowed down to the ground before me.
>
> I must confess that the spectacle which was simply steeped in tradition sent a shiver down my spine.[2]

The Old Believers were devout Christians who adhered punctiliously to their rituals, and who lived by a rigid discipline even though they stood outside the official church. However, the consequences of the schism went far beyond the Old Belief. Just as a language requires the support of strong centralised authority to

maintain its purity of form, so that it disperses into a multitude of widely differing dialects once that authority begins to lose its hold—as with the history of Latin after the decline of Rome, for example—so it is with religious faiths. The Orthodox church lost much of its authority as a religious power with carefully maintained doctrines and rituals, as peasants in the hundreds of thousands moved away from central Russia rather than accept the new teaching. Some remained with the Old Belief, others started to found increasingly eccentric faiths of their own, constituting the so-called peasant "sects," an infinitely varied series of faiths, one splintering off from another in continuous variation without any "high cultural" guidance from central ecclesiastical authority—in a manner that recalls the development of popular sects in rural America. It was this native peasant sectarianism that shaped the attitudes and the subsequent teachings of Rasputin.

Sectarianism was a specifically peasant form of that search for God, the quest for righteousness, salvation, and justice that so often dominates the Russian consciousness; Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn being some of the more obvious examples that spring to mind. It was specifically a popular phenomenon, as one of its historians writes:

> In our history sectarianism was the only occasion on which the Russian people, not as individuals, but in the mass, without leadership or encouragement from the governing powers or the educated made its own contribution to ideas and values.[3]

It was a brand of spirituality which owed as little to high cultural tradition as folklore does to literature, and this accounts both for its intensity and its eccentricity.

About the intensity of these heterodox beliefs there can be no doubt. There are innumerable examples of fervour combined with obstinacy and superstition that make it clear that peasant culture in the last years of the old regime was as far removed from us in its psychological climate as any dark age. It was in a milieu in which events such as the following were possible that Rasputin spent his formative years.

A sectarian peasant named Kovalev had news of an impending state census. He at once assumed that this heralded the advent of

Antichrist, who was anxious to have a list of the names of all the damned. Feeling there was little time to lose he dug graves for himself and his family. He buried the latter alive, mother, wife and young children, and as the earth fell on them they uttered prayers for the dead. The idea caught on in Kovalev's village and he had to bury some twenty more persons before he was able to commit suicide himself. In the same year, and for similar reasons, a community of sixty sectarians deemed it necessary to die. The men first killed their wives and children, and were then decapitated by their leader, who afterward cut his own throat. The year was 1897.[4]

Another late nineteenth-century sectarian, Nikitin, a peasant from Vladimir, burnt his house and two children after cutting their throats in an overzealous emulation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. As he was killing them, his wife and their mother talked to them, carefully explaining his motives. He was sent to Siberia, where he was found some time later on Good Friday, wearing a crown of thorns and hanging from a cross of his own construction. He had contrived to nail his feet to it with his right hand, holding on with his left—which he subsequently drove against the point of a nail he had hammered through the back of the crosspiece. He lacked the strength to do as much for his right. He announced that he had wished to sacrifice himself for the sins of the world.[5]

Russian sectarianism embraces a wide range of practices and beliefs. In a novel tracing the sectarian movement in Siberia Andrei Cherkasov describes the fortunes of a group of dissidents from the lower Volga who flee to Siberia as a sectarian unit, or "fortress" *(krepost')*, and who gradually undergo a process of fragmentation after the death of their leader, breaking up into a series of fortresses adhering to differing faiths *(tolki)* that come close to paganism. Thus the *dyrniki* (literally, holers) worship the sky through a hole in the roof, another faith worships a particular tree, another the river, but whatever the *tolk,* they all displayed an obstinate attachment to their particular faith. This kind of belief persisted at least up to 1917; radical in its rejection of official religion, and highly unstable in the sense that at any moment fission or secession to a new form of worship could be expected.

It is for that reason that one cannot be specific about sectarian doctrine and practice; the sects were heterodox by definition. There

are common features, however, above all hatred of the official church, which persecuted them even more savagely than it did the Old Belief. One even finds cases of mass antisectarian trials being conducted as late as the summer of 1915 when, after three retrials, forty-eight men and women were found guilty of belonging to a sect and were sentenced to eight months' imprisonment in a military fortress.[6] In the eyes of the Orthodox church sectarianism was part of the primitive side of the peasant soul, with powerful and not always unfounded connotations of heresy, paganism, and savage, not to say licentious, practices. Sectarianism was viewed as part of the Russian heart of darkness, the spiritual version of a terrible secret vice.

In some respects the picture was distorted. Many of the sects, Baptists, Stundists, Dukhobors, Molokane (milk drinkers), were much closer to Germanic nonconformists than to any heart of darkness. They could only be considered dangerous in a land of official Christianity, which considered dissent of any kind dangerous in itself. But a much more powerful case can be made against the particular range of underground sects that shaped the attitudes of Rasputin, the so-called *khlysty*, or as they preferred to be known, the *Bozhie lyudi*, or people of God.

Khlyst means "whip" in Russian and it is usually assumed that the *khlysty* were so called because of the role of flagellation in their rituals. However, it is more likely that the word is a distorted form of *khristy*, or Christs, particularly since the notion of a succession of Christs is central to the doctrine, the role of flagellation incidental.

The *khlysty* were not simply schismatics; at best they might be considered heretics, but it is possible to argue that they were not Christians at all, despite the ardour of their faith and their determination to search for perfection of the spirit. As far as we can tell, the sect dates from the early seventeenth century, and was allegedly founded by a certain Danila Philippov, a peasant from Kostroma and an army deserter. One of the sect's sacred texts describes him as follows:

> Once he climbed to the top of a mountain, and there, surrounded by angels, archangels, seraphim and other celestial beings the Lord

> Sabaoth himself came down to him. The heavenly beings rose up again and the Lord Sabaoth remained on earth incarnate in Danila Philippov.[7]

Philippov became the "living God" and his followers were God's people. He issued twelve commandments, proclaiming himself God and requiring that he be worshipped. He forbade the use of alcohol and bad language, prohibited theft, and also marriage or even attendance at weddings and christenings. The final commandment was to "believe in the Divine Spirit."

The sect caught on and some years later Philippov was joined by a "Christ," Ivan Suslov, to whom he transmitted his divine nature. Suslov in turn was joined by twelve apostles and a "Mother of God." Together they preached the *khlyst* doctrine, which maintained that all other forms of worship were without value. It was only through intense and fervent prayer according to their teaching that the Holy Spirit, the divine essence, would enter into one. Christianity was rejected; Jesus was dismissed as an "Old Christ," held in much lower esteem than more recent incarnations. The cult went to great lengths in pursuit of spiritual purity, but others went further still, witness a breakaway group, the *skoptsy*, or castrates. They believed that the original apostles were castrates who had undergone what they called baptism by fire, as opposed to John's baptism by water, and mutilated themselves accordingly. The first stage of mutilation, or "first stage of purity" or "little seal," as it was termed, consisted of the removal of the testicles and scrotum with a razor or knife; sometimes a red-hot instrument was used to cauterise the wound. The operation was sometimes succeeded by the "second degree of purity" or "great seal," which consisted in the removal of the penis. Under judicial interrogation many castrates described the process; the operation was usually performed when they were rendered unconscious by drink. Some, however, maintained that they were castrated forcibly; arms and legs being tied down to rings so that they formed a cross. Not all sects considered actual castration essential; they admitted so-called spiritual castrates as well as actual ones. The *khlysty* tended to look down on the castrates, taking the view that castration made chastity too easy.[8]

The *skoptsy* founded their faith on the conviction that there was

no indivisible barrier between the human and the divine, so that man could literally become The Lord Incarnate.[9] Through renunciation and mortification of the flesh, the burial of appetite, a secret resurrection could be achieved, man reborn as God,[10] or at the very least as a "secretly resurrected prophet." Such a man will have experienced complete annihilation of the will, its place being taken by the will of God. From that moment on it is the living God who speaks through him, so that he can do no wrong.

Despite, or perhaps because of the obsession with abstinence, sexuality plays an intermittent and peculiar role in the doctrine of the cult, notably with respect to the resurrected prophet or living God. Since he can do no wrong, his behaviour, however seemingly extreme or immoral, is venerated because he is "beyond sin" and cannot be judged by mortal man. He is omnipotent, and for him nothing is impossible. He can work miracles and foretell the future. He attracts disciples not by words alone but by a secret power. He can override all traditions and prohibitions, and his followers will accept his instructions without hesitating. Thus one resurrected prophet, a certain Radeev, maintained more than thirty lovers whom he ordered to obey him since such was the will of God. Chastity, he observed, in anticipation of Rasputin, was the sin of pride. His devotees were convinced of his innocence: "With him there can be no temptation for others since he gave himself unto this sin not of his own will but by the very will of the Holy Spirit."[11]

The Orthodox church persecuted the cult, but with varying degrees of success. Thus Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich (father of Peter the Great) arrested Suslov, tortured and crucified him on the Kremlin wall. He was then put in a coffin by the place of execution on Red Square. However, the legend has it that Suslov rose from the dead and started to preach again. Once more he was tortured, flayed alive and crucified. His followers wrapped him in a shroud, which promptly turned into a new skin. He rose yet again and renewed his preaching until, in 1718 at the age of one hundred, he ascended to heaven.[12] Suslov was succeeded by another Christ, and so the tradition continued. In the course of the next 150 years the cult flourished and gained adherents among the merchant classes. Even some members of the aristocracy were drawn to its heterodox spirituality. Thus in 1800 there were castrate sects in both capitals

among merchants, noblemen, the army and the civil service. Some years later the *Napoleonovtsy* believed that Christ had returned yet again, in the improbable form of Napoleon.[13] Other sectarians believed that Napoleon was none other than Antichrist, and the illegitimate son of Catherine the Great, who had sent him to be educated in France. They believed that he did not die upon St. Helena (the notion that great rulers live on in some mysterious way is a feature of Russian peasant superstition). Instead he had gone into hiding in Turkey, and on the Day of Judgment would return, and become a castrate.

Khlyst practices are based upon oscillation between self-denial and ecstasy; the one acting as catalyst to the other. Thus carnal relations are forbidden between husband and wife, but as we shall see, are encouraged in other circumstances. The sectarians group themselves in cells or "arks," each of which has its leader, the pilot or Christ, a Mother of God, angels, apostles, prophets, and prophetesses who come together with the simple brethren to guide them through rituals of ecstatic worship that are the essence of the faith. They would usually congregate in secret cellars especially dug to accommodate their practices, wearing special wide-sleeved white tunics with coloured girdles. Some would form circles and slowly begin to gyrate and dance, singing special songs and always moving from right to left, while the rest of the congregation sat round watching, slapping their knees in time to the music. The movements would continue, forming complex ritual patterns and building up excitement. The object was to attain the state of *radenie* or frenzy, which plunged you into a religious ecstasy as the Holy Spirit entered you. Sometimes in the course of the dance the worshippers would strike each other across the shoulders with cloths. They would turn faster and faster, becoming soaked in perspiration. As one sectarian put it: "The songs, the heat, the smell in which you bathe make you feel quite drunk, your face burns with a fever and you feel the fire in your heart."[14]

Finally everyone present joined in the dance with "convulsive movements crying 'Oh the Spirit, Oh the Spirit' until the whole ark was overcome with confusion and ecstatic joy."[15] Ecstasy was accompanied by prophecy and speaking in strange tongues, as in the

following *radenie*, which took place in early twentieth-century Siberia:

> As they turned they behaved strangely and outrageously, some shook, bent over, fell down like lunatics, others stamped their feet, squatted down and danced, or cried out wildly and spoke in unknown tongues believing that the Holy Spirit had come upon them.[16]

Some claimed to talk "Indian" or "The language of Jerusalem," though it must be said that the examples of such speech provided by the eyewitness in question have a strong pseudo-Germanic ring to their gibberish:

> *Rente rente funtritut*
> *Nodir lisentrant entrofint.*[17]

It was at this point in the proceedings that abstinence could give way to its opposite with the so-called "communal sin," when fervour would turn into an indiscriminate sexual orgy among the celebrants. The practice was also known as "the love of Christ." However, it was by no means a regular feature of sectarian worship, occurring in some arks some of the time. Apparently its function was twofold: to engender children during the ritual, and also, a notion dear to Rasputin and the basis of his sexual casuistry, "to use sin to drive out sin." The sectarians believed that it was only through having sins to expiate that true salvation could be attained, so sin was necessarily the first step towards salvation.[18] Sin played a particularly important part in the doctrine of an extreme *khlyst* sect, the New Israel, which flourished right up to 1915 when its leader, Aleksey Shchetinin, an acquaintance of Rasputin, was arrested and deported. He preached that man is immersed in a sea of sin, but must not drown there; sin is the great equaliser. The more a man sinned the more he suffered and the greater were his chances of salvation.[19]

1915 (R)

So far the *khlysty* do not seem so very different from such American pentecostal sects as the Snake Handlers or the Holy Rollers, rural forms of ecstatic worship which have evolved independently of ecclesiastical high culture. Yet for the Orthodox the sects had sinister connotations, "nameless practices" being attributed to

them. Andrey Bely's novel *The Silver Dove*, set in early twentieth-century rural Russia, features a demonic "pilot" who uses his "Mother of God" to beguile a young member of the intelligentsia, captivating him with her dark sensuality to ensure that, when the time is ripe, the young man first impregnates her and then is sacrificed in ritual murder. It is a superb and prophetic novel which projects the most powerful "sense of an ending." It portrays life in cool country houses going on as it always had; gracious and venerable ladies being waited upon by loyal retainers oblivious of a new generation of aggressive, restless, half-aware peasants who had somehow discovered that only the old and the ignorant were content with their lot, that a time would soon come when they would have all the land they wanted, and even grow smart enough to be a match for any city dweller. In the meantime the old ladies would have done well to lend an ear to the songs the young men of the village sang to their accordions, songs of freedom, violence, and the red cockerel of arson. In so far as the book is a study of the fatal nature of contact between the peasantry and the intelligentsia, which portrays sectarianism as a revolutionary and destructive force, describing fervour and ecstasy mischannelled as an integral part of peasant rebellion, it is a strange anticipation of Rasputin and the role he would play in Russian history. As Bely wrote later:

> I sensed the spirit of Rasputin before Rasputin appeared on the scene. I fantasized him in the spirit of my pilot. He is Rasputin's village past.[20]

It has been alleged that the sects practiced the ritual mutilation and circumcision of young adolescent girls. While the victim held on to an icon one of her breasts and the clitoris would be cut off, divided up and eaten. Alternatively a girl would be worshipped as a Mother of God and impregnated. Her left breast would be removed after *radenie* and eaten communally. If she were to give birth to a daughter it would be brought up as her successor, if a son he would be called a Little Christ, and on the sixth day after his birth his heart would be pierced with a spear and his blood drunk. His body was then reduced to a powder and used in the bread baked for communion.[21] In justice it must be said that these practices are described by only one source,

and even this concedes that they had probably died out by the late nineteenth century. However, for our purposes the truth of the matter is less important than the fact that many educated Russians at the turn of the century believed the sects to be capable of such actions. This helps us to understand the sinister associations with which they were invested. The authority of rumour and extravagant allegation in late tsarist Russia was boundless. A striking example was the *cause célèbre* of a young Jew named Beylis, the unfortunate main protagonist in one of imperial Russia's numerous Dreyfus cases. He came within a hair's breadth of being convicted of the totally imaginary ritual murder of a Christian baby, shortly before the First World War. When he heard that Beylis had been found not guilty, the tsar, whom some have accused of anti-Semitism, observed that although the murder undoubtedly took place, he was glad that Beylis was not convicted, since he was innocent. The case was the inspiration of Bernard Malamud's novel *The Fixer*.

Rumour apart, the hysterical atmosphere of the sects was responsible for unusual experiences, notably among the *khlyst* pilgrims who wandered from village to village, practising spiritual abstinence or giving themselves over to divinely directed promiscuity. Some of them travelled with "spiritual wives" who might share their beds without having intercourse, giving both partners a chance to prove their spiritual mettle. A case history published in 1912 gives an indication of the strange blend of delusion, exaltation, and the quest for truth which informed that world.

A male pilgrim met a woman, Pelageya, on his wanderings. She had a vision that informed her she was to meet three men carrying books who would be "higher than all other men." She had spent two years visiting holy places in search of them. The male pilgrim was also travelling as a result of a vision; it had promised him that if he went to a certain place angels would carry him from there into the wilderness. All he needed was the company of a "Blessed Mother" who would be the catalyst of his transportation. The couple eventually abandoned their separate quests and returned to the man's village, where they started a prayer circle. Their house was soon the source of strange portents witnessed by many, for example a pillar of fire reaching to the sky and surrounded by swallows. This, it emerged, was the devil tricking them into believing in their own

sanctity. They were both accompanied by an invisible angel who told them one another's thoughts, as well as the thoughts of those present at their gatherings. They acquired a great reputation for holy wisdom, and encouraged others to emulate them, to leave their spouses and take spiritual partners.

Spirituality turned to sensuality when another prophetess, named Anastasia, urged the man to sleep with Pelageya after a prayer meeting, "when upon me descended in the form of a cloud a kind of vapour which smelt very sweet, and I felt delight course through my body convincing me that this could be no sin." From then on the meetings ended in orgies "without anyone noticing anything criminal about it. If sinners might comfort themselves with the pleasures of the flesh surely we the just and the righteous are the more to be forgiven for doing what we do out of necessity."

The man's legal wife begged him to return to her. This irritated him and he prayed for her death, whereupon an angel appeared to him saying that she would die in twelve days and her soul would be lost because of her disobedience. He began to pray for her soul and a second angel appeared, telling him that his prayer was answered, giving him three crowns, one for himself, one for Pelageya, the third for his wife, who would stand on his left hand in the Kingdom of Heaven. When he told her as much she began to cry. Shortly afterward she found her husband making love to Pelageya, fell over in the snow and went into a six-hour trance. On coming to she told of a vision she had had; devils were trying to keep her from her husband, the sky was on fire and he was barefoot, surrounded by devils, foaming at the mouth. Whenever he kissed one of his disciples the foam stuck to her lips and she was held to him as by an invisible force. The vision appears to have convinced the husband that he had been deceived by devilry, and he was persuaded to return to the Orthodox fold.[22]

Another convert, an ex-*khlyst starets* of great authority, made the following confession:

> For 17 years I preached the so called spiritual life, in actuality a life of secret vice which profited me greatly. Even now I have more than 300 followers. The devil came to me in the form of an angel each day, bringing a dozen books of a peculiar kind which he called

> gospels, which he had brought from heaven and which he read to me. They expounded on various devilish matters. When a novice would come to me hearing about my supposed saintliness and second sight devils revealed to me all his sins and thoughts. All I needed was to look him steadily in the eye for me to see, as in a mirror, all his sins and wrong-doings, which the devils made known to me at once. Consequently everyone had great faith in me, believing me to be a veritable saint and prophet. They all brought me presents and I profited greatly from my skills.[23]

As Rasputin comes into clearer focus in latter years it will be seen how deeply he was marked by various aspects of sectarian practice. He used their casuistry to persuade his female disciples to sleep with him, asserting that he wished to share their beds to test their capacity to resist temptation. Alternatively he would tell them that it was no sin to have sex with him since he was above sin, or that sin was the first stage on the path to repentance. He himself ranged from sincere belief to something approaching charlatanry, or at the very least an abuse of his spiritual authority in the interests of physical appetite.

Rasputin was drawn toward the sectarians for a number of reasons. As a popular faith it employed language and rituals that were readily acceptable to the peasant religious imagination, much more so than the rituals of the Orthodox church, which were executed in a foreign tongue; Old Church Slavonic is closer to Bulgarian than to Russian. The ritual search for ecstasy through *radenie* and the dance appealed to Rasputin; in later years he would end drinking bouts by dancing till he dropped, preferably to the accompaniment of gypsy guitars, violins, and rhythmic clapping. *Radenie* struck the deepest chords in his being. Sectarian attitudes answered another of his fundamental needs. It will be recalled that on his return from Verkhoturye Rasputin was a changed man. Yet he would never prove capable of sustained asceticism; however much he might crave perfection, and it was a craving that wavered considerably over the years, he would never succeed in transcending the world of appetite. Now the *khlystovshchina*, with its strange combination of abstinence and licence, its emphasis on spiritual purity combined with orgiastic coupling, the quest for salvation through sin itself, was perfectly suited to Rasputin's paradoxical blend of God

and appetite, enabling him to strike a balance between the spirit and the flesh.

It would be a mistake not to take his God-seeking seriously, to dismiss him as a simple opportunist who exploited his talents to make a career for himself. True, he was as much an ambitious opportunist as any courtier, and peasant though he was, he was one of the most successful courtiers in history. But he was also, above all in his early adult years, a seeker after truth and holiness, who spent many hours at a time absorbed in his devotions; both then and in later years he was known to pray for hours at night, or could be found in an isolated part of a neighbouring wood absorbed in meditation.[24] But, Rasputin's powerful sexual appetites were not conducive to a quest for salvation conducted within the framework of Orthodoxy. Moreover, there was yet another reason why he could never have become a monk: Rasputin was incapable of accepting discipline. Throughout his life he arranged to go his own way, and it was inconceivable that he could live by a monastic rule. His "broad Russian nature," as Russian cliché would have it, needed more room to breathe than could ever be found within the walls of any institution. As an observer, drawing on recollections and police records, put it:

> From his early years Rasputin fully understood that he was a man with pathologically corrupt tendencies. He was quite aware that he would not last long in the narrow world of monastic life, which is why he chose to follow a course that suited him better—passing into the world of pseudo-Saints, pilgrims, Fools in Christ which he had known from early childhood. Entering that world as a young man, Rasputin, ignoring the mockery and condemnation of his fellow villagers, who referred to him as "Grisha the prophet," became a clear and definite representative of the type, in true peasant style, being both coarse and eloquent, hypocritical, fanatical and holy, a sinner and an ascetic, a womaniser who put on an act for every minute of the day, arousing curiosity, wielding great influence and enjoying a knowledge of his fellow men that was tantamount to clairvoyance.[25]

CHAPTER 4

THE "NEW" Rasputin returned from the monastery and settled back into village life. However, according at least to official hagiography, in the form of one of his daughter's memoirs, the village could not hold him for long. One day when working in the fields he appears to have had a vision: the Virgin appeared to him, bathed in glory, walking just above the ground, and remained long enough to give him her blessing before disappearing. She appeared in unfamiliar form, and it was not until some years later that Rasputin recognised its basis in one of Orthodox Russia's holiest icons, the Black Virgin of Kazan. It is presumably her dark colouring that he recognised, since the icon portrays Our Lady with an infant Jesus, only her face being visible, the outline of the body being traced on the rich settings of the icon case. The icon was deemed to have extraordinary virtue; each summer it would go the rounds of village after village in procession. Inhabitants would go out to meet it, accompanying it to their church and even into private houses.[1] In

1904 the icon was desecrated by an escaped convict. It was torn from its setting, which was stolen, and the icon itself disappeared. It was seriously believed by many devout persons that Russia's subsequent misfortunes—defeat at the hands of the Japanese and the revolution of 1905—were direct consequences of this act of sacrilege. Some years later the convict's accomplice tried to talk his way out of gaol by persuading a gullible bishop that the icon lay hidden in an Old Believers' monastery deep in the woods of Siberia. However, it was suspected that the icon in question might be a fake, and his offer was not taken up—for the remarkable reason that should it be accepted as authentic when in fact a fake it would compound the nation's misfortunes. It would be a disaster if an unworthy object were mistaken for the genuine article, and venerated accordingly.[2]

However, the story does not end there. In the early 1950s there were persistent rumours that the icon was still intact, and was in private hands, in England. The icon in question was eventually tracked down and inspected by experts, who after subjecting it to every conceivable test and measurement concluded that it was indeed Our Lady of Kazan. In an attempt to discover how it came to be where it was a trail was followed that led back to a Polish Jew in West Germany. When asked how he came to have possession of one of the holiest objects of Russian Orthodoxy he showed the investigator the door with considerable vehemence, and the trail ended there. The icon is now in the United States of America.

Together with a friend, Dmitri Pecherkin, Rasputin returned to the monastery to ask the *starets* Makarii what the vision meant. Makarii seems to have told Rasputin that he should go on a pilgrimage to the Orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos.

Did Rasputin really have a vision? All we can say for sure is that he always maintained that he did. His daughter told one of his early biographers, General Spiridovich, one-time chief of the tsar's personal security service, about the experience in some detail. However, the general had his doubts—for the extraordinary reason that there was no place near Pokrovskoe where the Virgin was known to make regular appearances to peasants.[3] On the other hand we have seen from other accounts of sectarian religious experience that belief in supernatural portents was widespread. We can be sure of one thing; if Rasputin did have such an intense visionary

experience it was a unique event in his life. Although he would have his moments of clairvoyance, nothing of this kind would ever happen to him again. If he had such a vision during his first enthusiastic practice of ascetic self-denial, as his daughter suggests, it is perfectly possible that he ascribed the lack of any repetition to the inability to master his own sensuality, making him experience his alternating bouts of indulgence and depressed remorse all the more acutely. A less charitable view of the experience would suggest that it was no more than a pretext to escape the drudgery of peasant labour and the banalities of married life; a splendid way to convince his wife that he was obliged to leave her and his young family to become a pilgrim.

It was in 1893, at the age of twenty-eight, that Rasputin set off on his wanderings. We are given a glimpse of the kind of figure he would have cut by another peasant, a genius who rose as high as Rasputin—and lived longer to tell the tale. As a performing artist he had a feel for Russian temperament, history, and mood that has never been equalled. One evening after a day's fishing as a young man, the future singer Feodor Chaliapin stayed in a miller's hut, where he saw:

> a figure stretched out in the corner wearing a threadbare grey garment and gaping felt boots . . . a beggar's pouch covered his face, a stout staff protruded from under his arm, and, in the midst of it all, he was sound asleep. At last it began to grow light. As soon as the night faded, the grey figure with the worn felt shoes began to stir unceasingly and stretched itself to the accompaniment of grunts; presently the visitor sat up, yawned, crossed himself, got to his feet and made for the door . . . [He washed himself] pouring water on his hands . . . soaked his beard, rubbed it and dried it . . . Next he took his staff, crossed himself again, bowed in three directions and departed. . . .
>
> The man was a pilgrim, a *strannik*. From time immemorial such wanderers have existed in Russia, nomads, homeless and hearthless, possessing no earthly ties, following no trade, driven onward by some nameless thought. Leading the life of gypsies, and yet not of the gypsy class, they roamed over the vast territories of Russia, from village to village, from country to country. They were to be seen going from one tavern to another, dragging themselves to the fairs, entering a hostel for a brief moment. They rested and slept when and where they chose. Nobody knew the meaning of their pilgrimages. I am convinced that had any of them been asked

whither he was going, and why, not one could have answered. Not one of them would have known. Not one of them had ever considered the reason of his wanderings.

All these pilgrims appeared to be in search of something. Their minds seemed to be filled with a confused idea of an unknown country where life would be kinder and more just. Perhaps they were escaping from something. Perhaps they were escaping from nothing more tangible than *"toska,"* that nostalgia that only Russians experience, utterly indescribable, utterly incomprehensible, and often without motive.[4]

Accompanied by Dmitri Pecherkin, Rasputin wandered on to Mount Athos—which was a disappointment. He was shocked to discover that the monks indulged in homosexual practices—it would appear that he came across someone enjoying a young novice in the woods. Shortly afterward he departed from the Holy Mountain in disgust, leaving behind an undeterred Pecherkin, who entered a monastery and remained there till his dying day. Rasputin henceforward invariably referred to Mount Athos as a hotbed of unnatural vice.

For the next three years Rasputin fades again from recorded history. Subsequently he claimed that he travelled on to Jerusalem—which is doubtful, since notes he made on a future visit to the Holy Places do not suggest that he had been there before. It is more likely that he simply travelled the length and breadth of Russia, living the pilgrim life, talking to others like himself, monks, priests, heretics, and sectarians, developing his knowledge of the Scriptures and his capacity for theological discourse and debate. In short, they were years of wandering and learning, in the course of which he turned from a simple God-seeking peasant with healthy appetites into a person who projected great spiritual authority and who appeared, to many eyes, to be a *starets* in his own right.

The mature Rasputin was a man of medium height, bony, tense, with a thin face, which was pale and yellowish, and a straggling, slightly curly beard. He could make a most powerful impression upon his listeners, staring at them with bright steady eyes that seemed to read their very souls. Everybody who described him in later years agrees that it was the eyes that made the greatest impression, and it was claimed by some that he was able to make his pupils expand and

contract at will. The voice was strange too. He talked in a thick, almost incomprehensible Siberian accent, but without the booming sonority that its rounded vowel sounds usually impart to it. His conversation was desperately hard to follow, for he often spoke in riddles, accompanied by strings of spiritual adages and half-remembered passages from the Scriptures. As he talked and stared at his listeners, his face would frequently cloud over with an air of mistrust, a combination of hesitancy and arrogance: was he making a fool of himself or was it perhaps that his listener was unworthy of him?

He continued to struggle with his sensuality in encounters with peasant women, and female pilgrims too. He had already developed that extraordinary sexual dominance which was one of his most remarkable characteristics, effortlessly taking over a woman's will and persuading her that she would find salvation in her submission to his authority. Submission did not necessarily imply intercourse, however; Rasputin was equally prone to the testing of his self-control, and that of others. He liked to sleep with one or more naked women and struggle to overcome his and their desires—a struggle in which he was intermittently successful. He never, incidentally, seems to have admitted that a night spent "overcoming the demon of desire," as he put it, could produce a degree of sexual excitement exceeding that achieved when the demon of desire was actually triumphant.

Some years later Rasputin spoke about his wandering years to a priest, Iliodor. Initially a fervent admirer, Iliodor rapidly turned against Rasputin to the point of first attacking him publicly, then arranging an assassination attempt that nearly succeeded, and which, Rasputin claimed, was responsible for Russia's entry into the Great War, and hence for the revolution. Iliodor maintains that he based his account on some notes Rasputin dictated in 1907, *The Life of an Experienced Pilgrim;* although we have no way of checking the claim, the tone of the passage resembles that of Rasputin's only published work, with its half-educated echoings of the language of piety:

> Up to the age of 28 I lived what people call a worldly life. I loved the world and everything in it, and I sought my consolations in

> worldly things. I drove, I fished, I ploughed, and my life was fairly easy for a peasant . . . In my heart I always cherished a hope of finding the road to salvation. I became a pilgrim and in my pilgrimages I often had to bear all kinds of calamity and misfortune. There were attempts to kill me but the Lord watched over me. More than once I was attacked by wolves but they did not harm me.
>
> It is sweet to write about this now but I had to live through it all. I used to walk 40 or 50 *versts* a day, heeding neither storm, wind nor rain. Often I had to go hungry. More than once I wandered from Tobolsk without changing my underclothing for half a year and without touching my flesh with my hands. This I did for the sake of experience and trial. Often I walked for three days at a stretch eating very little. On hot days I imposed a fast on myself, drunk no *kvas*, and worked with the labourers, at intervals running into the bushes to pray. I liked to walk along the river banks, finding consolation in nature and thinking of the Saviour who also liked to walk near streams. Nature is a teacher of wisdom just as every tree teaches of spring.
>
> I found comfort greater than all other comforts in daily readings from the Gospel, though I did more thinking than reading. Then for three years I wore shackles, but the evil one disturbed me, saying, "You are exalted, you have no peers." The shackles did me no good, but when I discovered the chains of love I loved everyone. . . .[3]

This account of his wanderings is not to be taken at face value: it is Rasputin who is writing hagiography here. It seems unlikely that he wore penitential chains for a span of three whole years, for example. Yet the overall picture of wandering, asceticism, prayer, and contact with nature rings true enough, even though the picture it presents is a partial one, omitting any reference to sectarian practices, or to the testing of his self-control by passing the night with unclothed pilgrims of the opposite sex.

Rasputin returned from his first bout of travelling three years later, in 1896. He gave eminently sensible reasons for his return; the pilgrim way was too easy, it failed to concentrate the spirit, and in the long run, made for an essentially aimless mode of existence that exposed one to the temptations of sectarian heresy:

> It is good to wander, but not for many years. I visited many a pilgrim's hostel, and I met pilgrims who had wandered not only for many years, but for a lifetime, and it happened that the enemy had

> sown his heresies among the poor souls, the chief among these being philosophising. They had become so lax and negligent that I found only one in a hundred following in the footsteps of Christ Himself. We wanderers fall an easy prey to the enemy. Lassitude breeds evil. That is why one should not wander for too long at a stretch, unless one has fortitude and power of will and is deaf and even a little dumb.[6]

Rasputin suggests that pilgrims are overexposed to the combined dangers of heresy and idleness—whether this was a piece of specious apologetic defending himself against charges of sectarianism we cannot say, but whatever his reasons he clearly decided that a life of perpetual pilgrimage was not for him. Early in 1896 he returned to Pokrovskoe. The family tradition, as related by his daughter, has it that he arrived unannounced and disguised as a pedlar, a Siberian Ulysses surprising his wife Praskovia, who duly failed to recognise the travel-stained, weather-beaten figure who stood smiling quietly before her.

Although he may have come home Rasputin did not settle back to the peasant life. He was deeply marked by his experiences, not to mention his release from manual labour, and had no intention of returning to work in the fields—an activity which any Russian peasant was all too happy to define as "woman's work" if he could, and spend summer lying on the hay piled up in the barn, winter on the stove. For all his seeking after truth and bouts of asceticism Rasputin would always remain reluctant to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.

It was not physical laziness alone that kept him from the fields. He had a powerful if personal and unfocussed sense of vocation too; the need to save his own soul and to guide others towards their own salvation. We now see the beginning of a new phase in his development, as the pilgrim turns teacher while remaining the embodiment of a certain well-known type of peasant mentality:

> Religious, restless, anguished, seeking the path to salvation, often yielding to temptation but never discouraged by his moments of weakness.[7]

For all his moments of failure and anguish Rasputin was possessed from the outset of a remarkable capacity to impress his authority as

spiritual guide and mentor, now in the first instance, upon his fellow villagers. He was and would remain a man of the people. He had forged his beliefs, his cast of thought, his manner of speaking and preaching in pilgrim circles that lay far beyond the reach of authority and the jargon of official Christianity. He expressed himself in a way that was immediately sympathetic to the peasant mind, and would subsequently impress others of infinitely higher rank precisely because his mode of expression had all the naive directness, the freedom from claptrap, which had made generations of educated Russians, who ought to have known better, believe that true wisdom, goodness, spirituality were to be found in the bosom of the great, good, and simple Russian people. This preposterous belief in the virtues of a peasant class who in 1905, 1917, and the Civil War proved themselves capable of extreme callousness and animal violence, was, if not engendered, then widely disseminated by Leo Tolstoy, who, in the courts of history, has a certain amount to answer for.

From now on Rasputin gave himself over entirely to preaching and to his personal quest. Soon after his return, acting, in his own words, in imitation of Christ, who had been born not in a palace but a manger, "I dug a cellar in the stables and went to pray there . . . Whenever I was free during the day I would return there, and I found that my thoughts did not scatter in that narrow place."[8] Although there was nothing intrinsically "wrong" with digging underground chambers, it will be recalled that this was a sectarian practice, and so bore distinct connotations of heresy. Rasputin turned his chamber into a tiny chapel, hung with icons that had lights burning before them. "Only there did it feel good to pray," his daughter once observed in late years.[9]

The Rasputin *izba* now became a kind of meeting house, where the *starets* held forth, telling stories of his travels, discoursing on the proper path to salvation, and exchanging interpretations of the Holy Scriptures with passing pilgrims. He was an eloquent, convincing speaker who already had a large number of disciples, the majority of whom were women. Although Rasputin would have his share of male followers, and gained his entry into the highest circles by his ability to impress some of the most distinguished churchmen in the land, he never inspired in men that uncritical devotion and obedience that he

proved able to secure from women. His closest followers were always members of the opposite sex, while he made no close men friends. Talk of sexual magnetism rings with precisely the kind of sensationalism that has so often clouded earlier accounts of Rasputin, making him the "mad monk," an inexact cliché that conceals a subtler and more interesting personality. Yet it is perfectly clear that he presented himself, exercised his authority as a spiritual leader, in a way that impressed women more than men, inspiring a submissive trust that had a sexual base.

Rasputin's growing reputation as a guide and comforter did not go unnoticed, or unenvied, by ecclesiastical authority, in the shape of Father Peter, the village priest. He considered Rasputin a challenge to his own position, while the underground chamber and the following of spiritual "sisters" whose relationship to their leader was rumoured to be anything but spiritual sufficed to make the priest suspect that his rival could be the pilot of a sectarian ark—and in imperial Russia that was a serious offence. Accordingly Father Peter wrote to his bishop in Tobolsk, accusing Rasputin of sectarian practices. His letter resulted in a combined operation by church and state in the shape of a police raid on Rasputin's cellar accompanied by an ecclesiastic who interrogated him on the articles of his faith.

The police were presumably looking for traces of *khlyst* rituals, white garments or coloured girdles; it is hard to say what else the raid might have yielded unless they seriously expected to interrupt Rasputin and his adepts in full *radenie*. In the event they found nothing but a small chamber decorated with icons and containing a few sacks of flour. The interrogator drew a blank too. He had a long conversation with Rasputin, who made a profound impression upon him as an Orthodox holy man of great piety. Father Peter's charges were dismissed as ridiculous, and Rasputin's reputation as a *starets* increased.

The priest had bitten off a great deal more than he could chew. It might have been possible to get the better of Rasputin but there is no record of anyone actually doing so. Where courtiers, ministers and princes of the church were all to fail, a village priest stood no chance. There is no reason to assume that he denounced Rasputin out of unfounded malice. Although it is unlikely that Rasputin was a full practising *khlyst*, since he could never exist happily within the

framework of any system, he drew liberally upon practices, arguments and attitudes that derived from the sects. However, Rasputin was a highly intelligent man, with a strong sense of self-preservation and the ability to protect his flanks. He would never flaunt his sectarian leanings and was always capable of convincing churchmen and other investigators of his unswerving Orthodoxy in matters of religion. Even then in Pokrovskoe, to be seriously suspected, let alone convicted, of being a sectarian would have destroyed him, and he was more than a match for any local church investigator when it came to defending his own position.

Over the next few years Rasputin spent a lot of time in Pokrovskoe, steadily acquiring the reputation of a Siberian holy man. People began to travel long distances to talk with him, consult him, and seek comfort from him, bringing him presents of food or money in return. The *starets* did not disappoint his visitors. Although, in later years especially, he would abuse his authority in the interests of sexual gratification—which could give rise to complaint—no one ever complained that he was a quack or a charlatan; no one to whom he offered spiritual comfort has ever described himself as disappointed by him, and one may be sure that his enemies would have made much of any such instance. Unless from the outset one accepts that Rasputin really did possess genuine spiritual authority, the story of his astonishing rise will remain incomprehensible. The greatest of all his strengths, one which never left him and which was the real reason for the tsarina's dependence upon him, was his ability to calm people in distress, or, as Russian has it, "to lighten their souls." As a later female admirer, Mounya Golovina, put it: "Does one not feel at peace with Grigorii Efimovich, so that one forgets all the world's misery? He has the gift of bringing calm and serenity to the soul."[10]

However, Rasputin was not just an unorthodox holy man who gave spiritual comfort punctuated by occasional lapses into sensuality. He was also at this time, more than ever before or after, a family man, and it is as such that he first comes into clear focus, through his daughter's recollection of her own early years:

> My father would often take us on his knees, my brother Mitya, my sister Varvara and myself. He would tell us wonderful stories with the tenderness he always showed and that absent look in which

> seemed to be mirrored the countries he had visited and the strange adventures he had met with on the road . . . At other times he would speak of the deep silence of the Siberian forest and the wild beauty of the steppes. But he could also laugh with his children. I know well what good games of ball Varya and I had with him in the court or in front of the house, the rides we had in the *telega,* with father driving himself or teaching Dmitri the proper way to hold the reins. In October it was he who used to take us to the village fête where girls in embroidered dresses and bodices with coloured scarves used to dance to the accordion.[11]

Family man though he had now become, Rasputin did not abandon the wandering life. Every spring he would set off as soon as the roads were passable, travelling to monasteries and holy places all over Russia, coming back to Pokrovskoe in late summer—after harvest. He was profoundly attached to his village and would remain so. When he became an intimate of the imperial family, the highest courtier in the land, he would still leave the capital to spend spring and autumn at home. But even now at the turn of the century Pokrovskoe had grown too small to hold him.

* * *

Rasputin took his first step into history proper in 1902, on his way back from a pilgrimage to the monasteries and shrines of Kiev, among the holiest places of Russia, when he spent some time in the city of Kazan. Situated on, or rather close to, the Volga, it had been the capital of the Tartar kingdom until Ivan the Terrible sacked it in 1552. It was a colourful city, and a flourishing river port, and it was from the river that Rasputin would have caught his first glimpse of it, as did the American telegraphist George Kennan:

> Presuming that we had arrived at Kazan, I went on deck. The sun was about an hour high and the river lay like a quivering mass of liquid silver between our steamer and the smooth, vividly green slopes of the high western bank. On the eastern side, and close at hand, was a line of the black hulls with yellow roofs and deck-houses that serve as landing stages, and beyond them and just above the high water mark on the barren sandy shore was a row of heterogeneous wooden shops and lodging-houses, which, but for a lavish display of colour in walls and roofs, would have suggested a street of a mining settlement in Idaho or Montana. . . .

Rasputin already had a considerable word-of-mouth reputation as a peasant holy man, and this was enough to give him an entrée into church circles. The Orthodox church places great emphasis upon saints, holy men, miracle workers, and the growing sense that political and ideological developments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had created something of a crisis of faith—the essential theme of the novels of Dostoevsky, for example—made churchmen anxious to discover new saints, new holy men, new workers of miracles, seeing in their existence the living proof that the faith was as strong as ever and things were as they had always been. This meant that many of its members were open-minded to the point of gullibility about those who came to them with a reputation for holiness.

In Kazan Rasputin made the acquaintance of at least three distinguished churchmen. The first was a teacher at the academy, a Jewish convert named Father Michael. A short, thin man, bald, with a thick black beard, he had a highly excitable temperament and was easily given to strange enthusiasms, while reputed to be very intelligent and a scholar of distinction. Some years later he abandoned the official church to join the Old Belief. He became a bishop and was known for his fulminations against the established church. Rasputin also made the acquaintance of a popular preacher, Chrisanthos, who rapidly became a great admirer. Rasputin for him was the embodiment of simple faith, a true Holy Man of the people.

Finally Rasputin met a much more important personage, none other than the bishop of Kazan, Bishop Andrey, who had in secular life been a Prince Ukhtinsky. Thus he had suddenly begun to move in the highest ecclesiastical circles of the city, which says much for the impression he was able to make. However, Bishop Andrey did not stay impressed for long. A more sophisticated judge of character than Michael or Chrisanthos, within a year he had begun to voice the gravest doubts about Rasputin's holiness. The doubts were inspired by another new step Rasputin took in Kazan; his ecclesiastical acquaintance had brought him to the notice of Kazan society, introducing him to several of the city's leading families. It was a crucial moment in Rasputin's life, the moment when he ceased to be just another peasant holy man, who had the ear of a handful of not altogether Orthodox churchmen, to be taken up by polite society,

polite feminine society to be precise. He started social life as he would end it, in an aura of fervent adoration, coloured by more than a tinge of scandal.

In many ways this was the greatest step that Rasputin ever took. Hitherto he had been a religious vagabond, wandering from one holy place to another, sleeping in ecclesiastical hostels if he was lucky, sometimes sharing a foul-smelling peasant's hut, sometimes sleeping under the open sky. On his travels he might have seen trains, and perhaps even the occasional motor car bowling down dusty summer roads, but he had lived in the timeless, slowly moving world of peasant culture. Now, thanks to his ecclesiastical friends, he moved into a different world. For the first time he entered European houses, saw carpets, gas, electric light, telephones even. For the first time he found himself sitting in upholstered chairs. He saw people drink tea without sucking it through a piece of sugar they held in their mouths, nor did they pour it into their saucers to cool it. Yet great though the shift from the peasant world to civilisation might have been, Rasputin took it in his stride. As he sat, with his dirty boots, his threadbare overcoat with its bulging pockets, and his straggling beard, in drawing rooms hung with chintz and muslin, at tea tables covered with embroidered cloths, absentmindedly twisting his fingers through his napkin, he did not allow his surroundings to over-awe him, and took the veneration accorded him by his tea-gowned hostesses as no more than his due. He remained as ready to hold forth on spiritual matters or talk of his wanderings as he was in any peasant *izba*. In Kazan he revealed for the first time one of his most striking qualities, one that would take him to the heights of imperial Russian society, namely a complete indifference to the quality of his surroundings, and to the rank of his hosts, whether they were the wives of academics and government officials that made up what passed for high society in Kazan, or the "Master of the Russian land" himself, with his wife and children, an empress, four grand duchesses, and the heir to the throne.

That he should have come to the notice of society was not all that surprising. Kazan was a provincial town, with a provincial town's eagerness for new faces. Besides, there as elsewhere, many religiously minded households had their particular visiting priests and holy men of the people. Religion, more than any other force in

imperial Russia, regularly bridged the gap between social classes. However, from the very start, Rasputin was something much more than a curiosity, a hanger-on at rich women's tables. Rapidly he built up a circle of disciples in polite society, who regarded him as a man of God and a *starets*.

They were quite wrong to do so. Although he possessed great insight, together with the talent to ease souls and remove the burden of guilt, Rasputin could never properly be termed a *starets*. His admirers' use of the word was a testimony to their ignorance and their enthusiasm. He could more properly be considered a so-called "Man of God":

> Along with the . . . official *starets* who obeys the monastic rule, there is in Russia yet another religious type unknown in Europe, the so-called Man of God . . . unlike the *startsy* they seldom remain in monasteries, travelling from place to place, preaching the will of God and calling on people to repent. You find "Men of God" outside holy orders but like the *startsy* they lead a rigidly ascetic life, and enjoy a comparable moral authority.[15]

Clearly Rasputin was no *starets;* he could not possibly be. To be a proper *starets* he would have to have been a monk, and Rasputin was married. However, there can be no doubt that he already wielded great authority over his would-be disciples, and it was this that earned him his unmerited title. An account of him in Kazan describes the impression he made there:

> He had an original approach, his language was simple, short sentences with lots of images. He had expressive eyes that seemed to see straight through you . . . and the *starets* seemed to exercise a certain hypnotic hold over those who came near him.[16]

But for all his authority Rasputin was no ascetic. He assisted women to struggle against the flesh in strange ways reminiscent of sectarian practices, and it was such assistance that sowed the seeds of doubt in the mind of Bishop Andrey. An eminent citizen of Kazan has left the following account of his behaviour:

> I do not know of any instances of a lady actually giving herself to him or joining him in orgies, but I do know of a most respectable lady, a wife and mother, who, though greatly surprised, yielded to

> Rasputin's request that he share a bed with her. It is true that they were not alone and that matters went no further, but the fact remains that share his bed she did.[17]

It appears that in many houses Rasputin was permitted to kiss young girls or women, or share their beds, in order to assist them in their struggle against sin. We get a glimpse of the kind of argument he used to persuade them from the testimony of Mme. E. A. Kazakova, who saw him in Pokrovskoe in the autumn of that year on his return from Kazan. It appeared that Rasputin warned village girls of the dangers of being seduced by pilgrims who would then forbid them to talk of their experience. In order to protect them from such temptation Rasputin would kiss and kiss them "until they should grow disgusted with kissing."[18] When Mme. Kazakova took him to task for his behaviour he replied that the girls had no cause to be ashamed, and went on to observe that, when repentant women confessed their sins to him, he took the whole burden of their guilt upon himself. Then in order to test the fullness of their repentance he would invite them to take baths with him and wash him.

Rasputin always loved the bathhouse, which plays such an important part in Russian life in villages and towns alike. In later years in the capital he would visit the bathhouse several times a week, sometimes in the company of prostitutes, sometimes simply to sober up. A simple peasant bathhouse consisted of a steaming room and a washing room with plenty of hot and cold water. Rasputin would go to the washing room first, and invite his companion to wash and scrub him, making use of a bast swab. He would perhaps invite her to see for herself that he was "beyond sin" by inviting her to wash his private parts, while he kept his self-control. They would then move on to the steam room, which would hold a stove and some red-hot stones over which they would pour buckets of water. The room had tiers of shelves around it, and Rasputin and his companion or companions would retire there to lie and steam themselves for hours. Later they would go back to the washing room, where once more they would give the *starets* a good soaping, and round the proceedings off by thrashing him gently with a leafy bunch of newly plucked birch twigs.[19]

When Rasputin kissed and fondled his disciples, in or out of the

bathhouse, he claimed to be tempering them against passion. Mme. Kazakova revealed that he had already managed to entice a good number of well-to-do lady followers to Pokrovskoe. They took him to be a person of great sanctity, who also, it would seem, needed looking after. They combed his hair and beard, and were even known to trim his fingernails and toenails, devoutly preserving the parings. He would often put his arms around their waists, fondling and embracing them openly, observing that there was no harm in his actions, since they were all as sisters to him. The expression sister, or spiritual sister, again smacks of the sects.[20]

These then are our first glimpses of the mature Rasputin, the reputed *starets* or man of God, with his arms round the waists of adoring ladies who venerate his nail clippings and submit to unusual forms of trial by sexual ordeal. The picture tests belief but it has been repeated so often in various forms, described by so many different sources, that it must be accepted, and if possible explained. Rasputin's behaviour is comprehensible enough; it is his success that calls for comment. Rasputin was a highly sexed and fearless peasant, who retained his peasant abruptness and directness of approach: the man who would address tsar and tsarina in the intimate second person singular would never alter his manners to suit the company he kept. It was precisely those direct peasant qualities that helped to account for his appeal to women. He appeared to many a simple, unaffected man of the people, while others were drawn to him for reasons that recall that mysterious but indubitable attraction that certain types—jockeys, boxers, professional huntsmen—have been known to hold for ladies very much their social superiors. But of course there was more to it. Rasputin radiated an authority that both attracted and repelled. We can get an idea of the impression he made by seeing him, at a somewhat later date, through the eyes of Lili Dehn, an imperial lady-in-waiting. She went to him for advice—should she go abroad with her husband or stay at home with a convalescent son?

> I waited for some time alone in a little study until a man came in so noiselessly that I was almost unaware of his presence. It was Rasputin! Our eyes met and I was instantly struck by his uncanny appearance. At first he appeared to be a typical peasant from the

frozen North, but his eyes held mine, those shining steel-like eyes which seemed to read one's inmost thoughts. His face was pale and thin, his hair long, and his beard a light chestnut. Rasputin was not tall but he gave the impression of being so; he was dressed as a Russian peasant and wore the high boots, loose shirt, and long, black coat of the moujik. He came forward and took my hand.

"Ah . . . I see thou art worried . . . Well nothing in life is worth worrying over—everything passes—you understand—that's the best outlook."

He became serious.

"It is necessary to have Faith. God alone is thy help. Thou art torn between thy husband and thy child. Which of them is weaker? Thou thinkest thy child is the more helpless. This is not so. A child can do nothing in his weakness—a man can do much . . ."

. . . the impression which Rasputin had produced on me was so vivid. I was at once attracted, repelled, disquieted and reassured; nevertheless his eyes were productive of a feeling of terror and repugnance. . . .[21]

He could undoubtedly exert great sexual authority—even though he might make a woman feel like a rabbit staring into the eyes of a stoat. He was also a remarkable lover. In later years his assassin Felix Yusupov once told Duff Cooper that as a lover Rasputin was exceptional in his ability to withhold orgasm for a very long time, and that moreover he had a large wart strategically situated on his penis, which vastly enhanced its capacity to stimulate. Persons who knew Yusupov well have dismissed this observation with a smile as "just the sort of preposterous thing Felix would say." Besides, the wart may not have been a permanent feature: venereal warts tend to come and go. However, one woman who submitted to Rasputin, allegedly in order to gain his protection for her husband, later confessed that the first time he made love to her her orgasm was so violent that she fainted. Subsequent encounters gave her "a marvellous, delicious" sensation the like of which she had never experienced before or, sadly, since. One only needed, she observed, to have been possessed by Rasputin once to belong to him body and soul.[22] Her reaction provides the key to his magnetism. A lover of such power does not need actually to possess a woman in order to convey to her a sense of his authority. His own knowledge of his ability is sufficient in itself for him to radiate an overpowering and easily sensed sexual confidence.

However, it takes more than magnetic personality, or even a wart, to account for Rasputin's hold over countless reputable women who did *not* become his lovers. It was not their sexuality as such that he appealed to, but an appetite of a very different kind.

The pilgrims who spent years on the road in search of salvation were by no means alone in their quest. This was born of a craving that has remained to this day an integral part of the Russian character—take the case of a distinguished if eccentric Marxist philosopher I recently encountered in Moscow who, aged fifty, observed that the time had come to abandon philosophy and, in his words, "set about saving his soul." The search for God has long played a vital part in Russian intellectual life. This was particularly the case in the early twentieth century, which saw a marked religious revival. Earlier decades had seen a fashion for ruthless materialistic radicalism and austere feminism, but by the 1900s the fashionable conscience of the age was more concerned with the life of the spirit. Yet it was a peculiar kind of concern. The age was suffused with something close to the sense of an ending: a sense which developed dramatically in the first fifteen years of the century. There was a widespread feeling that old, stable values, particularly the values of official Christianity, were played out. Sergei Witte feared that a decline in religion might herald revolution:

> In my opinion, the greatest danger confronting Russia is the degeneration of the official Orthodox church and the extinction of the living religious spirit of the people . . . No state can exist without higher spiritual ideals. These ideals can only sway the masses if they are simple, lofty and accessible to everyone, in a word if they bear the imprint of the Divine . . . Without religion the masses turn into herds of beasts, but beasts of a particularly evil type, for these beasts possess a greater intelligence than animals. Our church has unfortunately long since become a dead, bureaucratic institution; our priests serve not the high God, but earthly Gods; Orthodoxy has become Orthodox paganism.[23]

NII believes this although he details Witte.

The poet Alexander Blok, who was remarkably sensitive to the climate of change, and could smell revolution on the wind, felt that official Christianity was finished, that, in his words, "The gypsy caravan was moving on." It was a restless time, when people looked for unorthodox solutions to their spiritual problems and worshipped

strange gods. Many turned to theosophy, occultism, later anthroposophy, which grew increasingly fashionable; others, in avant-garde artistic circles, made half-hearted attempts to worship the ancient Slavic deities—Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) is one of the trend's more successful manifestations. There was also a growing interest in heterodox Christianity, in wandering holy men and in the sects which began to find adherents among the lower and even the upper classes of the capital. One of the most intelligent observers of the contemporary scene, S. R. Mintslov, a civil servant and a writer of talent, was appalled by the veneration accorded certain popular churchmen, persons of physical coarseness and religious eccentricity. He considered their rise a symptom of decadence, a manifestation of spiritual sickness and the craving for strong sensation. Thus in 1903 he writes of a St. Petersburg priest, one Malinin, who commanded a huge following at St. Isaac's Cathedral. He was a coarse monster of a man, with a stentorian voice—and a great female following. Mintslov considered his success a sign that he was living in an age, in his words, of "female psychopaths."[24]

To understand Rasputin's success, to appreciate that his disciples sincerely believed that when he kissed and fondled them he was purging them of sin, that his kisses "were different from those of other men," he must be conceived of in the context of this unbalanced spiritual craving and sensation-seeking. His lady followers were guilty of silliness and gullibility rather than hypocrisy. They believed in Rasputin's holiness, evidence notwithstanding, because they wanted to believe in a holy man, and because of his authority. He was able to convince them all too easily that by obeying him they were advancing the course of their salvation in an unorthodox but by no means unhappy marriage of spirit and flesh.

CHAPTER 5

No mistake could have been made as to the ultimate nationality of the city that ordered its champagne by the magnum, never by the quart.

GRAND DUKE ALEXANDER OF RUSSIA

ST. PETERSBURG, PETROGRAD, LENINGRAD, whatever names the shifts of history may give it, remains one of the great cities of Europe. It has authority, scale, and above all a sense of identity, which it impresses upon its citizens and visitors alike, making them feel that they are in a very particular place which cannot be mistaken for any other. All accounts of the capital whether by distinguished novelists such as Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, or by less eminent observers, stress the city's special quality, its uniqueness. Thus Meriel Buchanan, the daughter of the last British ambassador to the court of the tsar, noticed first of all a combination of monotony and colour:

> A grey city St. Petersburg seemed that day. The wide streets covered with dirty half-melted snow, the houses huddled together as if trying to seek refuge in each other's company, crowded trams with shrill insistent bells, people hurrying along, so muffled in heavy coats that it was impossible to see their faces. Then, as we

> drew nearer the better quarters of town, the streets grew more spacious, a little colour stole in amidst the surrounding greyness, a church with blue domes painted with golden stars, a huge red palace, carriages and coachmen with bright velvet caps, policemen in long black fur trimmed overcoats, a big yellow building with a pale green roof, a golden spire that shone against the sky, a huge bridge spanning an immensely broad river.[1]

A novelist, Hugh Walpole, fleshes this first impression out with a more detailed panorama of prewar St. Petersburg:

> I was conscious of the town itself, in every one of its amazingly varied manifestations. I saw it all laid out as though I were at a great height above it–the fashionable streets, the Nevsky and the Morskaya, with carriages and motor cars and trams, the kiosks and the bazaars, the women with baskets of apples, the boys with the newspapers . . . the shops in the Morskaya with the coloured stones in the window, the oculist and the pastry cooks and the hairdressers and the large "English Shop" at the corner of the Nevsky . . . And I saw the Nevsky, that straight and proud rolling street filled with every kind of vehicle, and black masses of people, rolling like thick clouds up and down, here and there, the hum of their talk rising like mist from the snow. And there was the Kazan cathedral, haughty and proud, and . . . the bridges and the palaces and the square before the Alexander Theatre . . . I watched the Nevsky and saw how it slipped into the Neva with the Square on one side of it, and St. Isaac's on the other, and the great station on the far end of it, and about these two lines, the Neva and the Nevsky, the whole town sprawled and crept, ebbed and flowed. Away from the splendour it stretched, dirty and decrepit and unattended, here piles of evil flats, there old wooden buildings with cobbled courts, and the canals twisting and creeping up and down and through it all. It was all bathed, as I looked down upon it, in coloured mist. The air was purple and gold and light blue fading into the snow and ice and transforming it. Everywhere there were masts of ships and the smell of the sea and rough deserted places, and shadows moved behind the shadows, and yet more shadows behind *them,* so that it was all uncertain and unstable and only the river knew what it was all about.[2]

The Neva and the Nevsky set the feel of the city, a feel of great breadth; both the river and the street seem quite disproportionately wide. The feeling is increased by the flatness of the land on which

the city is built, so flat that one feels dominated by an overpowering sky, which dwarfs the city for all its imposing palaces and government buildings. More than most, the city is at the mercy of its climate, which contrives to be unpleasant for some eleven months of the year—take the following entries from a 1903 diary which give glimpses of autumn, winter and finally summer.

> 4 ix 03.
> Petersburg is having peculiar sunsets, as if the whole horizon were bathed in fire, the sun sets purple and appears to flood the sky with smoke. Although the street lamps are lit the sky keeps on smouldering with a fiery tinge till late evening.[3]

By December the light was long gone:

> 9 xii 03.
> Not a sign of a sleigh yet [i.e., no snow]. Amazingly dark mornings, you get your first glimpse of dawn around half past eight; lamps lit everywhere. The air is thick not with darkness but with something heavy and brownish like peat smoke. They turn out the street lamps at a quarter past nine.[4]

Summer seems worse:

> 14 vii 04.
> Life is hard in Petersburg in the summer, in the heat of the day, and worse in the still summer evenings. The place is airless; out of doors there is a kind of blue grey pall of unhealthy vapours and even the smartest streets have begun to smell of rotting sewage.[5]

One of the first features to catch a visitor's eye in summer was the proliferation of notices and public warnings in bold red lettering telling citizens not to drink the water for fear of cholera, which regularly used to reach the level of an epidemic. Papers such as the *Petersburg Gazette* would solemnly exhort their readers to stick to beer—for safety's sake. Many of the inhabitants of the capital had never tasted fresh water, suggests one observer, since all drinking water was automatically boiled. During the cholera season free boiled water was to be had from huge containers that were wheeled from street to street. However, it must be said that many of the capital's humbler citizens treated such bids for health and hygiene

with sublime disregard. It was quite usual to see "dirty workmen slaking their thirst with water dipped out in their greasy caps from the foulest canals of the city, while cautionary notices were staring them full in the face only a few yards off."[6] The workmen and working-class crowds of St. Petersburg in the early twentieth century would seem quite familiar to anyone who knows the Moscow or Leningrad of today. He would find the same blend of jostling, pushing, and squeezing, accompanied by hair-raising bad language from both sexes, and indignant squeals of protest from elderly women who suspect that they might not be getting their way. Then as now there was widespread drunkenness. On public holidays the city took on a colouring all its own, with drunks pouring down its main streets, while the air itself appeared to reek of vodka and bad language.[7] Although it was not a working-class city—indeed as late as 1910 ten percent of factory workers went home for harvest—the kind of Russian liable to end his celebrations by falling flat on his face in the street rather than being taken home in a cab was more in evidence in the centre of the town than he might be in other capitals. This is because the poorer classes were evenly distributed over the city. Rather than concentrate in slum areas on the outskirts, they tended to live in the attics or basements of houses which they shared with the more well-to-do.

Yet there was more to the capital than drunken workmen. It was distinguished from other Russian cities by its cosmopolitan quality. This was reflected in many ways—in its merchants, for example. The merchants of Moscow were conservatives of the old school, Russian to the core for all their fabulous wealth—it used to be said that their warehouses held enough furs to lay a path from Moscow to Paris. The merchants of St. Petersburg were different. English and German families had lived there for generations, and had their own independent communities. The city's smart set was equally cosmopolitan. Everybody had foreign governesses, and in the early twentieth century England was all the rage, English having replaced French as the fashionable language. However, members of society were usually at home in both languages, switching from English to French to Russian quite unconsciously. *"On govoril one sans-atout"*—he bid one no-trump—being the kind of trilingual phrase one could expect to hear at the bridge table. Anglomania had made Drew's

English Shop the most popular store in the city. Its stock included Pears soap and football jerseys in the colours of Oxford and Cambridge colleges. The English habit came from the court, where everything English was in special favour. The aristocracy even used to get their suits made in London, but when it came to washing, France was still held to have the edge. It was the smart thing to have one's laundry done in Paris.

Although such gestures might suggest that the Russian aristocracy had a certain talent for conspicuous consumption, this does not mean that as a caste it possessed fabulous wealth. In fact even the tsar himself had to take care if he was to balance his domestic budget. There were, of course, great fortunes, among the grand dukes and a tiny handful of other families, such as the Yusupovs, but they were few in number, and would scarcely stand comparison with those of some of the leading English families of the age. Nevertheless the social life of the capital was brilliant enough. The St. Petersburg season opened on the morning of New Year's Day, when the emperor and empress made a ceremonial appearance in the Winter Palace. It ended on the Sunday before Lent. During this time hostesses vied with one another to give the most memorable ball of the season. There were highly formal *bals blancs* for unmarried debutantes and rather more relaxed *bals roses* for young married couples. The dancing season would culminate in a grand masked ball given by Countess Kleinmichel.

Yet private entertainments of this kind were eclipsed by the magnificent court balls, held in the enormous, and, it was generally agreed, forbidding Winter Palace. The most important of them was the ball that opened the season. There was a fixed guest list, which included the diplomatic corps, members of the first four of the fourteen classes into which all Russian government servants, civil and military, were divided, senior guards officers, and junior guards officers known to be good dancers. The ball began early, carriages arriving at appointed entrances to the palace at 8:30:

> January. Intense cold. The whole of the three vast blocks of the Winter Palace inundated with light. Braziers burning around the immense Alexander column, a granite monolith with an archangel on top of it. Carriages arriving in an unbroken line. Open sledges bringing those officers who did not fear the cold; the horses'

harness covered with blue netting to prevent accumulations of snow from being blown into the passengers' faces.

Motor-cars were regarded then as a capricious and undependable toy . . .

The guests went up the grand staircases of white marble, on the soft and velvety carpets; white and scarlet uniforms; spreadeagle helmets in gold and silver; countless epaulettes . . . white dolmans bordered with precious beaver fur; finally the Court uniforms, heavy with gold embroidery and completed by short breeches and white silk stockings.[8]

Uniforms dominated at the balls, as they did at the opera and the ballet, occasions from which uniforms were quite indissociable. The author remembers many years ago taking an old Russian lady to the ballet at Covent Garden. The last time she had been to it was to see Kseshinskaya dance in Petrograd, just before the revolution. As we walked into the opera house she exclaimed, in a blend of shock and bitter undisguised disappointment: "But where are the uniforms?"

Whatever they may have looked like, the uniforms were a misery to their wearers, notably to the young officers on duty in the palace. They wore a full-dress uniform that consisted of a regulation jacket, a kind of extra waistcoat—for the Horse Guards, for example, this was scarlet with metallic eagles on the front and the back—and, worst of all, elk-skin breeches:

It was essential that the breeches should have not the slightest crease. To attain this result they were damped, smeared with soap, and put on—after taking off the pants (ie drawers) if I may venture to say so. The operation called for the services of a couple of vigorous soldiers.[9]

The ladies wore court dresses, cut very low, with bare shoulders and a long train. On the left of their bodice they would wear, according to rank, the imperial monogramme, if they were maids of honour, or even the imperial portrait, which was only granted to ladies of the greatest merit. The head of Nicholas's Court Chancellery, A. A. Mossolov, evokes a *grande dame* at the ball:

She was already in her forties, but still slim, and her spangled dress displayed her figure wonderfully. Her light, almost chestnut hair was decorated with a diadem set with two rows of diamonds. A

ferronière with a single diamond of two square centimetres crossed her forehead. A diamond necklace, the neck of her dress bordered with diamonds, with a flower at the back entirely of diamonds, set flat; two diamond chains leading, like enormous threads of fire, first to the front of the bodice, and then to the buckle at the waist.[10]

The tsar and tsarina would circulate freely through the crowds, and when supper was served they did not have their own table, but moved from one table to the next, at each one places being kept in reserve for them, while their itinerary, and just whom they would honour by joining, were of course all carefully determined in advance. Court balls, as may be imagined, were occasions that were taken very seriously indeed by the guests, and when, in later years, the tsarina insisted that the number of balls be drastically curtailed, since they put an intolerable strain upon her, shy and awkward as she was, it made her increasingly unpopular, and not just among the court nobility, but also among their juniors, the newly promoted civil servants who were only just eligible for an invitation, and who set that much more store by the whole occasion.

Besides balls and dances there were other social occasions which brought society into contact with the imperial family, notably the charity bazaars that were held during and after the Japanese war. They would be organised by leading figures such as the Grand Duchess Marie, who held hers annually in the Assemblée de la Noblesse, and at which the empress herself had a stall. St. Petersburg also had to offer the usual entertainments of a capital city. These were golden years for the opera and the ballet, which performed every Sunday night, while Saturdays were reserved for visits to the French Theatre. There was horse racing all the year round at the hippodrome, while an important centre for male social life was the Yacht Club, on Bolshaya Morskaya St., where it owned a smallish single-story building. The club was exclusive. Male members of the imperial family were elected automatically, other members were put up. It was a great thing for an up-and-coming guards officer to get in, and new members tended to make themselves conspicuous, looking proudly out over the busy street through the club's ample windows. It was a place where many useful contacts were made, and many rumours had their origins there, especially during the First World War.

As well as being a vital centre for trade, and the focus of social life, St. Petersburg was also the administrative capital of the empire, and hence the home of civil servants galore, and of still more uniforms, civil and military. Everyone in state service wore a uniform, and this included even students, their full dress consisting of a dark green tunic with gold buttons and a dark blue collar. Swords were plentiful too. One of the sounds to be heard on any smart street was the ring and rattle of sabres trailing and travelling along the pavement in the wake of cavalry officers temporarily on foot, for the capital was also a military city, and an imperial one, much given to parades:

> April 28. Just after eleven. I saw a splendid sight. Starting from the palace, along the embankment to the Summer Garden there were rows of Horse Guards; the bands were playing God Save the Tsar and the tsar rode along in a dark uniform with a blue sash beside the Empress's carriage; behind came the various uniforms of the aides-de-camp and generals. The regiments . . . began to cheer, but very much by numbers, giving one very little sense of enthusiasm. Of course no one was allowed near the embankment, on foot or otherwise, and the imperial procession went slowly by the ranks of soldiers moving down an apparently deserted street.[11]

Imperial protocol and security on such occasions was strict, since the danger of assassination was ever-present and the tsar the prime target. To those of us who believe terrorism to be a recent phenomenon it comes almost as a comfort to realise that, in the latter days of imperial Russia, countless government officials fell to the assassins' bombs and bullets. These included three ministers of the interior, D. S. Sipyagin, 1902, V. K. Plehve, 1904, and in 1911 Peter Stolypin—who had already survived a bomb attack on his house five years before. Another distinguished victim of terrorism was the governor-general of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergei, who was blown up by a revolutionary named Kalyaev in February 1905. Despite a visit from the grand duke's wife and the tsar's sister-in-law in prison, Kalyaev refused to express regret for his actions and went unrepentant to the scaffold.

Between 1905 and 1909 the total number of victims of terrorist attacks numbered 5,913, of which 2,691 were killed. Over the same period 4,630 terrorists were sentenced to death, 2,390 executed.

Tight though security was, it had its lapses, such as the occasion when the tsar came under the fire of his own guns. Each year, on the Feast of the Epiphany, the sixth of January, the tsar and the metropolitan of St. Petersburg would ceremoniously bless the waters of the Neva. Blocks of ice would be cut from its surface, and an altar and cross fashioned out of them. Accompanied by a suite of courtiers and ecclesiastics the tsar and the metropolitan would bless the waters, dipping a gold cross into them. The ceremony was rounded off by a salute fired by a battery facing the Winter Palace from the far bank of the Neva. In 1905 the salute was fired as usual—and shattered several palace windows, showering onlookers with broken glass. It appeared that one of the gunners had forgotten to exchange his shrapnel for blanks—a story not of conspiracy, but of a certain distinctly Russian kind of incompetence.[12] For official life in imperial Russia combined a remarkable degree of regimentation with elements of a hopelessness that prompted one British observer, Maurice Baring, to suggest that it was as if a complicated administrative machine had been set up in the heart of rural Ireland. Regimentation was reflected in some of the city's more eccentric regulations, such as the one that made it illegal to sell matches after 5:00 P.M. on Sundays, while it was only in April 1904 that ladies were permitted to ride on the top of the horse-drawn trams. There were city regulations of other kinds. When a pigeon fancier tried to get permission to import some birds from Finland he got caught in festoons of red tape that were exotic even by the standard of pre–World War One European bureaucracy. The objection to pigeons was that they could carry letters out of the country without risk of interception, bypassing the censorship to which any item of outgoing mail might be exposed. The pigeon fancier had to apply in turn to the police, the customs, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Finance, the War Ministry, and the Department of Engineers, since that department dealt with matters involving aviation. The request was finally turned down because he was considered to live too close to a military fortress whose secrets he, or his birds, might reveal.[13]

Yet despite such careful regulation St. Petersburg was a town in which things could go very wrong. Leaving aside such major disasters as Bloody Sunday in 1905, when troops fired on unarmed

demonstrators bringing a petition to the tsar, things regularly failed on more modest levels, demonstrating the effect upon patterns of city life of generations of administrative incompetence. Take the following glimpse of St. Petersburg, January 21, 1905:

> The Egyptian Bridge collapsed yesterday. Fortunately no one was killed, and nobody drowned . . . along with the bridge part of a squadron of Horse Grenadiers fell into the Fontanka canal . . . The bridge should have been scrapped and replaced three years ago. Instead the municipal council allocated 575 roubles for repairs. But that sum only existed on paper. The contractor was given only 175 roubles, and obliged to sign a receipt for the whole sum. It is true though that no one required him to make any repairs whatsoever.[14]

By the time Rasputin was on his way there, the capital of Russia differed from other European cities in another remarkable respect. It enjoyed a degree of sexual openness, as opposed to licence, that by the standards of the age was extraordinary. Anyone leafing through the newspapers of the period will realise at once that he has entered a different world. Even the more distinguished dailies of the capital would carry between one and two-and-a-half pages of small ads. A reasonable proportion concerned accommodation and domestic help, but far and away the greater part consisted of advertisements offering various types of treatment for syphilis and gonorrhea. The treatments are classified by numbers—syphilis 606, or 914—alternatively they plug products such as Urital Galen, guaranteed to stop the most stubborn discharge in no time. That product was in hot competition with A. Ya. Akuliany's Armatin, advertised with equal generosity. The advertisements do not simply signify that there was more going on in St. Petersburg than elsewhere. That may or may not have been true. Essentially they testify to a relaxed and matter-of-fact attitude to certain uncomfortable facts of life, an attitude that fails to understand hypocrisy, and regards as fruitless attempts to pretend that certain conditions do not exist; in other words, they reflect an honesty and realistic openness that were among the most attractive characteristics of pre-revolutionary Russia. In the new Russia, of course, neither crime, prostitution, nor venereal disease exist.

Openness and frankness were reflected in a considerably greater

degree of sexual freedom than that enjoyed in Edwardian England. Members of the older generation complained of the decadence of the 1900s, in both public and private life. Thus a bookseller complained that the works of radical politics that had constituted his staple for years had become difficult to move; readers had grown more interested in pornography and the wilder sides of religion and the occult. It was a time when people sought strong sensations, spiritual and physical, and when homosexuality ceased to be the love that dare not speak its name. Its climate is well reflected in the mediocre best sellers of M. P. Artsybashev. His best-known novel, *Sanin*, is a study of nihilistic, disruptive and sensual youth, with vulgarised versions of the characters of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Gide. They are free of all sexual taboos, and the book is a work of quite remarkable frankness. Characters are actually described having erections, and maidenheads fall at an amazing rate. The work makes out a case for immediate sensual enjoyment under the threat of nihilistic despair. The protagonists express no surprise when three of their number take their own lives for reasons that remain obscure but that smack of *tedium vitae*. The survivors continue to discuss life's meaning, or the lack of it, and bear witness to an unguided striving for spiritual fulfillment.

The first decade of the century was a time of spiritual discontent, reflected in certain St. Petersburg circles in an increasingly feverish search for God. Besides the ways of conventional Orthodoxy there was an ever-growing interest in other paths such as theosophy, table-tapping and séances, reflected in the proliferation of journals devoted to such matters.[15] In advanced literary circles there was to be found a strange blend of heterodox faith and sensuality, tinged with popular religion, as Nikolai Arsenev points out in his remarkable study *Russian Piety:*

> This religious hysteria . . . also had a profound influence on certain aspects of the literary and cultural life of the Russian intelligentsia on the eve of the First World War . . . What was being preached was excess, and an orgiastic philosophy, a mixture of paganism and the most sacred Christian mysteries, an ecstasy, a deliberate frenzy, both sensual and at the same time religious, or at least quasi-religious. A smell of decay, and exoticism and morbid emotionality, a quest for sensation, a profound lack of moral equilibrium, seemed to characterize the literature of . . . the first

> fifteen years of the twentieth century. These literary circles . . . were at the same time . . . connected with the underground currents of sexualism and pagan mysticism which animated the Russian ecstatic sects . . . This movement reflected a tendency that was much more closely related to the popular soul than one would have thought at first sight; related however to the morbid element of this soul, in its disease, to the sensual and sinister undercurrent which combined the sacred and the scabrous.[16]

Even in more conventional religious circles there was a shift of emphasis, a growing interest in popular and not always entirely Orthodox forms of religion, a turning towards the sects and holy men and women of the people. In the words of a devout Christian of the time:

> Religious Petersburg began to look for answers to its doubts and spiritual questions in new ways and entered the realm of "popular" religion, that has no theological problems or contradictions, and was not committed to any body of dogma. It was all the easier to do so since there was no shortage of representatives of this kind of faith. And soon such representatives who had hitherto frequented the poorer parts of the city and the religiously inclined tradespeople of the city's markets, or visited the apartment of Archimandrite Theophanes, known to the whole city for his faith and currently Inspector of the Theological Academy, began to find their way into the drawing rooms and salons of high society.[17]

It was perfectly possible to witness the meeting of the world of primitive religion and the modern age upon the street. The thoroughfares of the capital abounded in sights such as the following:

> October 6, 1905
>
> I met a strange character this morning on the Nevsky Prospekt, wearing a cassock and with a tall staff in his hand. He was barefoot despite the snow and bare headed. He had a broad pleasant face covered with a thick beard . . . He was the pilgrim Vassily who always dresses like that however severe the frost, and collects money for the building of churches. They say that he is well known not just to the people but in the very highest circles.[18]

A few months later the author was travelling on a tram when Vassily got on and stood on the platform:

> His thinning hair was wet; he held his famous staff, with a cross on the top and a huge iron spike on the bottom . . . The holy gentleman's pockets were filled with brochures and copies of his life story. He hands them out and if he gets any money in return this immediately goes into a bag that hangs round his neck. Not so long ago a magistrate convicted him of causing a nuisance and brawling; the verger of the Kazan cathedral did not let him take his staff inside. He was offended and observed: "The Emperor Alexander III authorised me to take this staff everywhere, and now you want to stop me." He seized the verger. A struggle ensued and he was given a stiff fine.[19]

Vassily was a curious character well known in the capital. He was a peasant from the Kuban district, an illiterate soldier. His staff, weighing about fifty pounds, with a large silver cross, had frequently got him into trouble with priests who objected to his carrying it. Alexander III had indeed given him written authorisation to have it by him. He had been introduced into court circles by one of Nicholas's uncles, Sergei Alexandrovich, and it would seem that during the revolution of 1905 he offered Nicholas much advice about preventing revolutionary propaganda reaching the army and the maintenance of discipline. He would, when out of town, regularly send telegrams to the imperial couple, who were often known to reply. He fell from favour after a drunken brawl with a cab driver.[20]

* * *

To say that religious life was coloured by an enthusiasm verging on hysteria is not enough to convey the strange blend of ardent faith and superstition that reigned in the civilised Russia of those years. One can get some idea of the authority of superstition from the fact that during the Japanese war of 1904–1905 respectable newspapers would regularly carry stories of military miracles wrought by St. Nicholas on the Russian behalf. In the spring of 1912 in Novgorod there were persistent rumours that Antichrist had been born and the world was about to end. It was said that a baby had been born with iron teeth. As the priest christened the child he observed that it was a miracle. "This is no miracle," replied the baby, "the miracle is yet to come," and died. The reporter of the tale continues: "What kind of twentieth century is this? It has arrived on paper only, and we are really still in the depths of the 18th."[21]

It should be noted that in that year polite Novgorod society was very fond of bridge and passionately devoted to poker, at which everybody cheated as best they could.

In the capital one of the chief objects of religious enthusiasm was the priest John of Cronstadt (1829–1908). Since 1874 he had been the priest of the Andreevsky cathedral in Cronstadt, a naval base and suburb of St. Petersburg. He preached a popular brand of religion with a strong sectarian colouring, and was venerated by his flock of common people and aristocracy. He advocated absolutism and the need for the church to uphold the absolute authority of the Tsar Autocrat. He had the reputation of being a healer and a miracle worker, and to many seemed a likely candidate for sainthood, but it was a sainthood tinged with heresy. Hysterical women were known to interrupt his services calling out to him as "The Lord Sabaoth,"[22] an expression recalling the sectarian view of the Living God, and one which would also be applied to Rasputin by his more enthusiastic followers. John of Cronstadt also had a curious habit when eating with his admirers; he would take his soup, bless it, eat a spoonful and then pass it round as if it were a communion vessel from which each disciple would solemnly eat. This too was, as we shall see, a habit he shared with Rasputin. John's followers, the Joannites, were practically a sect in their own right. They were mostly hysterical mystics and beggars, persons from the lower orders, who from the 1890s onwards spread word of John's miracles, and described him as "the earthly incarnation of God," while his leading female follower was "the Mother of God." Because he had no time to hear the individual confessions of all those who wished to take communion, and in the Orthodox church communion must be preceded by confession, he established a kind of public confession in which everyone shouted their sins aloud simultaneously, making for a kind of clamour that would bewilder the most enthusiastic Southern Baptist, as the shrill voices of the women, who were usually in a majority, drowned the deeper tones of the men. John himself did not approve of his wilder followers, and would refuse his Joannites communion, understandably, since their attitude smacked strongly of heresy. Indeed, after John's death the official church took severe measures to stamp the Joannites out. This did not prevent the

Russian Church in Exile from canonising John, proclaiming him a saint in 1964.

Archimandrite Theophanes (an archimandrite was a form of abbot), born V. D. Bystrov, was another of the capital's leading churchmen. He was associated with the Theological Academy, first as an inspector, later as its rector. Short, thin, reserved, with a dark beard and hair that seemed plastered to his skull, he was universally loved and respected as a churchman of outstanding faith, wisdom, and kindness. His prestige extended well beyond the academy, to St. Petersburg society and the court itself, for the emperor had recently chosen him as his spiritual advisor. As we shall see, for all his qualities he was not always a sound judge of character.

Although Theophanes was a more Orthodox churchman than John of Cronstadt he shared the latter's bias. He too believed that true faith was more easily to be found among the people, and liked to surround himself with wanderers, *startsy*, men of God, and *yurodivye*. The latter are yet another relic of an earlier age. The word is variously translated as fool in God, simpleton in Christ, holy fool. The type was regularly encountered in Holy Russia and was probably the survival of a notion, common enough in medieval Europe, that God had endowed the mad with a peculiar kind of sanctity. However, mental derangement as such was not necessary to become a *yurodiviy;* it could also happen that the search for God would lead a man to assume the role of a half-wit, as a form of humiliation and mortification of the intellect. Traditionally *yurodivye* were held to be spiritually pure, and were placed beyond the reach of human authority, whatever they might say in their half-witted stammerings. Thus one of the most famous simpletons of Russian history, Vassili the Blessed, had a spiritual authority that made even Ivan the Terrible tremble. He features in iron cap, hair shirt, and penitential chains in *The Boyar's Plot,* the first of Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* films. In 1912 the town of Novgorod contained no less than seventeen *yurodivye* complete with penitential chains and caps of steel.

That Theophanes should hold wanderers and *yurodivye* in high regard may be greatly to his favour in some respects but it had some peculiar results, as in the case of Mitya Kolyaba:

> He was bow-legged, misshapen, almost mute, with a withered arm. He had to be led as his eyesight was very poor; his hearing too was deficient, and his speech consisted of a few horrible sounds, uttered in painful gasps. Whenever he was shaken by an epileptic attack and began to shriek his voice changed from an uncanny whisper into the sinister howling of an animal. Finally it would become an unnerving and fear-inspiring roaring and baying. The repulsive impressions thus created were enhanced by the insane flailings of his deformed arms. Indeed one had to have extremely strong nerves to endure the presence of this imbecile.[23]

Kolyaba was allegedly endowed with the power of prophecy. A sexton named Egorov claimed that when in a fit Kolyaba had the gift of tongues, and that he, Egorov, could interpret them. His reputation as a prophet and *yurodiviy* grew rapidly, and in 1902 he was brought to the capital where he made an excellent impression upon Theophanes, was introduced to various God-seeking members of the aristocracy and even taken to court. Indeed, in an extraordinary surge of heady God-seeking enthusiasm, a girl from the Smolny Institute, Russia's leading educational establishment for the daughters of the nobility, actually married him.[24] Prince Zhevakhov, a devout Christian of exasperating naivety, observed in his memoirs that St. Petersburg society did not accept Mitya blindly, but that it preferred to mistake a sinner for a saint than pass a saint by, failing to recognise him.[25] Although the religious circles of St. Petersburg may not have engaged in the pursuit of strange gods, they were certainly not averse to the cultivation of strange saints.

Late in the autumn of 1902 rumour of a new saint, prophet and miracle worker from Siberia began to reach the capital. A young and fanatical monk, Iliodor (his secular name was Sergei Trufanov), who was to become a prominent public figure and thorn in the flesh of church and state alike, first heard of the new man of God from Theophanes. The man of God was none other than Rasputin, news of his doings in Kazan having reached the Theological Academy of St. Petersburg. Theophanes observed to Iliodor that his existence was proof that:

> To this day our Holy Russia abounds in saints. God sends his consolation to His people from time to time in the guise of men of righteousness, and they are the mainstay of our Holy Russia.[26]

* * *

Theophanes, always on the lookout for potential saints and persons of exceptional holiness, had heard of Rasputin from the bishop of Kazan; indeed, the bishop gave Rasputin a letter of introduction to Theophanes. Armed with this, and in the company of Archimandrite Chrisanthos, chief of the church's mission to Korea, Rasputin arrived in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1903 and lodged with Theophanes.

The Siberian man of God made a profound impression, and Theophanes soon introduced him to John of Cronstadt. The introduction, as described by his daughter, has a ring of family mythology about it. Rasputin is alleged to have entered John's church without any preliminary introduction, taking communion there among a crowd of peasants. It would seem that John immediately sensed his exceptional presence and gave him communion first. Later he blessed him solemnly, urging him to carry out the great things assigned him by the will of God. It may all have happened like that, although it seems more likely that the seventy-four-year-old priest had been briefed by Theophanes in advance. Nevertheless the incident as reported is significant as it represents the kind of thing that the admirers of Rasputin wanted to believe—one "saint" automatically recognising another.

A little later Theophanes introduced Rasputin to Iliodor. The latter's subsequent description of the meeting is coloured by extreme prejudice—an expression appropriate in view of the fact that Iliodor later tried to have Rasputin assassinated. A fanatic by nature, hysterical, and in later years a demagogue, Iliodor was initially one of Rasputin's greatest admirers, only to turn against him, concluding that he was the embodiment of hypocrisy and lust. If Iliodor describes him here as a suspect character, that suspicion is retrospective. One day Iliodor is greeted by Theophanes in the Academy; the inspector has "an unpleasant simpering peasant" at his side:

> "This is Father Gregory from Siberia," remarked Theophanes pointing to the peasant, who was treading with his feet on one spot as if on the point of darting off in a wild gallop. "Ah, ah, ah," I stammered in embarrassment, holding out my hand to the peasant. We kissed each other.

> Gregory was dressed in a cheap, greasy, gray coat the skirts of which bulged out in front like two leather mittens. His pockets were inflated like those of a beggar who deposits there any eatables that are given to him. His trousers, no less shabby than the coat, hung down over the coarse legs of his peasant boots evidently blacked with tar, and the seat of his trousers flapped like a torn old hammock. The hair on the saint's head was roughly combed in one direction; his beard looked like a piece of sheepskin pasted to his face to complete its repulsive ugliness. His hands were pock marked and unclean and there was much dirt under his long and somewhat turned-in nails. His entire body emitted an indeterminate disagreeable smell.
>
> Gregory, having kissed me, surveyed me with his eyes, then moved his thick blue sensual lips, from which his moustache protruded like two worn out brushes, slapped me on the shoulder with one hand keeping the fingers of the other in his mouth and, addressing Theophanes with a kind of ingratiating unnatural smile remarked: "He prays powerfully, very powerfully."[27]

Hindsight or not, much of this rings true, especially the physical description. Rasputin had something of the *yurodiviy* about him, with his restless jerky movements, his habit of blurting out strangely phrased intuitive judgments. "Powerfully" is a weak translation of the Russian *shibko*, a strange adverb to describe prayer, with a strong colouring of peasant idiom; "He prays mighty fierce" would be a better rendering. The encounter is peculiar in another respect. It took place, says Iliodor, on December 16, a date which had a peculiar significance in Rasputin's life. It would be on another December 16 eight years later that Iliodor, in the company of Bishop Hermogenes, a possible castrate, and the half-wit Mitya Kolyaba, would make a farcical attempt to kill Rasputin, and December 16 was also the date of his assassination. It is possible but unlikely that Iliodor falsified the date in retrospect, for he failed to draw attention to its significance. It is a strange coincidence that it should have been on that day of all days that Rasputin made the acquaintance of the man who would prove his bitterest enemy, do more than any other to attempt to discredit him, participate in a violent attack upon him, and mastermind at least one other assassination attempt that was nearly fatal.

For all Iliodor's subsequent reservations, Rasputin made a tremendous impression upon religious circles in the capital, gaining

the admiration of churchmen and laymen alike. He was variously described as a *starets,* a *yurodiviy,* or a man of God, but all agreed that he was a potential saint. For devout and simple men such as Theophanes he fulfilled a particular need, the need to believe that Holy Russia could still bring forth persons of exceptional holiness, proof that God still favoured her and that her church was as strong as ever. As Zhevakhov puts it:

> [In those days] it was the best, not the worst who flocked to Rasputin, their only fault being ignorance in matters of religion, or a gullible belief in Rasputin's "sanctity." There were people who made the most extreme demands of themselves, who were quite incapable of compromising with their consciences, and who, suffering deeply in the worldly atmosphere of lies and falsehood, looked for a solution to persons who seemed capable of conquering sin and allaying the fears of troubled souls; the kind of people who felt themselves unable to fight a lone battle against lies, suffering and misery, and who needed the moral support of those who were strong in spirit.[28]

Rasputin, who now began to find his way into the salons of the religiously minded nobility, cut a figure so far removed from their limited experience of the peasantry that they were incapable of assessing him, while remaining willing to take him upon trust:

> Rasputin's success was aided by the fact that high society . . . was not conversant with religious matters, had little contact with the clergy, or, finding such contact unsatisfactory, was distinctly uncritical, accepting him as a *starets;* they did not dream of taking a critical view of his words and deeds.
>
> In fact they were scarcely in a position to do so, not only because Rasputin spoke in jerky unconnected phrases and cryptic hints, which it was impossible to make sense of, but because his reputation was based not on what he said, but upon the impression he made. The stiff necked world of Petersburg society was utterly bewildered by its encounter with a bold outspoken Russian peasant who was no respecter of persons of any kind, said "thou" to all and sundry, was quite oblivious to considerations of protocol or etiquette, and unimpressed by any setting in which he might find himself . . . He treated all comers with a gentle kindness, as "hungerers and thirsters after the truth."[29]

Rasputin, to the end, would dress and speak as a peasant. For all his

eventual ambition and the fierceness with which he would defend his situation as the intimate friend of the empress, he never attempted to "better himself," alter his peasant manners and nature. It was as a peasant that he penetrated to the heart of the empire, and a peasant he was content to remain. In the days of pre-Petrine Muscovy the women of the Kremlin regularly received a stream of beggars, pilgrims, and holy men in their apartments, thereby maintaining a link between rulers and the people that Peter the Great severed. It took Rasputin to renew immediate contact between the court and the people, with consequences that would prove disastrous for all concerned.

Some of Rasputin's more extravagant biographers have suggested that his career was advanced by Freemasons and Jews; but they advance no evidence to substantiate their claims, nor could they. It has also been suggested that Rasputin owed his initial success in the capital to ultra-right-wing elements, who planned to place him close to the tsar, and use him as an advocate of their policies. There is no direct evidence to substantiate this claim either—however, it is the case that all of Rasputin's early protectors were associated with right-wing political or religious elements. This was true of Theophanes and of Bishop Hermogenes, another early ecclesiastical acquaintance, who was very close indeed to activist patriotic groups such as the Union of the Russian People. It was true too of the first society hostess to receive Rasputin in her salon.

Countess Ignatiev was the wife of Count N. P. Ignatiev, Alexander III's first minister of the interior, a stern reactionary who replaced a more liberally inclined predecessor. Although he had not held office for over twenty years, he was one of a number of "wise old men" to whom Nicholas II would turn occasionally for advice. In two years' time, when Russia was in revolutionary turmoil, he would advise the tsar to stick to his principles and not grant his country a constitution. The countess was a very devout woman, closely connected to some of the most distinguished families in the land. For years she had run the leading right-wing salon of the capital, and was held, by many, in the very highest regard. This was not an opinion shared by Sergei Witte, who thought her an ambitious and foolish old woman: "A very unbalanced personality of limited intelligence, who began to dabble in politics under the guise of an interest in the church."[30]

Nevertheless the Ignatiev salon was an important meeting place for government ministers, high-ranking ecclesiastics and aristocratic reactionaries. They met in an atmosphere of religious enthusiasm, celebration of the autocratic principle, and a not always very orthodox mysticism. In other words it was the perfect setting for Rasputin's launching into high society. The *starets* professed his own brand of popular faith, and combined it with his simple peasant's adoration of *Batyushka Tsar'*, the tsar and little father. He made a considerable impact, if we can judge by the appearance made by the recently canonised Serafim of Sarov, at a séance held chez Ignatiev. The saint manifested himself with his head ringed by a halo of fire, and announced: "A great prophet is among you."[31] It was generally agreed that the prophet was none other than Rasputin.

There can be no doubt that the *starets* derived enormous benefit from his admission to such exclusive circles. However, we should not assume that he was the only Holy Man of the people to be received by the countess; Mitya Kolyaba was also seen there, for example. Moreover we do not know how often he went there, or on what terms. Certainly to be received by the countess conferred a certain recognition upon him, but it does not appear that she continued to play a significant role in his subsequent advancement. In fact it could be said that a rather more significant role was played by an ordinary priest, Yaroslav Medved', who had frequently visited Tsarskoe Selo. He talked to Rasputin at great length of the extraordinary reception accorded Rasputin's own *starets* Makarii of Verkhoturye, confirming all the stories Rasputin had heard from him, of how he had been taken to Tsarskoe Selo and presented to Nicholas and Alexandra. Rasputin, who now decided, late in 1903, to leave the capital and winter in Pokrovskoe, must have set off highly content with his own reception in the capital, and possessed of the tantalising knowledge that there was still a long way he could go.

Although he may have departed trailing clouds of glory, there was a cloud of another kind low down on the horizon, the kind that was as yet "no bigger than a man's hand." A month or so after he left, in January 1904, Bishop Anthony of Volyn' paid a visit to the capital. A distinguished theologian who had once been rector of the Theological Academy, he still took a great interest in its affairs, being considered a good friend to its younger students. He was enthusiastically

informed of the remarkable impression made by Rasputin, but proved sceptical to the highest degree. Tales he had heard of Rasputin's behaviour in Kazan had convinced him that by no stretch of the imagination could he be taken for a saint. He said as much, denouncing him as an imposter, but Theophanes and Rasputin's admirers dismissed his warnings as idle talk, for Bishop Anthony was known to be an inveterate gossip. Nevertheless in certain circles it began to be whispered that "In Kazan Father Grigorii has been with women."

Theophanes's indignant rejection of these allegations is interesting because it sets a pattern. Over the years evidence of Rasputin's misbehaviour would accumulate steadily, only to be obstinately rejected by his admirers, because to accept it would prevent them from believing what they so desperately wanted to believe, that the extraordinary authority Rasputin asserted was proof that he was a man of God, with the power to remit sins. Rasputin offered such solace because he claimed to take the sins of others upon himself. Shorn of that power there was little he could offer the heavy-laden. The credulity which surrounded Rasputin is reminiscent of that displayed by the Germans who elected Hitler chancellor in Germany in 1933; his disciples wanted so badly to believe in Rasputin that he managed to persuade them, for a long time, that black was white because that was the colour they needed it to be.

CHAPTER 6

RASPUTIN RETURNED to the capital, putting up at the Mount Athos monastic hostel. For all the rumours of his doings in Kazan, Theophanes and his friends gave him a warm welcome. They also helped him to extend his influence. It was at this time that he met a lady who was to become the most enthusiastic and most deranged of all his disciples. Mme. O. V. Lokhtina was a prosperous landowner married to an engineer in government service. She had been bedridden for years with neurasthenia, and doctors proved unable to help her. Rasputin, it would seem, managed a cure. A woman with a great capacity for enthusiasm, she became his unswerving lifelong admirer. She was his first intimate upper-class friend—he soon moved from his lodgings to stay with the family, and continued to live there for some years. It is highly probable that he became her lover, or at least applied sectarian arguments to test her capacity to conquer the temptations of the flesh.

Lokhtina is interesting in another respect; she was the only one

of his society admirers overtly to profess sectarian attitudes—in this case well beyond the limits of mere eccentricity. For Lokhtina was overpowered by Rasputin, who may have cured her neurasthenia, but only at the cost of destroying her mental equilibrium forever. She came, literally, to worship him, would fall to her knees in front of him, kiss his hand and address him as the Living Christ or the Lord Sabaoth. To improve the quality of her worship she took to dressing entirely in white, in an echo of the sectarian aspiration to purity, with her dress bedecked with ribbons. Round her head she would wear a bandeau bearing the word "Alleluia," above which could often be seen a bonnet of wolf skin, made in Pokrovskoe, a gift from Rasputin. She became increasingly strange, displaying more than a tinge of sexual hysteria. Some years later she told Rasputin's daughter that Iliodor, who had by then turned against Rasputin, had attempted to rape her in his monastery cell. When other monks came running to her screams Iliodor convinced them that it was she who had tried to seduce him, whereupon they indignantly stripped her naked and tied her to the back of a horse, which they drove out into the snow. None of this seems likely, although Iliodor did know Lokhtina well enough at one stage to get hold of her diaries, which he used for his polemic against Rasputin. She eventually took her search for God to the extremes of *yurodstvo*. A photograph of her in 1914 portrays a woman in her forties, an aged Ophelia, with a strange and staring face beneath a beribboned hat, draped in a long white cloak. At the time she was living in a peasant's mud hut in the village of Morozovo searching for God.[1]

Lokhtina was the most extreme and longest lasting of Rasputin's lady disciples. We last see her before the investigating commission of 1917, making a brief and very dignified appearance. Her attitude toward Rasputin helps us to understand the kind of hold he could secure. To her he was a healer who had cured her of an admittedly nervous condition, which no doctor could help. He was also a great authority of a sectarian and popular cast, in whom spirituality and sexuality were inextricably confused. Thus he exerted a powerful influence on three interdependent fronts, health, sex and religion, with consequences that, at least for Lokhtina, were permanently unsettling.

In the spring of 1905 Theophanes and Yaroslav Medved' helped

Rasputin take his next and most important step, one which turned him from a Siberian guru into a historic personage. At Easter that year Theophanes introduced him to the highest circles, presenting him to Grand Duchess Militsa, who was married to one of the tsar's relatives, Grand Duke Peter Nikolaevich. The grand duchess and her sister Anastasia, Duchess of Leuchtenberg, were known as the Montenegrins (they were Montenegrin princesses, Negus by origin) or, more colloquially, as "the crows" because of their dark hair and colouring. The tsar's relatives disliked them, considering them over-ambitious and too conscious of their rank. They were notorious for insisting upon their right to follow immediately behind the emperor, empress and dowager empress on ceremonial occasions. As Grand Duchess Olga Alexandrovna put it: "The sisters were nicknamed Scylla and Charybdis, and nobody dared to make a move until the Montenegrin ladies were where they considered they should be."[2] To be fair, this was probably a case of one sister leading the other, for the two women were not alike. Anastasia was considered to be much the nicer of the pair, quiet, inward-looking, with a strong religious sense.[3] Militsa was very different; ambitious, domineering, full of envy and a born intriguer. She too was religious, but in a not very Orthodox way. She had made an extended study of patristics, and of Christian mysticism, and was also said to read Persian mystic texts in the original. However, her interests extended further still, embracing spiritualism, theosophy, table-tapping and every branch of the occult. In other words, she was just the sort of person to respond readily to Rasputin. She was impressed by his man-of-the-people manner, by his speech, which was frequently incomprehensible, and by his idiosyncratic commentaries upon the Scriptures, and was quite ready to believe that he possessed extraordinary powers of healing and divination. The high regard in which he was held by Theophanes and his circle confirmed her in her opinion, an opinion that had not inconsiderable consequences for Russian history, for Militsa, at this time, was very close to the tsar, and more especially the tsarina.

* * *

It is hard to imagine anyone less well equipped to steer imperial Russia into the twentieth century than Nicholas II. A family man

first and foremost, a partner in one of the most loving marriages ever to come before the public eye, he would, as it has sometimes been said, have been perfect as the owner of a large estate in rural England; as an autocrat he was hopeless. He had not even had the benefit of proper preparation for his task. His education had essentially been that of a cavalry officer. According to a cousin, Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich, his principal tutor was a "dry unforthcoming general who impressed on his charge that the miraculous force of secret annointment during the coronation was sufficient to give the future autocrat of Russia all he needed to know."[4] Another highly critical account written before the revolution provides a more elaborate picture:

> Though masters in plenty came to instruct the tsarevich and his brothers and sisters they were nevertheless allowed to remain without that domestic training which alone gives to future sovereigns and people in high stations the knowledge to fulfill their duties in the proper way and to meet with dignity the responsibilities of their arduous position.
>
> Again, lessons, though they teach something, yet do not instruct those who receive them if they are not accompanied by an intelligent training, and of this the Imperial children had none. They were given elementary notions of languages and arts, but I doubt very much whether to the present day any of them, the Sovereign not excluded, could write a letter in French without mistakes. [Though it should be said that his written English was excellent.] The love of learning was not inculcated; reading serious books was never encouraged; the discoveries of science were only explained as things which existed, but not as things capable of further development. In a word the tsarevich received quite a middle class training, and though he was afterwards sent on a long voyage for the purpose of improving his mind and acquainting himself with the world, it is more than doubtful whether he derived any real benefit from it.[5]

Nicholas seems to have retained considerable naivete in matters scientific. Some time after he came to the throne, "an American succeeded in persuading the Emperor that he had discovered a way to defend the frontiers of a country as vast as Russia by the use of electric currents of such force that no enemy could possibly cross the line. This discovery was to do away with the need for an army.

Naturally, he demanded certain pecuniary considerations in advance before revealing his secret. The emperor was greatly impressed, and it was only with a good deal of trouble that he was dissuaded from subsidising the ingenious inventor."[6]

Nicholas's personality did not help him overcome the limitations of his education. A short, neat figure of a man, five feet seven inches tall, he was timid, introverted and weak, in the sense that he was incapable of making up his mind and sticking to his decisions. However it must be said that he always commanded great love and loyalty in his immediate entourage, together with a considerable amount of respect. He had great charm and also a quiet, penetrating way of looking at a man that could make even the strong feel weak. Thus an ex-minister who knew him well and had no reason to love him wrote of "that delightful affability of his which captivates not only all who meet him for the first time, but even men who, like myself, know the exact worth of his gestures and phrases."[7]

Yet despite his considerable majesty of manner, as an emperor he lacked stature and that taste for power which is important for any politician, vital for an autocrat. His happiest years had been those spent as a junior guards officer. His favourite pastimes were physical, not intellectual. He loved riding, could walk any but the fittest courtier off his feet, enjoyed rowing, sailing, shooting and playing tennis; in his late forties he was still capable of giving the last Russian champion, left-handed Michael Sumarokov-Elston, a testing work-out. The pictures we have of him in the hands of the Bolsheviks, cutting wood or shovelling snow, are not icons of imperial humiliation, they show the tsar having a good time—with his coat off doing useful physical exercise.

The early years of his reign had passed under the "guidance" of his four massive uncles. As Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich put it:

> The well-built young man spent the first ten years of his reign sitting in his study behind a huge desk, listening with a feeling that went close to terror to the advice and directions of his uncles. He was afraid to be alone with them.[8]

As a ruler Nicholas never learnt how to use the advice of uncles, ministers or sages from Siberia:

> He was always timid, almost painfully so, and when by a strong effort of will he conquered that timidity, he came out with what he wanted to say in an almost brutal manner . . . He never had any opinion of his own . . . his want of mind making him always endorse the judgment of the last person he speaks to.[9]

Even if a minister had lost his confidence the tsar would receive him with the utmost courtesy and listen to him with great attention. He made it a point never to display emotion, although he might drum a little on the windowpane or smoke more cigarettes than usual. As A. A. Mossolov, for sixteen years head of the court Chancellery, put it:

> Nicholas was still perfectly able to give him a friendly reception, to thank him for his collaboration and to shake hands warmly with him when he left and then to send him a letter calling on him to resign.[10]

Yet weak though he may have been as a ruler, he possessed that peculiar dogged obstinacy that sometimes accompanies weak men in power. On the rare occasions on which he made his mind up definitely he was impossible to move; no argument, however convincing, could reach him. Take, for example, his reaction to a ministerial council that advised him to abolish some of the restrictions that Russia imposed upon her huge Jewish population:

> "Despite most convincing arguments in favour of adopting a positive decision in this matter, an inner voice keeps insisting more and more that I do not accept responsibility for it. So far my conscience has not deceived me. Therefore I intend in this case also to follow its dictates. I know that you too believe that 'the tsar's heart is in God's hands.' Let it be so. For all the laws I establish I bear a great responsibility before God, and am ready to answer for this decision at any time." So went his answer. None of the documents in my possession shows more clearly the tsar's mystical attitude towards the nature of his Imperial power.[11]

Those words were written by the last peacetime prime minister, V. N. Kokovtsov. Nicholas sincerely believed that he had received Russia from God, and was personally responsible for her well-being. This meant that he did not have the right to delegate or dilute his

power in any way. It also meant that when he heard the voice of conscience advise a certain course nothing could dissuade him from taking it. Obstinacy, mysticism, and weakness combined to shape another and perhaps the most disastrous of all his characteristics: a deadly fatalism. We are all in the hands of God, and if it is his will that, for example, the Japanese annihilate the Russian fleet at Tsushima in 1905, there is nothing a tsar can do about it. Nicholas accepted the course of history passively. "Thy will be done" was his response, to the very end; and as he was always ready to point out, he was born on May 6, the day of Job.

The fatal calm that he displayed in such circumstances might be thought of as a version of the British stiff upper lip, but it was very different. Nicholas achieved his outward impassivity by withdrawing from the world, refusing to accept the significance, the existence even, of bad news. The display of calm was achieved at the price of a flight from reality, a secret and interior withdrawal reminiscent of a man who removes the telephone from his ear in order to reduce the sound of a nagging wife to a remote if petulant murmur. Nicholas, though by no means musical, was fond of Wagner, his favourite opera being *The Twilight of the Gods*.[12]

In one respect at least he was lucky, beyond the luck of many men, and certainly most heads of state. When the young Princess Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt came to Russia to attend the wedding of her sister Elizabeth to Nicholas's uncle, the grand duke Sergei, the princess and the tsarevich fell quickly and enduringly in love. In his diary for January 1891 he writes, "My dream is some day to marry Princess Alix H. I have loved her for a long while . . ." There were objections to the match; she was reluctant to leave her Protestant religion, especially since the service that would announce her conversion to Orthodoxy required her, literally, to spit upon her old faith. However, she eventually relented, and Nicholas was in raptures:

> Wonderful, unforgettable day in my life, the day of my engagement to my darling adorable Alix . . . Oh God what a mountain has rolled from my shoulders . . . The whole day I have been walking in a mist without realising what has happened to me . . . The whole world is changed for me; nature, mankind, everything; all seems to be good and lovable and happy.

Alexandra's reactions are similar. "Never," she was soon to write in what had become a joint diary, "did I believe that there could be such utter happiness in this world, such a feeling of unity between two mortal beings. I love you—those three words have my life in them."

A wise man once observed that all marriages, however disastrous, have had their peaks of glory, usually at the start. However "Nicky" and "Sunny" or "Sunshine" (Alexandra's childhood nickname) could lay claim to much more than that. In purely personal terms their marriage was an outstanding success. "Hubby" and "wifey" (it is singularly revealing of the domestic tone of their marriage that they should have chosen to refer to one another in the cosy language of upper-middle-class Victorian England) could lay claim to nearly twenty-five years of happiness. The letters the tsarina wrote her husband of twenty years' standing combine intimacy, tender love and suggestions of genuine physical passion, which makes them exceptional by any standards.

Alexandra was fortunate in the husband chosen for her, but otherwise there was little enough luck in her life. One of the younger daughters of the German grand duke of Hesse-Darmstadt, who had married Princess Alice of England, she was a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. After the death of her mother, when Alexandra was six, she moved to England and was brought up by her grandmother, in Kensington Palace, London. She was seventeen when she first met Nicholas—he was twenty-three—and was a striking girl with blue eyes, fair hair and a fine complexion. However, neither her Victorian upbringing nor her temperament had equipped her for her role as tsarina. This demanded qualities of tolerance and flexibility, a talent for being both firm and easy-going in intuitively apprehended doses, and above all the capacity to radiate warmth of spirit—none of which she was endowed with by nature or encouraged by her upbringing to adopt. Lack of charm is a handicap at the best of times; in the empress of Russia it was a disaster. Since the time of the second marriage of Peter the Great—to a Livonian peasant girl—it had been the custom for tsars and tsareviches to marry foreign princesses. However, these were usually accorded ample time to prepare themselves for the role of tsarina. In the case of Nicholas's own mother, Maria Fedorovna of Denmark, seventeen

years passed between her betrothal to Alexander and her coronation. Alix had no such opportunity. Indeed, her betrothal virtually coincided with the death of her future father-in-law. She arrived in Russia a total stranger, scarcely able to speak the language—although she worked hard at it over the years and by 1914 was almost word-perfect, with the faintest touch of awkwardness and a slight English accent. She made a bad impression from the start: a certain Princess A. M. Baryatinskaya, who saw her when she arrived, was most struck by "her timidity and the exceedingly melancholy expression of her eyes not easily forgotten."[13] Others looked on her still less charitably, seeing her as cold, unyielding, charmless, and potentially domineering.[14] As a result the unavoidable gaffes of a newcomer went unforgiven:

> Far removed from the complicated interplay of court life, the young empress made mistakes that were insignificant in themselves, but which appeared heinous crimes to the eyes of Petersburg high society. This confused her and imparted to her that well known tension which informed her manner. This in turn sufficed to invite comparison between the dowager empress and the "cold snobbery" of the young tsarina. Nicholas II took these comparisons very much to heart and soon relations between the court and society grew very tense indeed.[15]

The young tsarina was sensitive enough to appreciate her lack of success with the nobility, a lack for which she held them alone responsible. Over the years the imperial family would steadily reduce their contact with society, dividing their time between official ceremonies and an intimate, almost recluse-like family life, while the tsarina demanded of all those close to her an undivided, uncritical, and unswerving loyalty. As a tutor would write a few years later:

> Exclusive as she was, she could not accept anyone who was not wholeheartedly hers. She only confided in friends whom she was sure to dominate; it was necessary to respond to her confidences by giving oneself to her totally.[16]

Anyone who showed signs of being critical was automatically dismissed as disloyal. Alexandra developed an uncompromising sense of "us" and "them"; "us" consisting of a handful of friends and the

immediate family, while "they" were nothing less than the hundred million odd other inhabitants of the Russian Empire. A similarly uncompromising approach informed her attitude to government, and to her husband. In each case the attitude was one of autocratic domination, and tragically limited as a result. Pobedonostsev, one of the last great architects of reaction and the autocratic principle, allegedly described her as "More autocratic than Peter the Great and sterner than Ivan the Terrible. Her limited mentality makes her believe that she is gifted with great intelligence."[17]

Her insistence on absolute loyalty both in the empire and the imperial household—she once described herself to Nicholas in a letter in which she advised him on the running of the country as "wearing invisible trousers"—took its toll upon the tsar. Although it was not until the last years of his reign that she positively overwhelmed Nicholas with advice, the belief that her husband needed help of a very special kind can be traced to earlier years. In 1905, when the empire was in the grip of revolution, she observed that:

> You understand the crisis we are going through! It is most certainly a time of trial. My poor Nicky's cross is heavy, all the more so as he has nobody on whom he can thoroughly rely and who can be a real help to him. He has had so many bitter disappointments, but through it all he remains brave and full of faith in God's mercy. He tries so hard, works with such perseverance, but the lack of what I call "real" men is great. Of course, they must exist somewhere, but it is difficult to get at them. The bad are always close to hand, the others through false humility remain in the background. We shall try to see more people, but it is difficult. On my knees I pray to God to give me wisdom to help him in his heavy task. I wrack my brains to pieces to find a man and cannot; it is a despairing feeling.[18]

The empress would long hold the belief that her gentle, hard-working, desperately conscientious and devout "hubby" needed a real man or men to guide him and give him the strength he so badly needed. What was required was soul and integrity, not mere experience, which could so easily make a man false and ambitious. In due course she would find such a man in Rasputin.

Together with her narrow but strong character, Alexandra Fedorovna was, as may be deduced from the above, a woman of great

piety. Although at first reluctant to leave the Protestant faith, she had embraced Orthodoxy eagerly on coming to Russia, and was profoundly absorbed by its emphasis on ritual, prayer and the cult of saints. She approached her new faith with the unbalanced eagerness of the convert. Her temperament, and a certain rigidity in her Protestant background, combined with her sense of personal rejection to make her commitment to Orthodoxy uncomfortably intense; it lacked that Russian equilibrium that is born of common sense, tolerance and resignation—all qualities which the empress quite definitely lacked. How Queen Victoria's granddaughter reacted to the openness and sexual frankness of St. Petersburg, incidentally, can easily be imagined.

Alexandra had a profound belief in the power of prayer, and looked to it both for practical guidance and for its capacity to heal. From an early age and long before she met Rasputin, she believed in miracles and in healing by faith. Like Nicholas she also believed in the power of saints and men of God to offer comfort and divinely inspired guidance.

No one could maintain that guidance of the highest quality was not needed. The unexpected death of Alexander III had cast its shadow over Alexandra's arrival, and left Nicholas ill-prepared to assume power. Next the imperial coronation turned to tragedy as it culminated in a disaster of a very Russian kind. Those familiar with the administration's incompetence had looked forward with trepidation to the week of official celebration that was to be held in Moscow. They felt that the strain imposed by the influx of foreign heads of state and other visitors, with all the concomitant problems of security and protocol, by the numerous official ceremonies, the huge crowds, and the manner in which the citizens of Moscow were prone to celebrate—getting drunk as quickly as possible—were likely to tax the collective competence of officialdom too testingly, particularly since the man in supreme charge of the proceedings was the tsar's uncle and governor-general of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, whose ability to cope was very open to doubt.

Surprisingly, the official ceremonies went according to plan for the first two magnificent spring days, and we have a remarkable recreation of them from the grand duchess Olga Alexandrovna, the last tsar's younger sister. She had no official duties, but on the morning

of the coronation she went to the Cathedral of the Assumption, within the Kremlin walls:

> I was so excited that I could hardly sleep the night before. I was up long before anyone stirred. I suppose we had breakfast. I can't remember. Then Nana and a maid started dressing me. I wore a full-length court dress of silver tissue, and for the first time I had the wide red ribbon of St. Catherine's Order across my shoulder. They put a white *kokoshinik* [old Muscovite form of headdress], embroidered with silver, on my head. The dress had a mantle with a train falling down—pinned to the left shoulder. It was my first experience of wearing the "armour" as we called it, and I found it heavy and wearisome. I had a single string of pearls and no other jewelry. And it was such a hot day!

She rode in the procession in one of the gilded state coaches, which looked fine enough, but were miserable to ride in. The springing was terrible, and the passengers felt each one of the numerous bumps in the road all too well. Moreover, the coaches had not been aired before use, and were unbearably hot and stuffy. They moved slowly towards the Kremlin gates, through enormous cheering crowds, as peals of bells rang out from the city's 1,600 belfries.

The Cathedral of the Assumption is not large, and could only accommodate a relatively small number, in small special wooden stands built along its fresco-covered walls. Olga Alexandrovna was fortunate; she found a place close to a pillar against which she could lean during the five-hour service. For her, the most important moment came when the metropolitan of Moscow handed the emperor the crown, and he put it on his head:

> It looked a simple enough gesture, but from that very moment Nicky's responsibility was to God only. I admit that the very idea may sound unreal today, when the absolute power of sovereigns has been so discredited. Yet it will always retain a place in history. The coronation of a Tsar of Russia was a most solemn and binding contract between God and the sovereign, His servant . . . The ceremony ended with a very gentle and human climax. Alicky knelt before Nicky. I shall never forget how carefully he put the crown on her head, how tenderly he kissed her and helped her to rise. And then all of us began filing past them, and I had to leave my corner. I was just behind the Duke and Duchess of Connaught,

who represented Queen Victoria. I swept a deep curtsey, raised my head, and saw Nicky's blue eyes looking at me with such affection that my heart glowed.

That evening Moscow was lit up with illuminations and fireworks. Just before being tucked into bed, Nana let me have one last look from the big window at the distant scene. And for those fleeting seconds I was as absorbed in the spectacle as Napoleon must have been eighty years earlier when gazing, probably from the same window, at the burning of Moscow.[19]

On the third day it was the turn of the people of the city; they were to be entertained with food and drink and receive presents in the form of tin coronation mugs. The event was scheduled for noon on the field of Khodynka, about three miles northwest of Red Square. The crowds started to gather early on the preceding day, as trains coming into Moscow were so packed with expectant peasants that there was scarcely room to stand. Throughout the day the crowd gathered on the field, bringing supplies of food and drink with them, until by dawn on the morning of the ceremony there were, it is estimated, half a million people packed together so tightly that it was virtually impossible to move. A cossack who rode into the crowd in an attempt to break it up a little found that his horse was simply lifted off its feet, so tightly were they pressed together. Officials had seriously underestimated the size of the crowd, which had grown too large to control. It grew apprehensive and restless, fearing that there might not be a sufficient quantity of presents to go round. These were to be distributed from a line of booths at one end of the field.

Quite early in the morning the wishful thinking of the crowd interpreted the gesture of a workman close to them as an invitation to move forward and receive its gifts. As it moved forward slowly it transpired that a considerable number of persons in its midst had been dead for some time, and were simply supported by a crush so dense that no one could stir a hand. As the crowd went forward they fell to the ground and were trampled underfoot. The official inquiry recorded a total of 1,389 deaths. It found that the majority had died of suffocation; the preceding day had been very hot, registering 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and the heat had returned almost with the dawn. Moreover, onlookers claimed to have seen a thickish layer of vapour, carbon dioxide and vodka fumes, covering the crowd as it

stood packed upon the field. Now the story of Khodynka, as it is usually told, suggests that its victims were trampled to death, in a series of trenches that crisscrossed the field, which had been used for military manoeuvres. In fact, it would seem that the trenches were in another part of the field altogether, and not one body was found in them.

Although the nature and scale of the disaster have been distorted subsequently, there was no denying the immediate sense of tragedy, or the fury of the survivors at inefficient authorities who had allowed it to happen. As carriages drove out to Khodynka field to witness the popular celebrations they were met with a procession of carts coming towards them. Pieces of tarpaulin were thrown carelessly across the corpses, which had been no less carelessly loaded, leaving many hands dangling over the side. As the carriages approached, the official party thought at first that people were waving to them.

Throughout the rest of that long day official celebrations were interrupted by long lines of carts bringing back the dead. Yet the aftermath did more damage still to the dynasty. That night the French ambassador was to give a ball for the newly crowned imperial couple. Nicholas decided, or was advised, that it was better to be seen dancing on the day of the tragedy than risk offending the French by declining to attend. The couple put in an admittedly brief appearance, their faces badly marked by the morning's events. Yet to have attended at all bore witness to an alarming lack of political judgment, a lack subsequently confirmed by the tsar's refusal to dismiss his uncle, Grand Duke Sergei, who was ultimately responsible for the thousand-odd deaths.

* * *

Shortly after the marriage, in the spring of 1896, Nicholas brought Alexandra to the palace in Tsarskoe Selo, which would be their home for very nearly the rest of their lives. Tsarskoe Selo, The Tsar's Village, is today called Pushkin, after the famous poet who attended the Lyceum there. It was founded by the second wife of Peter the Great, and developed in the course of the eighteenth century. It was situated fifteen miles to the southwest of St. Petersburg, and set in the middle of a swamp. By the twentieth century the village had grown into a town of over thirty thousand

inhabitants, and was connected to the capital by the oldest railway line in the country, opened in 1837. The journey took just half an hour from the centre of town to the tiny local station with its steeply sloping wooden roof. Close to the main line ran a second set of tracks, carefully patrolled by imperial gendarmes. As these reached the "village" they peeled off to the tsar's private station. It was considered too dangerous to run the imperial train on the public track. Sidney Gibbes, the tsarevich's English tutor, considered Tsarskoe Selo to be:

> A ruralised town in an urbanised wilderness. It contains a number of houses and barracks, for it is also a great military centre. But besides this there are many charming palaces set around with vast artificial parks; also expanses of water that have come to seem natural to the place. While that is Tsarskoe Selo itself, the country round it is still in pristine savagery, barren swamp.[20]

The railway station was connected to the imperial palaces by a wide boulevard with a double row of trees on each side. Along it were to be found the houses of the nobility, standing in their own grounds, each with its resplendent doorman, wearing a blue uniform and elaborately coloured sash and bandoleer. At the end of the boulevard was the magnificent eight-hundred-acre imperial park, ringed with an iron fence. It contained artificial lakes, follies, a pagoda, a Turkish bathhouse, monuments, triumphal arches, walks, and bridle paths. It was magnificently landscaped, heavily wooded in places, where shrubs planted by successive emperors had become small forests of lilacs. The park was open to the public from 10:00 A.M. to dusk, and had been so for many many years. It occupies a very special place in some of the greatest Russian poetry, and was a spot much loved by Pushkin himself, and by one of his greatest heirs, the twentieth-century poetess Anna Akhmatova. Public access to the imperial grounds was a worry to the security services, who did what they could by keeping a very tight control upon the residents of Tsarskoe Selo itself. Anyone taking up quarters there, for however short a time, was subject to careful vetting.

The two imperial palaces were also open to the public. The Old Palace had been built by the architect Rastrelli for Catherine the Great. It was a large building, now coloured blue and white, with

over two hundred rooms. The second, so-called Alexander Palace, had been started in Catherine's reign, and designed by Quarenghi. It was completed in 1796, and was somewhat smaller, only a hundred rooms. It was situated some six hundred paces away from the Old Palace, beside a large artificial lake. The only tsars ever to like it were Nicholas I and Nicholas II.

Although the palace, much of which was destroyed in World War Two, during the siege of Leningrad, has been restored, it looked very different in the days of Nicholas II. Then its facade was overgrown with sweet-smelling lilac, which was inexplicably cut away by the Bolsheviks in 1920. Nicholas and Alexandra lived on a relatively modest scale in the west wing, which consisted of two stories. One entered the palace by a huge hemispherical hall, and turned right for the imperial apartments. The first room was an antechamber, full of portraits of earlier tsars, and, in later years, childrens' bicycles. Then came the library, and next the private apartments proper. First was Nicholas's public study, with comfortable leather armchairs, a mahogany desk, candelabra, a round table, and numerous photographs and paintings by nineteenth-century Russian artists. It opened onto an indoor pool on one side. Then came a dressing room and then his private study, which contained a billiard table and various personal memorabilia, including his old schoolbooks. On the other side of a central corridor were the empress's rooms. First a small room for her chief maid, then a dressing room and then the imperial bedroom. Nicholas and Alexandra always shared the same room, sleeping in twin iron-framed bedsteads. The room was generously hung with icons, and off it were a private chapel and the imperial bathroom. The next room was Alexandra's boudoir, the famous mauve room which she had furnished all by herself. Those who knew it were guarded in their opinions, but the general consensus was that it was very comfortable and also very ugly. It was a room of modest size with rather high ceilings, dominated by the colour mauve. The curtains and hangings were of mauve silk, and the armchairs had mauve covers. The woodwork was cream, however, and there were always large quantities of flowers, lilies and lilacs mostly. Strange though the colour scheme appeared to visitors, they found the furniture stranger still. Although the Romanovs had been acquiring fine

furniture from Europe for the best part of two centuries, the tsarina wanted none of it. Driven by some memory of her Victorian childhood, which may also have accounted for her colour scheme, she insisted on buying her furniture from England, by mail order. She bought modern factory-produced furniture from a department store called Maples, still to be found to this day, and still catering to the tastes of a conservative middle class. Maples's furniture, incidentally, has defeated at least one Soviet scholar, A. N. Petrov. In a book published in 1969 about Tsarskoe Selo he describes the famous boudoir as being panelled in stained maple wood, "which was typical of the style fashionable at the turn of the century."

The second floor was turned over to the children. Nursery, schoolrooms, maids' quarters, and, in due course, three bedrooms, one for the tsarevich, one for the two elder grand duchesses, one for the younger pair. The children led a life of considerable austerity, sleeping on narrow, hard camp beds. It was the custom to deny imperial children comfortable personal accommodation until they came of age, although their apartments seemed luxurious enough to one of their cousins, the grand duchess Marie Pavlovna, who used to play there as a child:

> These rooms, light and spacious, were hung with flowered cretonne and furnished throughout with polished lemon-wood. The effect was luxurious yet peaceful and comfortable. Through the windows one could see the palace gardens and guard houses, and a little beyond, beyond the grill of a high iron gate, a street corner.[21]

This then was home for the imperial family for over twenty years. Except for trips to the Crimea, and Baltic cruises on the imperial yacht, it was there that they remained, in isolated domesticity. Nicholas worked hard. In the morning he would begin by dealing with his correspondence—he actually liked to open his own mail—and would see ministers and advisors. At eleven he might take a break and join his family for a stroll in the park, and then carry on working till lunch. This could be an elaborate affair, with up to twenty people at table, and four or five courses. Nicholas and Alexandra did not like rich food. The tsar never touched caviare, since he had upset his stomach by taking too much one day, and liked simple Russian dishes, such as cabbage soup—although he was very

partial to suckling pig. After lunch he would work again for an hour or so before going for a ride in the park—his family preferred to be driven. They would meet again for tea, which was very much a family affair—Nicholas made a point of seeing the children then, since he often had to miss them in the morning. He would then work again till supper, receiving more visitors. After eating a simple meal at eight he might read to his family, or watch them doing needlework or sticking photographs into their albums. He would then retire to his study again for a little more work until his evening tea at eleven. He would then take his bath and write up his diary before turning in. The routine seldom varied, and the day-to-day life of the emperor and empress of all the Russias was essentially one of steady hard work and quiet domestic routine.

* * *

The early years of Nicholas's reign had their fair share of unrest, assassination and terrorist activity. Already some of the more sensitive spirits in the empire were beginning to feel that it would come apart quite soon. The poet Alexander Blok could smell catastrophe on the wind. It was the unbridged and in his opinion unbridgeable gap between the people on the one hand, and the rulers and the intelligentsia on the other, that frightened him. Ironically it was the bridging of that gulf by Rasputin that did much to trigger the last act of the tragedy.

The rate of disintegration was accelerated by the war that Russia imprudently embarked upon with Japan, disregarding all the attempts of Japanese diplomats to preserve the peace. The Russians assumed that victory over the Asiatics would come to them as a matter of course, which was not the case. Although the men and their junior officers fought with courage and determination, the army was "outgeneralled" by the Japanese, and the general staff soon discovered that it was not possible to fight a successful war many thousands of miles away with inadequate lines of supply. The Russian land armies suffered heavy losses, and a series of crushing defeats. In January 1905 the stronghold of Port Arthur was surrendered, rather too quickly, it was felt by many independent military observers. In March, Russian armies were badly defeated at Mukden. Defeat on land was then compounded by shattering defeat

on water, the destruction of the Baltic fleet in the Straits of Tsushima in May 1905. The fleet had been sent halfway round the world to engage the Japanese. On the way they shelled some English fishing boats off the Dogger Bank in the North Sea, mistakenly supposing them to be elements of the Japanese navy. The disaster, Russia's greatest military humiliation, was aggravated by the fact that it had been widely appreciated from the outset that the fleet's mission was a pointless gesture. Nicholas knew it too, and was strongly urged by some of his advisors to countermand the order to sail. He changed his mind several times before finally allowing the fleet to depart.[22]

Defeat after defeat made morale in the army drop steadily, and in the later stages of the war men began to turn against their officers—witness the following vignette of poor leadership and indiscipline described by Countess Kleinmichel. A colonel was travelling to the war by train with his wife and family, in the comfort of a private compartment. His senior NCO came to tell him that his command of 120 men had been crammed into a cattle truck intended for forty, they were short of water and so cramped that they could neither lie nor sit down. The colonel replied that he would be along shortly, and remained with his family. The NCO returned an hour later and observed to his officer that it might all be very well for him, but the men were being treated like cattle on the way to a slaughterhouse. The colonel placed him under arrest. Shortly afterwards he went to see him and was roundly cursed by the NCO, whereupon the colonel lost his temper, drew his sword and cut so deeply into the man's neck that he severed an artery. When the troops learnt what he had done they lost control, drenched their colonel in paraffin and set him alight, burning him alive in front of his wife and children.[23] As a contemporary diarist, A. K. Bogdanovich, put it: "It is a terrifying but interesting time that we are obliged to live through."[24] The same writer refers to our "immoral and unprincipled age."

An excellent example of that moral decay was the case of Evno Azef, one of the most celebrated double agents of Russian history. He was the son of a poor Jewish tailor, born in Grodno in 1869 and an engineer by trade. He was both a senior member of the tsarist secret police and a founder of the Socialist-Revolutionary party, and the leader of its terrorist section. He participated in a number of

"expropriations," or bank robberies, and assassinations too. He helped to plan the assassination of Grand Duke Sergei, the governor-general of Moscow, but his greatest "triumph" had come a year earlier, in 1904, when he helped to plan the murder of his own boss, Plehve, the minister of the interior. While participating in acts of terrorism he continued to feed the secret police information of the highest quality. Although rumours that he might be a double agent were prevalent for some years in inner revolutionary circles, it was a long time before they were accepted, and caused the utmost dismay when it was finally recognised that Azef had indeed worked for both sides. Although he was condemned to death in his absence by a revolutionary court, he died a natural death in 1918. By the end of his career, it was suggested, he no longer knew himself whether he was a terrorist spying on the police or an agent spying on the terrorists. When the full Azef story became known to the general public it caused a major scandal, helping to set the mood of the latter years of imperial Russia, a kind of "post-Watergate" atmosphere that joined cynicism with paranoia. The mood would come to its climax in the autumn of 1916 with the widespread belief that the rot had reached the top and that the empress herself was working for a German victory.

* * *

Military defeat and unrest in the cities and the countryside combined to bring about the series of events known as the 1905 revolution, often considered a dress rehearsal for 1917. There was no single dramatic moment that marked it, rather a steady rise of unrest and a weakening of the rule of law all over Russia. The revolution may be said to have begun in January 1905, with the so-called "Bloody Sunday" when a priest, Father Gapon, who had been closely involved with government-approved trades unions, led a huge crowd through the capital to the Winter Palace to petition the tsar for an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, and a constituent assembly. The tsar was not even in his palace at the time, although Gapon had given notice of his demonstration. Whether out of fear, malice or simple incompetence we cannot say, but at all events the palace guard were given orders to fire into the mob from close range, and a dreadful slaughter ensued, which has, properly, become an impor-

tant feature of revolutionary history. Gapon, incidentally, went underground as a revolutionary hero, but a few years later was executed by revolutionaries as a government agent, less fortunate in this respect than Azef.

By the spring of that year there was widespread unrest all over Russia. The country was paralysed by strikes, revolutionary activity, and peasant violence. On one estate, the property of a Prince Orlov, who had a superb stable of thoroughbreds, the peasants soaked the horses' tails in petrol and set them alight, whereupon they rushed into the stables, which in turn caught fire.[25] There were also incidents full of a very Russian kind of black humour. One diarist records:

> Launitz told me that when they were taking some terrorists off to be shot, a priest was walking with them. It was very cold and everyone was freezing, when the priest observed: "It's all very well for you, you're on a one way trip, but I'll have to go back."[26]

Military unrest spread from the army to the Black Sea fleet. Shortly after Tsushima, sailors on the battleship *Potemkin* mutinied, terrorising the coastline for a few days before sailing to Roumania, where they were interned. There were insurrections in the Baltic states, and in Poland, and, a little later, a general strike in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Neither Lenin nor Stalin played any part in these events, unlike Trotsky, who was active in the organisation of the St. Petersburg strike. By the autumn of 1905 the government could scarcely be said to be in control, and foreign governments were growing alarmed for their resident nationals. The British considered sending warships to remove their citizens, especial concern being displayed for the countless English governesses considered to be at risk in the capital. Although he managed to persuade them that it had not yet come to that, the British ambassador felt that Russia was moving, somewhat uncertainly it is true, toward revolution. He wrote that autumn:

> It is a fight in the dark, in the mud, with weapons which don't reach . . . On the one side autocracy, a little man with a snub nose, descendant of an alien and scarcely royal race, who is at the centre of this vast machine and the god of a hundred million. On the other—nothing at all—but just simply destruction.[27]

In the event Nicholas managed to defuse the unrest; after much hesitation and reflection, he was prevailed upon, on October 17, to grant a constitution, and signed a manifesto to that effect. He signed reluctantly, for he was betraying his coronation oath to rule as an autocrat, and however convinced he might have been of the practical necessity for concessions, he knew that he was breaking a sacred trust. It was not a universally popular measure. A graduate of the Smolny Institute recalls hearing the news. The entire school was summoned to assembly, and a lady-in-waiting, herself an old girl, appeared to address them with tears in her eyes, wearing the imperial insignia, or *chiffre*. She told them that, "Of course the Tsar-Emperor can do no wrong, *but* he has granted the nation a constitution."

Unrest did not die down at once. Indeed it was immediately afterwards that some of the sharpest street fighting broke out in Moscow, while in St. Petersburg there were massive street demonstrations with red flags waving, and not a policeman to be seen. The demonstrators obliged better-dressed members of the public to acknowledge their authority by taking their hats off to the red flags. However, the police had their own way of coping with the revolutionaries. They organised reprisals, persuading workers that students and Jews had triumphed over them, and would depose the tsar and govern themselves to the workers' disadvantage; the workers mounted savage attacks upon Jews and demonstrators as a result. The police had obligingly provided lists of Jewish residences.

However, the revolution was petering out. Virtually its last gasp came at Cronstadt, where the naval garrison mutinied, but were rapidly brought under control. The *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* ascribes their failure to "The lack of clear leadership and plan of battle; the mutineers acted in a disorganised manner." The British ambassador observed at the time that:

> The mutiny at Cronstadt had been carefully prepared and only broke down because the mutineers all got hopelessly drunk in the first five minutes and were easy to capture.[28]

The mood of the year of revolution is captured beautifully by Mintslov. He recalled the prophecy of a nineteenth-century holy man in the reign of Nicholas I. The tsar asked him who would

succeed his son Alexander. "Alexander," replied the holy man, astonishing Nicholas, whose eldest grandson was also named Nicholas. Was his grandson to die before he could succeed? "And after him?" "Another Nicholas." "And then?" The holy man fell silent, but the tsar urged him to speak. "Then will come a peasant with an axe in his hand!"

Mintslov, who had heard the prophecy in the reign of Alexander II, went on to observe: "Is this not the time of the peasant with the axe?"[29] He was wrong; it would take another twelve years for the peasant to arrive.

* * *

Nicholas, with his blend of obstinacy, weakness, and mystic resignation, and Alexandra, with her inflexibility, shyness, and exalté enthusiasm, were both devout Christians who shared an unhealthy and, in the final analysis, disastrous belief in the exceptional powers of saints and men of God, Orthodox and otherwise. They both believed that in their time, as in the time of the Apostles, there were persons specially favoured by God's grace, whose prayers accordingly had special power. The age of miracles was by no means past.

Nicholas, to be fair, was not the only tsar of recent times to have entertained extreme beliefs of this kind. The life and death of Tsar Alexander I has a web of legend woven around it, a web persisting to the present day. Alexander almost certainly condoned the assassination of his father, Paul, and, goes the legend, in the latter part of his reign grew increasingly aware of the need to expiate his guilt. Accordingly he faked his own death in the Crimean town of Taganrog. After a brief interregnum he was succeeded by his brother Nicholas, and vanished to become a *starets,* by the name of Fyedor Kuzmich, who wandered through Russia for many years, praying, healing, and working miracles. Alexander was well known for his inclination toward mysticism and the occult, and to this day Soviet scholars are not completely convinced that the story is untrue. One version of the legend suggests that he was later joined by his brother, the grand duke Konstantin Pavlovich, who also became a pilgrim and was still to be seen wandering the streets of St. Petersburg in the 1860s.[30] One of the strangest of all the rumours that circulated about

Rasputin in the immediate aftermath of his assassination had it that he was the illegitimate son of Fyedor Kuzmich, and the real father of the Tsarevich Aleksey, who thus had more Russian blood in his veins than any Romanov since the age of Peter the Great.

Alexander is also alleged to have had a particularly interesting kind of contact with the sects. During his reign, the *khlysty* and castrates enjoyed a considerable freedom and popularity, even in the highest circles. It has been suggested that the leader of the castrates, one Selivanov, was advanced by a particular court faction as a possible "sincere" mediator between the tsar and, on the one hand, God, on the other, his people. If this was the case it is a most peculiar anticipation of the role to be played by Rasputin a century later. Nicholas's grandfather, the Tsar Liberator Alexander II, also took an interest in the occult, witness the presence at his court of a certain David Douglas-Home, a medium with great psychic powers, which were said to extend to levitation. Conan Doyle referred to him as the greatest psychic medium the world had ever seen, and Tsar Alexander was a sponsor at his wedding.[31]

The interest that Nicholas and Alexandra displayed in holy men of various kinds is reflected in one of the more curious statistics of their reign; the extraordinary number, relatively speaking, of canonisations that it saw. As a prerevolutionary British journalist wrote of Nicholas:

> In miracles and marvels he took a childish delight, and was as ready to believe messages from the invisible world . . . as in the wonders wrought by the relics of Orthodox monks whose names he himself added to the bead-roll of Russian saints. His predecessors were more chary of peopling heaven than of colonising Siberia. Nicholas I assented to the canonisation of Mitrophan of Voronezh (1832), whose body was found intact after it had laid over a century in the coffin, but that was the only beatification made during the reign. Alexander II allowed the Holy Synod to enrich the church with one saint, Tikhon Bishop of Voronezh (1864); his successor did not even add one.[32]

Nicholas beatified three saints in the early years of his reign—Theodosius of Chernigov (1896), Serafim of Sarov (1903), and Joseph of Belgorod (1911)—while in addition, the reign was to see three ceremonial exhumations, the last of which took place in 1916.

On at least three of these occasions the action was the result of the emperor's personal initiative, a reflection of his need to believe that the age of saints was not past.

This was especially true of Serafim of Sarov. Father Serafim was a hermit who lived in the forest near Arzamas in the government of Tambov. He had a reputation for saintliness and miraculous healing. On his way to Taganrog shortly before his "death" in 1825, Alexander I had spent a long time in conversation with him. When Serafim died in 1833 he left various manuscripts in his cell. They were all burnt on order of the Holy Synod, but a single piece of paper, dated 1831, escaped. This allegedly contained a prophecy to the effect that, shortly after his canonisation, which would take place in the presence of the tsar and his family, misfortune would come to Russia and torrents of blood would flow. Millions of Russians would be scattered over the face of the earth. This would be God's way of testing his people. A hundred years after his death Russia would grow great again and a new era would begin, in which Russia would be governed by church and state together. The prophecy seems to have come good in parts, although the new era in question coincides unhappily with the beginning of Stalin's purges, and the way in which church and state came together has done little for the Christian cause.

Nicholas insisted that Serafim be canonised, even though when his remains were uncovered it was discovered that he had failed the test of saintliness, since his body had decomposed. When Bishop Anthony of Tambov protested at the canonisation, Nicholas had him stripped of office and dispatched to Siberia. It was officially put forward that the preservation of hair, bones, and teeth were sufficient evidence of sainthood.[33] The decision was not well received and numerous anonymous letters were found in the capital suggesting that the only "worker of miracles" was Nicholas II himself.[34]

The elaborate ceremony of canonisation was indeed attended by the imperial family. In the course of the celebration Nicholas took time to consult a famous local peasant clairvoyant, Pasha of Sarov. Some years later Nicholas, describing the meeting to a very junior member of the Holy Synod, observed that "she deigned to see him," and made a profound impression upon him. She foretold the outcome of the Japanese war, and then evidently started to strike one of the

many dolls she kept with her, calling it Sergei, in obvious reference to Nicholas's unfortunate uncle, the governor-general of Moscow, shortly to be blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb.[35]

The tsar and tsarina did not confine themselves to Orthodox saints and seers. They also took a great interest in spiritualism, the occult and table-turning. A few years later the tsar, looking very tired, would meet one of his aides one morning and observe with an apologetic smile that he had had rather a late night, since he "got somewhat carried away by spiritualism." Interest in less than orthodox religion accounts for the presence at the court of the last tsar of M. Philippe, occultist and clairvoyant. Had he not been eclipsed by his remarkable successor, M. Philippe would have played a much more prominent role in twentieth-century Russian history.

Philippe Nizier-Vachod, a Savoyard peasant, was born in 1849. At the age of thirteen he became an apprentice butcher in Lyons. He gradually discovered that he had exceptional powers, both of healing and clairvoyance, and aged twenty-three he set himself up as a fringe doctor and faith healer, which brought him into frequent and disagreeable contact with the orthodox medical practitioners of Lyons. However, this in no way affected the quantity or the quality of his clientele, for his consulting room in the Rue de la Tête d'Or was constantly filled with persons from every walk of life.

Monsieur Philippe, as he was known, was a "mild little man with a gentle manner and persuasive eyes."[36] Short, thickset, with a bushy moustache and brown hair that had a centre parting, he seemed an unremarkable man who took no trouble to conceal his peasant origins. However, like Rasputin, as soon as he began to speak, he quickly imposed his authority, by a combination of tone of voice, quiet authoritative smile, and remarkable eyes. One admittedly somewhat partisan description of these last says that "whereas they were usually chestnut he frequently appeared to various persons with eyes of a splendid blue." He is said to have possessed clairvoyant powers together with the ability to "read" people and assess their character:

> Often as he drew close to you he could tell you in a few words what was troubling you, and what you did not dare confess to him. On other occasions he would mention to one of the persons present

something about their lives that only they could know, or something they had said in secret . . .[37]

The same account describes him as a faith healer with the most remarkable powers, and as a man who had a great sense that his power came from God, who worked through him.

Early in 1900 M. Philippe was consulted by two Russian ladies who were very impressed by his gifts of divination and his air of supernatural authority. At their insistence he accompanied them to Cannes, where he met the Russian grand duke Peter Nikolaevich, his wife the grand duchess Militsa, and her Montenegrin sister Anastasia.

At this time the Montenegrin sisters were the only members of the imperial family to have Alexandra's ear and affection. Her mother-in-law, the dowager empress, had never taken to her, and the coldness that grew up between them was not helped by the older woman's insistence that she take precedence over her daughter-in-law, or by her reluctance to pass down the imperial jewelry. Alexandra took such slights badly, and also took note of the fact that the Montenegrins were the only members of the family to treat her with the full respect to which, as empress, she felt entitled. Their attention extended beyond deference to the profession of admiration, and even affection. When Alexandra fell ill with a stomach disorder they dismissed her staff and looked after and nursed her personally. In the early years of the century their influence grew steadily as that of the dowager empress declined.

The Montenegrin circle was impressed by M. Philippe. He was invited to come and visit the sisters in Russia, and set off on December 29, 1900, from the Gare de l'Est in Paris. He spent two highly successful months in St. Petersburg and left with an impressive reputation behind him. It was now that the Montenegrins came to Nicholas and Alexandra with news of M. Philippe, introducing their "pet holy man" as later they would introduce Rasputin. In both instances their motives are open to question, in the sense that they sought to exploit the tremendous interest the imperial couple took in clairvoyants, hypnotizers, magicians and men of God. At the least they could expect their own situation at court to improve, as they could be seen both to feed and

share the interests of Nicholas and Alexandra, acting, as it were, as suppliers of holy men to the court of the tsar. Moreover, it may well be that the Montenegrins and their circle hoped to exert influence upon the rulers by means of a holy man *en place,* who would follow the instructions of his sponsors.

In later years Prince Felix Yusupov, whose mind was admittedly more than open to the possibility that his country was the victim of a Satanic conspiracy on the part of Jews, bankers, and their unwitting instruments, the masons, expressed the belief that the latter had sent M. Philippe to Russia to attack the spiritual fabric of Holy Russia at its summit.[38] Although Russian masons do seem to have played a mysterious role in the February Revolution of 1917, one which is not as yet fully revealed, it does not seem likely that M. Philippe was one of their instruments.

Nicholas and Alexandra were to pay a visit to France that year, and ordered Grand Duchess Militsa to arrange to have M. Philippe presented to them. The meeting took place in September, in the palace of Compiègne and in the presence of the Montenegrins. M. Philippe created an impression that earned him an immediate invitation to Russia and the imperial palace at Tsarskoe Selo.

In a strange anticipation of the role Rasputin was to assume some years later, M. Philippe, peasant healer and clairvoyant, temporarily played the part of spiritual advisor to Nicholas, most powerful absolute ruler in the world. No decision of any importance was taken without consulting him, for was he not of these wise men especially chosen by God to guide anointed monarchs? The attitude was much encouraged by M. Philippe, who persuaded the tsarina that "if she submitted to the decrees of Providence and strove for spirituality she would always find teachers who strengthened her faith."[39] The monarchs consulted him on subjects of fundamental political importance: we learn from the tsarina's correspondence that "Our first Friend sent by God," encouraged their commitment to the principle of absolute rule, urging them on no account to grant their country a constitution.[40]

Philippe was not just an advisor and spiritual guide. Like Rasputin he had the reputation of a healer, and was said to have effected some miraculous cures at the imperial court. Indeed he so impressed the tsar with his natural curative powers that the tsar

requested the French government to award M. Philippe a medical diploma, a request that caused much embarrassment. This was the first occasion on which the personal beliefs of Nicholas and Alexandra were reflected in their behaviour as emperor and empress of Russia.

The Frenchman's powers were held to extend beyond miraculous healing well into the realms of the paranormal. Maurice Paléologue, France's last ambassador to the tsar, maintains that M. Philippe, encouraging Nicholas's love of spiritualism and table-tapping, conducted regular séances where he raised the ghost of Nicholas's father, the redoubtable Alexander III, who gave his son advice on how to steer his country through the troubled years of the early twentieth century. We know from other sources that Nicholas was much given to such practices, and it is by no means implausible that he should have sought his late father's advice in this way. But other accounts of M. Philippe's activities place a considerable strain upon belief, since they would put him, as a practicing magician, on the same level as Shakespeare's Prospero. His biographer, who may be thought of as partisan well beyond the point of gullibility, claims that he possessed remarkable powers of weather control. On one occasion he calmed a stormy sea in order to smooth the passage of the imperial yacht. When asked to do something about a high wind that was threatening to spoil a military review, he could not abate the actual force of the wind, but proved able to prevent it from blowing at ground level and whipping up clouds of dust.[41] The same source endows him with powers of invisibility, which he exercised when riding with the empress in open carriages in order to avoid embarrassing her. One day in Yalta in the Crimea, Felix Yusupov's father recalled, he was going for a walk when he met the grand duchess Militsa driving with a stranger. He bowed, but to his astonishment she failed to respond. On meeting her a few days later he asked her why she had cut him, only to be told that he could not possibly have seen her, since she was with M. Philippe, "and when he wears a hat he is invisible and so are those who are with him."[42]

Inevitably M. Philippe made enemies. The imperial couple did not lead a conventional court life, preferring to confer the privilege of close acquaintance upon select members of the aristocracy and family, keeping almost everyone else at arm's length. M. Philippe

came to enjoy a degree of intimacy that was quite inconsistent with his station, and that turned any frustrated would-be courtier against the French peasant. That he should, rightly or wrongly, be regarded in his own country as an opportunistic charlatan, came to make his presence at court appear increasingly undesirable. It brought discredit on the tsar and tsarina and cast an unfavourable light upon their judgment. Moreover, Philippe managed to antagonise the Orthodox church, which not only rejected his heterodox teaching but, more important perhaps, resented his position as intimate spiritual advisor to the tsar and tsarina, a position that should by rights be held by a senior churchman.

Unlike Rasputin, who would prove able to take far fiercer opposition in his stride, M. Philippe was unable to counter the intrigues of his enemies. Besides, there was also a failure of a different kind. Since her marriage in 1894 Alexandra had given birth to four daughters, Olga, Tatyana, Maria, and Anastasia, the youngest of whom was born in 1901. For dynastic reasons it was vital that Alexandra should produce a male heir. M. Philippe claimed that he could ensure the birth of a son in the immediate future. Sure enough, in the spring of 1902 Alexandra declared herself pregnant and expected without fail to give birth to a son in due course—but fail she did.

The failure has been explained in two ways. The less charitable explanation, and hence the most attractive for that luckless woman's numerous critics, not to mention M. Philippe's scarcely less numerous enemies, was that she had suffered a false pregnancy, the consequence of hysteria and wishful thinking. However, it has also been claimed that Alexandra simply had a miscarriage, which was not an event that would have been given widespread publicity at that time. Although we cannot say which of the versions is the true one, the fact remains that M. Philippe's failure to assist in the birth of an heir marked a weakening in his position. In the meantime Nicholas was put under increasing pressure to let the Frenchman go. He had just received a most unflattering report of his activities in France from the head of the French section of his secret police, while Theophanes was also encouraging him to get rid of him. Late in 1902 M. Philippe finally returned to France, but returned in no disgrace. Not only did Nicholas part with him reluctantly, he sent him home

with honours, having conferred upon him the title of inspector of port sanitary services, a post which gave him the rank of general, and more important, automatically made him a doctor of medicine. He also presented him with a magnificent motor car, a Serpollet, which a motor mechanic who worked on it subsequently described as "a presidential landau."[43]

It has been claimed that, before leaving Russia, M. Philippe made a prophecy to Nicholas and Alexandra. He is said to have comforted them with the assurance that one day he would be replaced: "Some day you will have another Friend, who will, like me, speak to you of God."[44] M. Philippe maintained his contact with Tsarskoe Selo on his return, carrying on a regular correspondence until his death in 1905, a death which he had prophesied to the very day.[45] For some time afterwards Anastasia attempted to keep up the goodwill that M. Philippe had created, seeking to maintain her influence over Nicholas and Alexandra with the suggestion that when the sage "relinquished the physical plane" his spirit had entered into her, so that she should be considered his effective reincarnation.[46]

M. Philippe was not the only French magician to get close to the court. A certain M. Encausse, better known under his *nom de guerre* Papus, was an occultist who enjoyed a considerable reputation in Parisian spiritualist and literary circles. He paid three visits to Russia, in 1900, 1903, and October 1905. On the last occasion he too visited Tsarskoe Selo. It was the time of the 1905 revolution. There was rioting in the streets of Moscow and the railways had gone on strike. The day after he arrived he too conjured up the spirit of Alexander III. Nicholas allegedly asked his father whether he should give way to the demands of the revolutionaries. The spirit replied that he was to resist revolution at all costs, but that it would return one day with a renewed violence which would be the direct consequence of his lack of severity in dealing with the present unrest. "No matter, take courage my son and do not abandon the struggle."[47] Papus then observed that he personally had the power to avert Alexander's prophecy as long as he should live, but no longer: he was to die on October 25, 1916, less than two months before Rasputin's assassination, while the dynasty was to fall some seventy days later.

He returned to France shortly after his interview with Nicholas, and for all his belief in the occult he seems to have been disturbed by the part it was allowed to play in the process of government. He observed to a friend that he could never have imagined that a monarch ruling over one hundred fifty million subjects would regularly look to table-turning and spiritual séances as a means of deciding political issues of the greatest importance.[48] Ironically, this reliance on spiritual guides is confirmed by a remark Nicholas made about Papus himself. Discussing one of the latter's books with his prime minister he observed that it contained insights, discoveries and revelations that might well put him in a position where he "would prove able to govern the country in person, altogether without any ministers of any kind."[49] It is true that he was smiling as he spoke, but there was nothing funny about his desire to rely on guides who possessed immediate intuitive access to "the truth" at the expense of political advisors of a more conventional kind.

Papus feared that the imperial couple would find themselves at the mercy of the first charlatan to try to take advantage of them. Like M. Philippe, he maintained a regular correspondence with them over the years, in the course of which he was to warn them repeatedly against the growing influence of Rasputin. Some months before he died he would write:

> Cabalistically speaking Rasputin is a vessel like Pandora's box, which contains all the vices, crimes and filth of the Russian people. Should the vessel be broken we will see its dreadful contents spill themselves across Russia.

For his part Rasputin did not greatly care for Papus and would observe that, since there was more sin to be found in the West than elsewhere, anything coming from Europe must needs be tainted; a very Russian point of view.

CHAPTER 7

Whatever may be said, the appearance at court of Gregory Rasputin, and the influence he exercised there mark the beginning of the decay of Russian society and the loss of prestige of the throne and of the person of the tsar himself.

RODZYANKO

"My son has so little luck with people."
NICHOLAS II'S MOTHER

p. 135

IT WAS THE Montenegrins who had brought M. Philippe to Tsarskoe Selo. That they believed in his powers does not mean that they did not try to benefit from them. It is the ambition of the courtier to get as close as possible to the monarch; proximity confers prestige, influence, and possibilities of material advantage. Certainly the two sisters encouraged the spiritual and mystic penchants of the imperial couple, and to contemporary observers, their motives were anything but disinterested: "It would all be very funny if it were not so sad," A. A. Polovtsev, a member of the Imperial Council, wrote in his diary, adding, "When it comes to the Montenegrins and M. Philippe financial considerations feature very largely."[1] Nicholas's uncle, the grand duke Nicholas, had also played an important part in the promotion of M. Philippe. Now, late in 1905, the Montenegrins and the grand duke made a further effort to place a protégé close to the tsar.

The revolution of 1905 may in retrospect seem a mere curtain

raiser to the revolutions of 1917, but it must have appeared somewhat different at the time, with widespread strikes, street fighting in Moscow and the capital, mutinous soldiers returning from the Far East, widespread looting and burning of landowners' estates in the provinces—not to mention the killing of the actual landowners. The imperial family were virtual prisoners at Tsarskoe Selo, not daring to enter their own capital and keeping a warship on constant standby with steam up ready to take them to safety. The attempt of the tsar to seek the advice of his late father gives some indication of the need he felt for reliable guidance; should he make concessions or should he continue to fight the revolution at every point?

It was apparently Grand Duke Nicholas who persuaded the tsar to sign the October Manifesto. Both he and the Montenegrins had been in constant contact with the palace for some time. In the course of the last three weeks of October there were only two days on which Anastasia did not visit the palace, while her sister dined there on at least seven occasions, such visits being backed up by innumerable telephone calls.[2] Nicholas and Alexandra did not normally see members of the family with anything approaching such regularity.

Anastasia Nicolaevna, who, it will be recalled, was married to the Duke of Leuchtenberg, grew increasingly close to Grand Duke Nicholas, a rapprochement both sensed and encouraged by Rasputin, who was an adept at providing his protectors with sayings that might encourage them in doing whatever they wanted to do. He observed that "the marriage of the brother and the sister will be the salvation of Russia"—Militsa, it will be remembered, was married to the grand duke's brother. The Montenegrins chose to regard this pronouncement as a prophecy suggesting that the grand duke and Anastasia must be brought together for the good of the empire. The marriage was also supported by Alexandra herself, and in due course it was indeed accomplished; divorce is rather easier in the Orthodox church, which also permits the celebration of second marriages.

Late in 1905 there was thus a certain conjunction of circumstances. The Montenegrins had grown very close to the grand duke, and collectively they had considerable influence over the tsar, greater perhaps than that of any other conventional pressure group at any

other time in his reign. The group in question was distinctly susceptible to mystics and holy men, and not averse to making use of such persons to further their own ends. Rasputin's encouragement of Grand Duke Nicholas and Anastasia led them to suppose that, at the least, he might prove able to exert a useful influence on the tsar and tsarina; might indeed prove a suitable replacement for the defunct M. Philippe, enjoying as he did the support of Theophanes and the inner circle of ecclesiastics who had disapproved of the presence of a French occultist at Tsarskoe Selo. Besides, the tsar, whose protracted indecision had culminated in the indignity of the October manifesto, was clearly in need of a spiritual guide to give him the kind of God-sent advice that he could never expect from mere politicians.

On October 31 Militsa, her husband, her sister and the grand duke dined with the imperial court and left very late. Next day the tsar and tsarina called on Militsa, a call recorded in the tsar's diary. It is one of those entries that mark history, although at the time the diarist is unaware that he is doing anything of the sort. It is the record of a casual encounter:

> We have made the acquaintance of a man of God named Grigorii from the government of Tobolsk.

That entry in the tsar's consistently unremarkable diary is the only account we have of Rasputin's first meeting with "Mama" and "Papa," as he would soon be calling the emperor and empress. Despite Nicholas's need for special guidance, Rasputin did not immediately impress him as such a person. True, he was no longer the filthy, unkempt Siberian wanderer. Although he still dressed as a peasant, he now wore good polished boots and expensive silk blouses. A true Russian peasant in this respect, he loved to have his achievements reflected in the luxurious quality of the clothes he carried on his back. Yet he had not, could not yet have developed his intuitive sense of courtier's statecraft. He was still tentative in his manner, ready to take refuge behind a mask of peasant naivety or even feign *yurodstvo* "simplicity in Christ."

Curiously, when he met the imperial couple on November 1, 1905, Rasputin realised an ambition that was very close to his love of

peasant clothes made of expensive materials. Just as such clothes would show the world what he had become, so he could say, "See who I am, I am just a simple peasant, but grand dukes and duchesses like me, and I have been to Tsarskoe Selo and met the tsar and tsarina, and they like me too. That's the kind of man I am." To English ears it sounds like boasting, but a Russian finds nothing wrong with showing off as long as there is something genuine to show—and in its absence *vranye* or creative lying in the interests of self-glorification can also command respect. It is a simple act of self-affirmation, and if you neglect to perform it no one else will do so on your behalf. Rasputin would always feel the need to show others what he had become, pointing proudly to the quality of his acquaintance. He had a genuine need to be close to the high and the mighty, and not necessarily because he stood to gain materially from that proximity. It was in itself the measure of his achievement.

Yet there was more to the Rasputin of these years than mere courtier's ambition. He had, after all, impressed devout churchmen with his holiness, and it was to his spiritual qualities that he owed his success. He was not just a charlatan who could fool a lot of the people a lot of the time. Over the years he may have abused his talents, his insights, and his capacity to heal and to comfort, or to preach a simple but remarkably convincing brand of peasant religion based on love of the universal harmony of God's creation. Yet it is not unreasonable to ascribe to Rasputin's ambitions something beyond mere self-assertion. The man who would later insist with great urgency that he had some special significance for the dynasty, that "When I perish they will perish," and whom history in this respect would prove right, may well have felt that he had some special purpose to his life, and that this purpose was bound up with the last Romanovs. It would be preposterous to suggest that he was some kind of Siberian Joan of Arc, and yet an over-simplification to make out that he was nothing more than a confidence trickster, a Tartuffe or a Felix Krull. His character was an inextricable mixture of opportunism and a sense of destiny, charlatanry and genuine understanding, sensuality and spirituality. Moreover, his ego was sufficiently strong for him to be incapable of critical self-awareness; he was convinced that whatever he did was thereby right. He resolved contradictions by ignoring them, saying, "Contradictions,

what of them, for you they are contradictions, but I am me, Grigorii Rasputin, and that's what matters; look at me, see what I have become!" For all his insights, Rasputin lacked the kind of conceptual framework which might occasionally have made him feel at odds with himself. He was always ready to act on impulse, for it was through impulse and the immediate that he could both seize the truth and express his broad peasant nature.

His initial impression upon the imperial couple may have been a relatively modest one, yet it had curious repercussions. Some days later Nicholas II showed one of his household, Colonel Prince Putyatin, a letter. It was signed by the St. Petersburg priest, Yaroslav Medved', who had for some time been the spiritual counsellor of the Montenegrins. The letter begged the emperor to receive a certain *starets,* Grigorii Efimovich, who had come from Siberia bringing the tsar an icon of St. Simeon of Verkhoturye. The letter went on to observe that the *starets* was lodging in the house of its author. Nicholas told Putyatin that he would be delighted to receive the *starets,* especially since he had not had time to visit Verkhoturye on his Siberian tour.

It was obvious to Putyatin from the tsar's manner that Nicholas knew all about the letter in advance, and that the whole business was a put-up job. Indeed, when charged some years later with Rasputin's introduction to Tsarskoe Selo, the priest Medved' denied ever having written the letter in the first place—though of course anyone subsequently accused of introducing Rasputin to court might well be found to suffer from a lapse of memory.

At all events Putyatin duly went to Medved's house in the Peski district of the capital, collected the *starets* and brought him to the palace. He was received by the emperor and empress, to whom he presented an icon of St. Simeon thirty centimeters high and painted on wood. He was also presented to the family, the four daughters and the heir, the eighteen-month-old tsarevich Aleksey. Each child was given a small icon and a piece of consecrated bread such as one takes with one from an Orthodox church after receiving communion. Rasputin conversed for some time with Nicholas and Alexandra and had tea with them before he left.

The most striking thing about this reception is its domesticity, a quality that would set the pattern of Rasputin's visits for many years

to come. Nothing could be further from the image of the emperor receiving a holy man from Siberia, who would lay an icon at the feet of the tsar and little father of his people. This was more like a married couple inviting a remarkable character to tea, to talk to him and because it might be good for the children. The tsar and tsarina always drew a sharp distinction between their public roles and their private lives, and their friends were very much part of the latter. Sadly, it was a distinction that was lost on the rest of Russia.

After Rasputin left, Nicholas asked Putyatin what he thought of him. The colonel prince was unimpressed. To him the man had seemed mentally disturbed and a hypocrite into the bargain. Putyatin's reaction was by no means untypical. Rasputin did not impress everybody on first acquaintance. There were many, men mostly, who rejected him from the start, finding his homespun religion and his staring eyes fundamentally false; his abrupt and jerky speech and movements signs not of holy simplicity but of mental derangement. However, the majority, including Nicholas and Alexandra, felt very differently on first acquaintance:

> In Rasputin's presence one immediately sensed the wisdom, gravity, deep comprehension of life and majesty of thought which he possessed to such a remarkable degree.[3]

The tsar's reaction to Putyatin's observations made his opinion very clear. He was obviously distressed, turning away and stroking his beard and moustache, which was a clear indication of displeasure second only to nervous smoking and drumming on the window pane—the ultimate point on the scale of imperial disapproval. Nicholas never mentioned Rasputin to Putyatin again. The colonel's views did not actually harm his career, although over the years he was treated with increasing coldness by the empress, who would not tolerate hostility of any kind towards her Friend.

However favourable the impression Rasputin may have created, his visit bore no immediate fruit. The Montenegrins, it is true, did all they could to advance his cause, as is shown by the following entry in the tsar's diary:

> Militsa and Stana dined with us; all evening they talked about Grigorii.[4]

However, despite their assiduities, Rasputin would see very little of the imperial family for the next eighteen months.

* * *

For Rasputin, 1906 was a quiet year, in the sense that he was not yet a public figure. True, he frequented aristocratic and even princely houses, but this was a time when mysticism and the quest for God, or strange gods, was much in vogue, and many great houses had their particular *starets* or holy fool to visit them and hold forth on matters spiritual. Rasputin was not invited to the palace that year but he did meet Nicholas and Alexandra occasionally in the Montenegrin residences. He cut a peculiar figure in that world, with his blue silk blouse and heavy boots, and attracted the attention of the security police, who found his appearance suspect but could find nothing to lay against him.

Rasputin spent most of 1906 in the capital, consolidating his position with ecclesiastics and the aristocracy. His reputation as a holy man grew fast and he soon gathered a following of disciples, women for the most part, who quite improperly conferred upon him the ecclesiastical title of Father Grigorii. Rasputin was sometimes bewildered by the extent of the veneration accorded him, but now, as always, would accept anything on offer, be it money or veneration, without question. However surprised he might be that some of his more enthusiastic followers eagerly assured him that he was a candidate for sainthood, he never showed it. He would enter a salon with a strangely tentative blend of confidence and uncertainty, looking around for potential enemies. He could smell these out almost immediately, and would make it his business to disarm them. He would do so by asking them a series of questions so personal—were they married, were they happy, did they love God, why did they not have more children—that he would gain ascendancy over them immediately, unless, as sometimes happened, he drove them off in disgust. He would then turn to "preach to the converted." He might cast his eyes around the richly furnished room, taking it as the basis for an impromptu sermon on the need for simplicity, humility and spiritual poverty, staring significantly into the eyes of the more attractive members of his entourage.

The most prominent member of his following was Olga Lokhtina, at whose invitation he gave up his hostel room to move into her house in the Peski district. Sadly, we have no details of his stay, and Lokhtina herself remains something of a caricature; lack of hard facts has made her pass into legend, becoming a part of the mythology of the "mad monk," and endowing her with the embarrassing capacity for exalté enthusiasm of Dostoevsky's sillier women. In a few years' time Rasputin himself would find her embarrassing, as she crawled at his feet and addressed him as the Lord God of Hosts, but at this early stage in his rise she was more than useful to him. When she took him out of his monastic lodgings and into her own house she did much to make him acceptable in the eyes of the world. It was one thing to have a peasant holy man call on you and hold forth in your salon, quite another to give him permanent house room; the implication was either that you had embarked upon a particulary taxing exercise in Christian self-humiliation, or that the peasant in question was house trained.

Olga Lokhtina also helped Rasputin in other important respects. Although he was not entirely illiterate he found writing and spelling more or less beyond him. He could never get beyond a painstaking scrawl, with letters wandering all over the page, while his spelling was a reflection of his Siberian dialect rather than a rendering of standard Russian. Accordingly he preferred to communicate by telegram, putting the onus of literacy upon the telegraphist. However, Olga Lokhtina now began to act as his secretary, copying out letters that he would sign with a spidery G.

That summer Olga Lokhtina blazed a trail that would be followed by numerous other ladies driven by curiosity, a desire to save their souls, and a thirst for strong sensation. She made the trip to Pokrovskoe and stayed in Rasputin's *izba,* living the simple village life. We may assume her stay followed the pattern of subsequent visits, which included mixed bathing and the sharing of Rasputin's bed in order to test the spirit against the flesh.

Rasputin was beginning to become something of a celebrity in the capital. In the words of General Spiridovich:

> The salons vied fiercely with one another to have Rasputin. The unbalanced ladies of Petersburg society could talk and think of

> nothing else. They taught him how to dress, to groom himself, to wash, and much more besides.[5]

He learned about the use of expensive pomades to perfume his beard, and was taught how to look after his hands and fingernails, how to wash himself without going to steam in the bathhouse. However he could never be dissuaded from using the cheapest and strongest-smelling brands of soap, which he would favour to his dying day. Equally, his lady friends never succeeded in persuading him to abandon his peasant mode of dress, loose blouse and baggy trousers tucked into high boots. However, he was happy to wear the silk blouses they embroidered for him and the fine cloth trousers and red leather boots that they bought for him. But even though they managed to improve his appearance beyond measure, his new friends could do nothing for Rasputin's table manners. He obstinately refused to learn about knives and forks, continuing to eat as he had always eaten, with his fingers. By the end of a meal, moreover, it would be apparent that his beard also had its part to play; Rasputin was not fond of napkins either.

Although he had succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of any Siberian peasant, success had left Rasputin unaltered in many ways. He was content to remain himself in dress and behaviour. He had too much confidence to feel a need to adjust to his new surroundings. There is more to this than mere shrewdness and calculation, for there is much about his behaviour that could not be considered either calculating or shrewd. A more calculating social climber would have made the effort to restrain his appetites in order to sustain a reputation for holiness. Rasputin did nothing of the sort. In matters of sex he continued to live dangerously. He always would, and one cannot help admiring him for it. His urgent sexual drive was a vital part of his nature, whether he was concentrating his energies by trying to master it, or letting it rip regardless of the consequences. There was nothing cautious about his sensuality, much to the bewilderment of devout Christians who suddenly found themselves exposed to it. Mme. O., from the government of Volyn', was a good Christian, a long-time pupil of Theophanes, who used to stay with her, as did other members of the Theological Academy. It was from them that she had heard of Rasputin. In November 1906 Theo-

phanes arranged for him to come and stay with her in the country. The visit got off to a strange start when she met his train, and he introduced himself by kissing her three times on her lips. Their subsequent conversations took peculiar turns, as Rasputin, nervously twisting his fingers through his beard, kept asking her whether there might not be something she had to tell him that she did not dare tell her confessor. When she replied with a smile that there was not he began to move nervously about the room, paused and suddenly said: "You know I know how to love really well."[6] Mme. O. pretended not to have heard, and when Rasputin became increasingly explicit she left the room. He subsequently invited her to become his "spiritual daughter," and when she pointed out that this could not be, since he was not a priest, and could not bless her, he replied that he possessed an inner excellence which was more important than any priestly rank; an attitude that smacks of sectarian heresy.

Rasputin did not stay long with Mme. O., and no actual scandal ensued, partly because she took the precaution of sending her young daughters and their Swiss governess away to stay with friends. Yet the interesting point about this brief episode is the unashamed nature of Rasputin's advances, and this despite Mme. O.'s reputation, and, more important, her contacts with the very person who sponsored Rasputin in the capital.

Perhaps Rasputin simply would not or could not restrain himself, and yet there may be more to the matter than that. Rasputin's sexual advances were immediately followed by the suggestion that Mme. O. become his disciple, implying that sex for Rasputin might, among other things, have been a way of achieving that absolute dominance a *starets* must have over his disciples; a serious attempt to achieve spirituality via the flesh. It would be wrong to compare Rasputin's behaviour to highly evolved Eastern cults such as Tantrism, which make specific use of sexuality, for this would be too ingenious by half. Nevertheless sexuality is an element in certain forms of Russian sectarianism to which Rasputin had been exposed. It also seems to have played an essential part in the way he addressed himself to his followers, one reason perhaps why he behaved so outrageously with potential adherents. Unequivocal sexuality was a means of establishing authority, not just the result of an unbearable itch.

Already in Kazan in 1903 Rasputin's behaviour had begun to cast a shadow over his reputation. Now, three years later, a number of his earlier supporters, such as Theophanes, were beginning to have serious doubts. Sexual escapades aside, men of God did not wear silk blouses and visit society women; fasting and asceticism play an important part in Orthodox conceptions of holiness. Yet it would be another four years before Theophanes would turn away from Rasputin for good, and it is curious that it should have taken so sincere and devout a churchman so long, just as it is curious that Rasputin should have retained the support of so many adherents for as long as he did.

There are a number of reasons why he "got away with things." In the first place Rasputin was himself undergoing a change. It took time for the unkempt pilgrim of 1903 in his greasy black coat and tar-stained boots to become the peasant dandy with a scented beard who was acceptable salon material; an outward change which reflected a change in the kind of company he kept. He spent less time now with priests and monks, more in palaces. The circles he moved in were exalté, enthusiastically religious and far removed from sceptical criticism. The very existence of men of Rasputin's supposed spirituality was a confirmation of their faith, and this made them reluctant to put him to the test. They believed that Rasputin was what they wanted him to be and were purblind to his shortcomings because they had no wish to see them. Thus one of the silliest of Christian enthusiasts, Prince Zhevakhov, who would subsequently attempt to alter the course of World War One by transporting to the front an unwieldy but very holy icon—he had been told to win the war that way in a vision—was well aware of Rasputin's shortcomings, but managed to explain them away. He realised that, as a rule, men of God remained within the walls of monasteries and did not frequent salons. He felt, however, that the quality of Rasputin's teaching, his ability to comfort and to cure, were undisputed, hence he was a holy man, and only persons indifferent or hostile to religion could possibly oppose him. This is more or less understandable, but Zhevakhov reaches the height of naivete when he attempts to explain away reports of Rasputin's more extravagant behaviour:

> With respect to actions which are apparently altogether at odds with morality or proper behaviour, these were considered a form of

> "simplicity in Christ," in other words there was a deeply concealed purpose deliberately disguised by deceptive appearances. This is why when disquieting rumours of Rasputin's actions began to make their way into society, they were only believed with reluctance and were seen as a deliberate attempt to blacken the "saint."[7]

Rasputin was held to be a saint partly because people wanted to believe in his sanctity, but there were more tangible reasons too. Apart from his undisputed capacity to bring comfort, Rasputin's powers took two forms: clairvoyance and healing. As a clairvoyant he was unremarkable. He was capable of occasional flashes of prophetic insight of a generalised kind, for example his intuitive realisation that his own fate was bound up with the fate of the dynasty. Nonetheless, he was believed to be clairvoyant, for example by the Montenegrins, although he would insist to Nicholas himself that he had no such gift.[8] Still there are stories about his remarkable powers. Once a monk criticised him in his absence for being a charlatan and a womaniser. Shortly afterwards Rasputin came into the room, stared him down and said: "So you think I am a charlatan and a womaniser do you?"[9] Whether the story be true, false, or to be explained by a tip-off, it is typical of the kind of thing people at the time believed about Rasputin.

He was much more successful as a healer. Olga Lokhtina was a case in point. When interrogated by the Muravyev Commission in 1917 she maintained her faith in Rasputin as a *starets* and a healer with steadfast dignity, saying that he had cured her of a nervous stomach disorder that had kept her bedridden for the best part of five years. Spiridovich claims that he used the same techniques as M. Philippe, a combination of fervent prayer and hypnotic suggestion, which calmed the patient and made him believe that Rasputin was interceding with God on his behalf. There are remarkable instances of his working successful cures. Some can be dismissed as the wishful thinking of those who longed to believe in Rasputin, but this was by no means always the case. The tsarina's lady-in-waiting, Lili Dehn, has left a memoir that is in some respects partisan—defensive of Alexandra to the point of being more than fair to Rasputin—so that sceptics should regard the following account of a cure with some distrust. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the entire episode was invented.

Her child is very ill and reluctantly she calls upon Rasputin to see if he can do anything:

> "Don't wake Titi," I whispered as we entered the nursery, for I was afraid that the sudden appearance of this strange peasant might frighten the child. Rasputin made no reply, but sat down by the bedside and looked long and intently at the sleeper. He then knelt and prayed. When he rose from his knees he bent over Titi.
>
> "Don't wake him," I repeated.
>
> "Silence. I *must.*"
>
> Rasputin placed a finger on either side of Titi's nose. The child instantly awoke, looked at the stranger unafraid and addressed him by the playful name which Russian children give to old people. Rasputin talked to him and Titi told him that his head ached "ever so much."
>
> "Never mind," said Rasputin, his steel eyes full of strange lights. Then, addressing me, "Tomorrow thy child will be well. Let me know if this is not so."[10]

The child fell immediately into a normal sleep; the fever had gone by morning and in a few days he was well again.

More remarkable still was Rasputin's capacity for healing from a distance. Again the following account comes from a slightly suspect source, E. F. Djaunumova, a lady who wished to make all she could of her meetings with Rasputin, and yet this was by no means the only occasion on which Rasputin proved capable of long-distance healing.

The lady in question was deeply upset to learn that her niece was dying. Rasputin noted her distress as soon as he saw her, and made her tell him all about it:

> Then something so strange happened that I cannot explain it . . . However hard I tried to understand there is nothing I could do. I don't know what happened, but I will describe it all in detail.
>
> He took my hand. His face changed and he looked like a corpse, yellowy, waxy and dreadfully still. He rolled his eyes till the whites alone were visible. He took my hand roughly and said in a dull voice, "She won't die, she won't die." Then he let my hand go and the blood flowed back into his cheeks again. He continued talking as if nothing had happened.

Some hours afterwards the lady got a telegram telling her that her niece had got better. She showed it to Rasputin:

"Did you really help?"

"I told you she would get better," he replied with conviction.

"Will you do it again? Perhaps she will get quite well again."

"You little fool, how could I? It was not from me that it came but from on high. And you cannot do it twice. But I said she would get better, so why are you worrying?"[11]

This is hardly conclusive evidence. Those who wish to believe in Rasputin's powers will accept it, sceptics dismiss it as worthless. Yet the fact remains that on one occasion at least Rasputin proved capable either of healing at a distance of some thousands of miles or of benefiting by a remarkable coincidence.[12] By the end of 1906 he had an established reputation as a healer, and not just of unbalanced women. He had a remarkable way with children too, as he once had with his father's horses; the same capacity to calm and inspire confidence in a patient. Indeed we have a brief child's eye view of him from this year. E. Judas, the niece of one of the tsar's doctors, M. I. Lebikov, met Rasputin as a child. They travelled east to Siberia in his company, which she found enthralling. He spent many hours talking with her, teaching her to "pray with most wonderful words," telling her never to pick flowers, "since it was cruel to take life by force." The man made a profound and positive impression upon her, one which subsequently inspired the fundamentally sympathetic book she wrote about him.

Of all the first-hand accounts of Rasputin, that of E. Judas inspires the most confidence, and it is surprising that it should be so little known. It is clearly favourable to him, but not hysterically so, and avoids all hint of sensationalism. There is nothing here about his supernatural powers, or his magnetic gaze that seemed to look deep into the heart. It places much more emphasis on quiet qualities; gentleness, love of nature, respect for life, the qualities that made him good with children and animals, reminding us that whatever Rasputin's other talents might have been, perhaps the greatest talent of all was his ability to calm and comfort troubled souls.

CHAPTER 8

p. 149

WITH OR WITHOUT the assistance of M. Philippe, the Empress had finally given birth to a son in June 1904, yet the happiness this brought Nicholas and Alexandra was short-lived. It was quickly discovered that the child suffered from haemophilia, the hereditary disease that had accounted for the deaths of four of Alexandra's immediate male relatives. It is curious, incidentally, that Nicholas should have been permitted to marry Alexandra in view of that flaw in her bloodline. From the point of view of the dynasty it can only be construed as a colossal oversight. On the other hand it has been suggested that the marriage was the outcome of fiendish and careful Prussian planning. It was allegedly engineered by Bismarck himself, with a view to the long-term debilitation of the house of Romanov. If so he was rather too successful, since the Russian revolution did a great deal to bring about the fall of the Prussian imperial house of Hohenzollern in November 1918. Haemophilia is transmitted by the female line, although it only

affects males. Any mother of a haemophiliac, especially before the disease could be treated, was bound to experience a terrible sense of guilt at the mortal illness she had passed to her son. One can scarcely conceive of the degree of guilt experienced by Alexandra, who had failed to provide the empire with a suitable heir, and who saw her youngest child, her only son, under perpetual threat of death and often in terrible pain. Such pressures would be enough to test the strongest of women, and they proved too much for the shy, nervous and morbidly religious Alexandra. A cousin of the tsar's, Grand Duke Aleksandr Mikhailovich, described the imperial reaction:

> The emperor aged ten years overnight. He could not bear to think that doctors had sentenced his son to death or to life as an invalid.
>
> "Your Majesty should know," said one of the court surgeons, "that the tsarevich will never get well. Attacks of haemophilia will recur from time to time. It is vital to take the most severe measures to protect his highness from falls, cuts and scratches, because anything of the sort, be it ever so trivial, can be fatal for haemophiliacs." A huge sailor was ordered to look after Aleksey Nikolaevich's safety and carry him whenever the tsarevich had to remain on his feet for a long time.
>
> For his imperial parents life lost all its sense. We were afraid to smile in their presence. Visiting their majesties we behaved in the palace as if we were in a house in which there had been a death. The emperor tried to find relief in unremitting hard work, but the Empress was not prepared to submit to fate. She spoke constantly of the ignorance of doctors, and expressed an unconcealed preference for charlatans. She turned all her thoughts towards religion and her faith took on a hysterical character.[1]

In the words of Pierre Gilliard, one of Aleksey's future tutors:

> The empress knew only too well, that at any minute the smallest piece of carelessness which would have left anyone else perfectly safe could cause death. If he were to approach her twenty times a day she would give him a kiss on every occasion, as he came up or went away. I understand, for each time she left him she was afraid it could be the last.[2]

In such circumstances it is hardly surprising that Aleksey should have been hopelessly spoilt, wilful and, in some ways increasingly disagreeable as he grew older. Too much love, too much attention,

made him consider love and attention as his unquestionable due, while the restrictions that his disease necessitated were doubly irksome to a child of his high-spirited energy and incapacity for concentrated mental effort. As he grew up there was more than one instance of his throwing his little tsarevich's weight about, requiring cabinet ministers to give him precedence, regiments to salute him, or sentries to march (a little way) out to sea. In later years his father was only half joking when he observed that he trembled for a Russia under the autocratic rule of his wilful little son and heir, whom he would sometimes refer to as Aleksey the Terrible.

The boy's illness remained a closely kept secret for some time. Although it seems to have revealed itself fairly soon after birth it would be a good five years before the handicap became common knowledge in court circles, and then the news only came out because the condition became more acute as time went by.

Granted her mysticism, her belief in holy men, and her healthy dislike of doctors, especially the kind of doctor who held out no hope for her son, it is understandable that Alexandra should have let the Montenegrins persuade her to turn to Rasputin to see if he could help.

He did. All we know of his first visit is that Rasputin came to the sick boy's bedside and prayed. Shortly afterwards the haemorrhage from which he was suffering at the time ceased. Rasputin then prophesied that the tsarevich would not die of the disease, which would disappear when he reached the age of twenty.[3]

The visit transformed Rasputin's situation. No longer a simple holy man, he had got through to the very core of the empire, well past the limits of the official court; henceforward he would be an integral part of the life of the imperial family. In itself this meant that he gained a degree of intimacy that he would share with a mere handful of others. The more successful he was at treating the tsarevich, the more directly dependent the emperor and empress of all the Russias would become upon Grigorii Efimovich Rasputin, native of Pokrovskoe.

We have no eyewitness account of his first treatment of Aleksey, but there is a hearsay version dating from the same year, from V. A. Telyakovsky, the director of the imperial theatres. He asks a friend in the know:

> "What sort of man is this Rasputin?"
>
> "He's a strange one. He was taken to the bedside of the tsarevich . . . The child looked at him and began to bubble with laughter. Rasputin laughed too. He laid his hand on the boy's leg and the bleeding stopped at once. 'There's a good boy,' said Rasputin. 'You'll be all right. But only God can tell what will happen tomorrow.'"[4]

There is not the slightest doubt that the tsarina believed in Rasputin's power to stop her son's bleeding. That is the single most important fact of the case. It gave him an immense hold over her, and, quite as important, convinced her of his holiness, his wisdom, and ultimately of the quality of his political judgment. Since he could work miracles he must be the second Friend sent by God to replace M. Philippe.

If Alexandra believed that he was able to arrest the bleeding it is reasonable to conclude that he did so. However gullible and prone to wishful thinking she may have been, credulity has its limits. We have to assume that Alexandra perceived a relationship between Rasputin's visits and the cessation of her son's attacks. Indeed, that Rasputin was able to exercise some measure of control over them is something that not even his most bitter enemies disputed. They preferred to find unattractive explanations for his success, suggesting that he had seduced Aleksey's nurse and persuaded her to feed him some special Tibetan brew to make him bleed. She would stop dosing him shortly after Rasputin called on the child and resume treatment later. The charge was preposterous, yet interesting, in that it acknowledged that Rasputin's visits did have an effect. In fact the imperial surgeon himself, Professor S. P. Fedorov, confirmed Rasputin's ability to check the bleeding. Having studied all the available research material on the disease he was convinced that medical science was helpless:

> And look, Rasputin would come in, walk up to the patient, look at him and spit. The bleeding would stop in no time . . . How could the empress not trust Rasputin after that?[5]

In fact bleeding cures are far from unknown to Russian folk medicine, which has a rich tradition of unorthodox kinds of healing, making much use of wise women, herbalists and "whisperers," or

those who talk you to health. Some of these possessed the secret of arresting bleeding, which would be passed down from one generation to the next as a legacy. The author's own interest in Rasputin dates back to his childhood, when his Russian grandmother would talk about him. She considered him no more than a highly successful practitioner of folk medicine, observing that all over Russia there were persons who treated people, and especially animals, with a peculiar blend of folk medicine and sympathetic magic. To his more level-headed contemporaries there was nothing supernatural about his methods or his powers, he was just the most successful "whisperer" in the land.

Anyone who wants to find out about magic and folk medicine usually has to go to the accounts of anthropologists and ethnographers describing their field work, and such accounts are usually disappointing. The clinical eye of the trained observer, and the no less clinical style with which the observations are written out, tend to defuse the atmosphere of its magic. But we are fortunate enough to have an account of a "whisperer" written not by an ethnographer, but by one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Russia. In *Doctor Zhivago* Boris Pasternak shows us a Siberian whisperer in action, and his description has all the uncanny folk poetry and magic of darkest peasant Russia built into it:

> The woman was saying:
>
> "Auntie Margesta, come and be our guest. Come on Wednesday, take away the pest, take away the spell, take away the scab. Ringworm leave the heifer's udder. Stand still Beauty, do your duty, don't upset the pail. Stand still as a hill, let milk run and rill. Terror terror, show your mettle, take the scurvy, take the scab, throw them in the nettles. Strong as a lord is the sorcerer's word.
>
> "You see, you have to know everything—bidding and forbidding, the word for escaping, and the word for safe keeping. You have to know what everything is. Now you, for example, you look over there and say to yourself: 'There's a forest.' But what there is over there is the forces of evil fighting the angelic hosts . . .
>
> "Now another thing. Suppose you take a fancy to someone, you just tell me. I'll make him pine for you, whoever he is . . . You think I'm boasting? Indeed I am not. Now look, I'll tell you. When the winter comes with blizzards, and whirlwind and snowspouts chasing each other in the fields, I will stick a knife into such a pillar of snow right up to the hilt, and when I take it out of the

> snow, it will be red with blood . . . that whirlwind isn't just wind and snow it's a werewolf, a changeling that's lost its little warlock child and is looking for it. That is why I struck with my knife, that is why there is blood on it. Now, with that knife I can cut away the footprint of any man, and I can sew it with a silk thread on to your skirt, and that man . . . will follow you step by step wherever you go. . . .[6]

Despite the fact that Rasputin's visits had an undisputed beneficial effect upon the tsarevich, he could not combat the disease in any fundamental way. The nature of his treatment has been admirably summarised by Mr. George Katkov:

> There is nothing mysterious in his reputed ability to alleviate the sufferings of the tsarevich . . . No hypnosis could of course alter the composition of his blood to replace the deficiency which prevented it from coagulating normally. But it is well known that hypnotic influence can affect the vaso-motor system and cause a contraction of the vessels comparable to the effect of adrenalin and similar drugs. But to the empress the intervention of Rasputin seemed miraculous. . . .[7]

In addition Rasputin was very careful with the timing of his visits, arriving, whenever possible, when the attack was past its peak—if only, perhaps, because it would then be easier to induce the requisite contraction. However, Mr. Katkov's expression "hypnotic influence" begs certain questions. Rasputin did not practice hypnosis as such, did not put his subjects into hypnotic trances. A few years later he enrolled in a course on hypnotism, but little came of it, partly because the police had the hypnotist removed from the capital. Yet clearly he possessed the power to dominate, render his subject passive and relaxed, ready to surrender his will to the greater strength of Rasputin. If one chooses to term such a power hypnotism, in the broad sense of the word, then he was a hypnotist *par excellence*. However, the only person he ever put into a hypnotic trance was his future assassin, Prince Yusupov, who was capable of experiencing, or believing he had experienced, a wide range of sensations, and who was fond of acts of passive surrender to boot.

For Alexandra, then, Rasputin was much more than the source of unorthodox if effective medical treatment. If he could work

miracles he must be a saint, if he were a saint he possessed, along with the power to cure, the power to guide and bless. Moreover, he was a man of the people, the people who "really loved" their tsar and tsarina, who made up the genuine Russia; the Russia that was cut off from them by the court and the over-sophisticated inhabitants of St. Petersburg and Moscow, with their malcontent revolutionaries conspiring to turn the people against their leaders. To the bitter end the emperor and empress retained this naive belief in the natural goodness of their subjects, never understanding that repressed head of violence which was in them, despite the "red cockerel" of arson and peasant revolt which had swept across the Russian land throughout the revolution of 1905. It was indeed the revolution that was largely responsible for their ignorance. From 1905 to 1910 the imperial family remained in virtual isolation in Tsarskoe Selo, never leaving it apart from holidays cruising in the Baltic or visiting their Crimean palace. Nicholas only resumed regular visits to his own capital in 1910. Such isolation is to be explained by fear of assassination, which was a serious danger. The tsar was the prime terrorist target, and in the course of those years the security forces scotched a considerable number of plots laid against him.

There were other, emotional reasons for the couple's isolation. The tragedy of her son's health had helped to render Alexandra emotionally unbalanced. She took to spending more and more time "resting" in a state of exhausted nervous tension, and became still further estranged from court and public life.

Curiously, the notion of the tsar's isolation played an important part in the ideology of autocracy. The tsar as father of his people, "Master of the Russian land" and the Lord's anointed, was at one with his subjects; if only they could get to know one another. But the tsar was cut off from his people by the so-called *"srednostenie,"* or dividing wall; bureaucracy, aristocracy, intelligentsia all came between him and his truly loyal subjects. Thus by definition all kinds of political experts, ministers, and advisors were essentially unwelcome; they mediated between the tsar and his people, preventing any possibility of immediate contact. Rasputin would provide the dynasty's first immediate contact in 250 years—with results that proved unfortunate for all concerned.

Rasputin succeeded in penetrating the *srednostenie* and was

received in the palace as a friend—not simply brought in as a doctor when the tsarevich was ill. His visits were irregular and took place in the evening; when the emperor had finished working and listening to reports Rasputin would enter:

> They would kiss three times in the Russian fashion, and then would start to talk. He would speak to them of Siberia, of the needs of peasants, of his pilgrimages. Their Majesties would always discuss the health of the tsarevich and their current worries about him. When he withdrew after an hour's conversation with the Imperial Family he always left their Majesties cheerful, their souls filled with joyous hope. They believed the power of his prayers to the very end . . . No one could shake their faith in him.[8]

It would often happen that Nicholas and Alexandra would be accompanied by the rest of their family—the eldest of the four girls was then aged twelve.

Had they been in the habit of receiving strange visitors from the four corners of the empire, Rasputin's appearances at the palace would have been comprehensible, as the visits of their "token peasant." Yet this was anything but the case. Rasputin's visits, occasional though they might have been, came at a time when the tsar and tsarina were virtually without intimates of any kind. He was one of the very few persons who appeared before them at their personal invitation, and not in order to fulfill some aspect of imperial protocol.

The events of the last two years, from late 1906 to 1908, had changed Rasputin, altering his sense of purpose and accelerating a process that had already been working in him for many years. Ever since his early religious experiences he had been moving steadily away from conventional modes of God-seeking via the Orthodox church and the monastic path. Then came the first modest social successes of Kazan, when he saw the inside of a carpeted European-style house for the first time. Ever since then his life had moved increasingly in the direction of purely secular ambition. His piety, religious insight, and extraordinary powers seemed to have become a means to an end; not exactly the pursuit of material comfort, but of prestige, a place in the sun. Although he kept his peasant ways and, like the pilgrim mendicant he once had been, still gratefully accepted

notes of any denomination that might be proffered him, his sense of purpose took a new turn. He began to feel he had a politico-historical mission, professing to have become convinced that somehow his destiny was linked to the destiny of the nation and the ruling house. The part he was to play was precisely that of the man of the people who penetrated the *srednostenie*. The tsar, he would frequently observe, was "surrounded by injustice and by lies," his advisors cut him off from his subjects. What was needed was a simple, devout man who would act in the interests of tsar and people alike.

Rasputin's new sense of mission and of his own importance coincides with his making a strangely uncharacteristic bid for, of all things, respectability. In 1907, we recall, he changed his name from Rasputin to Rasputin-Novykh. *Novykh* is a plural form of the Russian *noviy,* meaning new. His daughter Maria says that the name started as a nickname given him by the young tsarevich, who, whenever Rasputin came to visit him, would clap his little hands, bounce up and down with eyes gleaming, saying *noviy noviy*—the new one. The story has an improbable ring to it. Clearly Rasputin felt that his name, with its connotations of debauchery, lacked class, and made an attempt to make it look more respectable. That at least is the obvious inference, and yet one may wonder, in that case, why he retained the family name at all, since no addition could have eradicated its unfortunate connotations. Another more interesting explanation would be that the addition represents a change in Rasputin himself, with his new-found sense of political and historic mission as unofficial Friend, guide and advisor to the emperor.

* * *

If it be true that a person's character is reflected in his choice of friends, the empress makes a lamentable showing. Two Russians would get close to her over the years; one was our Friend sent by God, a choice that, at least, indicates a total lack of political common sense on the part of a "Caesar's wife," the other, for all her Christian virtues, was an unctuous platitudinous mediocrity ill-equipped for the part that history would thrust on her. Anna Vyroubova's prominence can be seen as the reflection of a fundamentally limited, mediocre, petty bourgeois strain in the tsarina, the same cast of mind that inspired her to furnish her private apartments

by mail order from Maples. Anna Vyroubova was her only close woman friend and the only Russian who liked, indeed adored, the empress for herself, with a blind, unqualified devotion.

Born in 1884, she was the daughter of A. S. Taneev, the emperor's chief of personal chancellery—a post that gave him the tsar's ear and hence tremendous influence and power. It had virtually become a hereditary office, having been held by Taneevs under five sovereigns. Taneev was the last of his line—he had two daughters but no sons. However he "placed" his children wisely. The younger married A. E. von Pistolkors, son of Princess Paley, the second wife of Grand Duke Paul Alexandrovich, who was an uncle of the tsar and father of one of Rasputin's future assassins. Anna, the elder daughter, did better still, being one of the chosen few who penetrated the *srednostenie* and won the friendship of the last tsarina. By the end of the reign she was playing a significant part in the government of the empire, as an intermediary between the tsarina and Rasputin. Taneev, a careful and ambitious man, was content to stay in the background, but he benefited enormously from his daughter's success and manipulated her situation to his own ends. Many of the ideas that Anna impressed upon the tsarina most certainly came from her father. However, he was at pains to maintain that his hands were clean, and whenever he was accused of sophisticated intrigue he would go pale with rage. Some felt he was prone to protest too much. However, to the end he had the skill to cover his tracks, and we cannot determine the scope of his influence. Certainly he had no interest in power for its own sake; his interest was restricted to personal advantage. He played no political role as such, but remains an obscure, slightly dubious figure content to remain in the shadows.

The story of Anna Vyroubova's success begins in 1902 with a severe attack of typhus. At death's door, her parents arranged for John of Cronstadt to come and pray over her; she recovered and the cure encouraged her to become increasingly ardent in her beliefs. She attracted the attention of the tsarina and her sister Elizaveta Fedorovna, and in 1903 became maid of honour to the empress. Romantic beyond the usual limits, Anna soon grew very attached to Alexandra. As Sergei Witte put it, she "regarded the Tsarina rapturously, everlastingly sighing Oh, oh!"[9] Alexandra returned her

affection and singled her out for the altogether unusual honour of joining the family on their Baltic summer cruise. The tsarina began increasingly to confide in the young girl, because her faith in her loyalty was total; and loyalty, fierce, uncritical, unswerving, was the chief quality she demanded of a friend.

Anna Vyroubova was large and fair, with a slow, vacuous smile; an essentially loving character, she spoke slowly with a slight lisp, "as if she had a mouth full of porridge," the tsarina would say.[10] To a child she appeared "large with rosy cheeks, draped in furs; she looked at us children with an exaggerated kindness, warmth and we did not care for her much."[11] Contemporaries saw her differently: petite, with an innocent baby face and great appealing eyes, and so childish-looking that she seemed only fit for boarding school.[12] She was a remarkably limited person with little to offer beyond devotion. She was also susceptible to religious enthusiasm, and viewed the world in simplistic terms. As Pierre Gilliard wrote:

> With a sentimental and mystical nature Mme. Vyroubova conceived an unqualified adoration for the Empress, which was dangerous by virtue of its very intensity, which made for lack of clarity and sense of reality . . .
>
> Mme. Vyroubova had the mind of a child . . . and her judgment had not matured. Lacking intelligence and perspicacity she followed her instincts and for all this lack of consideration her opinions on people and things were never anything but absolute. A single impression was enough to make up her limited, childish mind; she classified people according to first impression as "good" or "bad"—which simply meant "friends" or "enemies" . . .[13]

Gilliard goes on to observe that she was incapable of holding any political views herself, and that she was a tool in the hands of unscrupulous intriguers—by which he means her father. The intimate nature of her friendship with the empress, her inclusion as a member of the family on the Baltic cruise, struck the *amour-propre* of many people who found the favour she enjoyed inexplicable. It says much for the love of ingenious gossip in court circles—a love which would play a different part in the latter years of Rasputin's life—that an explanation was soon found. It was widely rumoured that the relationship between the tsarina and Anna exceeded the bounds of natural affection, in other words that they were lovers.

Prewar Russia had a matter-of-fact readiness to accept unusual aspects of human behaviour that would never have been tolerated in London, New York, or even Paris. It was after all only ten years since the trial of Oscar Wilde, and yet the malicious glee with which the rumour was greeted is not pleasant. It was, moreover, widely believed in respectable circles. We have a guide to the gossip current in respectable circles in the shape of the diary of a general's wife, A. K. Bogdanovich. Her husband, E. V. Bogdanovich, born in 1839, and now blind, was nonetheless a person who was reputed to have huge influence in official circles, and was much sought after by leading political figures and court officials. He conducted the leading political salon of the capital, presided over by his wife, a quiet, very hospitable person, who was an excellent listener, but who seldom spoke. Instead she would record the gossip she heard in the diary she kept, largely for her husband's benefit. The diary reports that Anna and the tsarina kept up a lively amorous correspondence, and that on most nights, at 9:00 P.M. after dinner, when Nicholas left his family to work for two or sometimes three more hours, the two women would withdraw from the dining room, going through the mauve boudoir to the imperial bedroom.[14]

The rumours are preposterous; as preposterous as a later set which suggested that Vyroubova slept with Rasputin. Vyroubova had no interest in sex of any kind, and remained a virgin at least until 1918, when with great fortitude she submitted herself to a medical examination for the benefit of the Muravyev Commission, which duly established her virginity. Yet such rumours have a considerable interest. The fact that she was required to undergo such an examination suggests how convincing they appeared at the time. To anyone familiar with the source material such allegations of unnatural practices seem laughable, and yet they were believed. The imperial family were so remote, so little was known about them beyond a narrow circle of court officials and intimates, that people could believe the wildest rumours—that the tsar was an alcoholic, his wife a lesbian who later abandoned lesbianism to become Rasputin's lover and do her best to secure a German victory in World War One. The last tsar and tsarina made many mistakes; not the least of these was their belief that they could lead an ordinary family

life, enjoying the same degree of privacy as any other quiet, happily married and well-to-do couple, and still be emperor and empress of Russia.

It may have been in order to stop tongues wagging that Alexandra Fedorovna decided that the time had come for Anna to get married, though it is hard to believe that the empress would have understood what it was that tongues were wagging about. More likely she was indulging an older woman's love of matchmaking. Anna's first choice was Orlov, a widowed cavalry commander and a friend of the imperial family. Nothing came of this, either from Orlov's reluctance or because he was considered too old for her. Instead a marriage was arranged with a naval lieutenant, Vyroubov, and in 1907 the ceremony took place, attended by the entire imperial family.

From the start the marriage proved hopeless. Vyroubov was a sullen, difficult man. It was said that he had been severely unhinged by news of the Russian fleet's annihilation at Tsushima, and had never recovered his balance. Whatever the accuracy of that analysis, the man was certainly violent, unstable, fond of the bottle and, at least when it came to Vyroubova, impotent. To make matters worse he found his wife's friendship with the empress hard to accept, and was prone to jealous scenes. Matters came to a head when he returned unexpectedly to their little house on the outskirts of Tsarskoe Selo. The empress and Orlov were visiting Anna, and the house was surrounded by security guards who failed to recognise Vyroubov and declined to let him in. A violent quarrel ensued, and the marriage was dissolved almost immediately afterwards. Of course it was rumoured that Vyroubov surprised Anna and the tsarina in bed together. The whole sorry business left a mark upon the wretched girl which drew her even closer to the tsarina, reinforcing the mutual need for sympathy and understanding.

It was Anna's curiosity about her marriage prospects that had first brought her into contact with Rasputin. A meeting had been arranged by Grand Duchess Militsa, who told her that in this world there were to be found persons living lives of such saintliness that they achieved clairvoyant powers. Such a person was Rasputin: his prayers were so powerful that they could secure anything he asked

for. Vyroubova recollects the circumstances of that first encounter. Rasputin entered the room, kissed the grand duchess and was introduced:

> He was dressed in a simple black peasant's smock, and I was struck by his piercing, sunken deep-blue eyes. We all three began walking about the room. Rasputin asked me what I did, where I lived etc. I was very worried about my forthcoming marriage, as I scarcely knew my fiancé, so I asked him whether I should get married. Rasputin replied that he advised me to do so, but that the marriage would not be happy. The conversation took ten to fifteen minutes . . . I next met him a year later, and was overjoyed to see him. I wanted to visit him to discuss my unhappy circumstances and he gave me his address, he was staying with Olga Lokhtina. . . .[15]

Vyroubova, an essentially passive creature, credulous, affectionate, and enthusiastic, attached herself to the *starets* with unquestioning faith. To her he was a saint, and she continued to believe steadfastly in his saintliness to the end, never permitting evidence to the contrary, talk of drink, sexual excess and visits to the gypsies, to shake her devotion. Only when giving evidence to the investigating commission did she express reservations, appear detached from him and keep him at arm's length. But this was because the imperial family was still alive at the time and needed all the support she could provide. For all her silliness Anna Vyroubova remained loyal, and her performance before the commission was a magnificent display of phlegmatic stonewalling under pressure, a performance that deserves to be remembered.

Rasputin's attitude to his "Annushka" is curious. Although he would kiss and even caress her in public, he never made sexual advances to her, and was often heard to observe that Annushka was "not like that." Certainly he dominated her with his superior will and intelligence, but there was more than exploitation to the relationship. Curiously enough, they were alike in their modes of character assessment; they both relied on an immediate reading of personality. Rasputin seems to have understood that beneath Vyroubova's obtuseness and cloying sentimentality there was a pure, naive goodness. Utterly devoted to others, she sought nothing for herself. In the years to come he would lay great stress upon that

quality, urging the tsarina, in troubled times, to turn to her. He praised not her judgment but her goodness, and she seems for Rasputin to have been one of the true inheritors of the earth, a worthy companion for the tsarina because of moral qualities that were more important than purely cerebral characteristics such as intelligence and judgment.

* * *

Rasputin soon took possession of Vyroubova, applying his special brand of healing and comfort in the aftermath of her marriage. She in turn helped to give him an established situation in a small set of religiously inclined persons of society. Rasputin was now a welcome guest at Vyroubova's house in Tsarskoe Selo, and at her father's St. Petersburg residence, Number 4 Inzhenernaya Street. It was there that he established the hard core of his society following, devotees who would support him unswervingly to the end. The "inner circle" consisted of Vyroubova's sister and brother-in-law, the latter's aunt, Mme. Golovina, her daughter Munya and, curiously, ex-prime-minister Sergei Witte and his wife. Witte had been out of public life since 1905 but was still ambitious and eager to return. An intriguer by nature, he frequented the Taneev household for reasons of political ambition.

Rasputin began to move exclusively in this small world, leaving less exalted acquaintances behind him. He was content to be the centre of a tight circle of devout disciples. As yet, however, in 1908, his existence and the kind of company he kept were scarcely known; his was anything but a household name. We can indeed pinpoint the exact moment when his reputation begins to spread, from the following entry in the Bogdanovich diary, when its author first gets to hear of him. A friend had struck up acquaintance with Vyroubova's chambermaid, to whom he observed that her mistress was "a good and earnest woman":

> This made the girl laugh. She said she would show him photographs that would soon change his mind. It appears that Vyroubova is friends with some sort of peasant, and a monk to boot. And here she is photographed sitting beside him. [The friend] could not believe his eyes. The peasant has the stare of a wild animal, a repulsive, insolent appearance. Vyroubova does not display the

> picture, she keeps it in her Bible. Sadder still, the peasant is there when the empress calls on Vyroubova. Vyroubova has made him a blue silk shirt with her own hands. He often visits her in Tsarskoe Selo but has not yet been to the palace. [He had.][16]

Slowly but surely Rasputin was moving into the eye of a public for whom his existence as an intimate of Vyroubova, let alone the empress, was a scandal, a breach of etiquette so enormous that it posed a threat to the very fabric of the autocracy.

As Mme. Bogdanovich rightly anticipated, since Rasputin was close to Vyroubova he must soon grow close to the empress. Vyroubova would call upon her friend and protectress once or twice a day, and they would spend hours together in enthusiastic conversation, largely devoted to the remarkable qualities of Grigorii Rasputin. Moreover, the *starets* continued to enjoy the support of Theophanes, who was now a bishop, and had just been appointed personal confessor to the tsar and tsarina. At the latter's request Theophanes had even made a visit to Pokrovskoe to make further inquiries into Rasputin's background. It says more for the goodwill than the judgment of Theophanes, who would finally see through Rasputin in about eighteen months' time, that the report he submitted was altogether favourable. Once again it must have been a case of wanting Rasputin to be what he appeared—there was evidence enough of his sexual misdemeanours to be found in the capital without having to interrogate the village girls of Pokrovskoe into the bargain. Yet Theophanes preferred to ignore the evidence, since it might militate against Rasputin's potential sainthood. The capital was in need of someone to replace John of Cronstadt, the most celebrated holy man in Russia, who had died that year.

In the course of 1908 Rasputin saw more and more of the imperial family. By now he would exchange kisses with "Papa" and "Mama," as he referred to the emperor and empress, while they in turn addressed him as Grigorii. However, they would never actually kiss his hand; that is, would not quite treat him as an ecclesiastic of the highest rank.

Rasputin also spent a lot of time with the imperial children. The eldest, Olga, was twelve by now, and the girls must increasingly have welcomed anyone from the outside, who could talk to them of

the world beyond the iron fence surrounding the imperial park.

Although by all accounts the imperial daughters were all very likable, they differed in character. Olga was of medium height, with a fair complexion, chestnut hair, and a nose that she referred to touchingly as "my humble snub." She was intelligent, but in later years disappointed her French tutor by her failure to apply herself to her studies. The second girl, Tatyana, eighteen months younger than Olga, was the tallest and most elegant of the quartet, with rich dark chestnut hair and deep blue eyes. She was proud, reserved, polite, but a little domineering. The younger children referred to her, teasingly, as "The Governess." Maria, the third daughter, was chubbier, lazier, less lively and a little more wilful than her sisters, with light brown hair. The other girls, who knew their Hans Andersen, would say that she had eyes "as big as saucers." Anastasia, the youngest, was the tomboy of the family. Lively as quicksilver, she was a splendid mimic, and capable of wreaking considerable mischief. She was just turned seventeen when the Bolsheviks shot her.

Nicholas and Alexandra encouraged Rasputin to visit the nursery and tell the children bedtime stories. He would speak to them of his own childhood, of the animals and people of Siberia, or the sights he had seen on his travels, and his conversation held them spellbound, making it virtually impossible to get the young tsarevich to bed, unless Rasputin took a hand in matters. The first time that the Grand Duchess Olga met Rasputin, it was in the children's quarters. Her brother the tsar had invited her up there to meet a Russian peasant. She found the four girls and their brother, all in white pajamas, being put to bed by their nurses, while, in the middle of the room, stood Rasputin:

> When I saw him I felt that gentleness and warmth radiated from him. All the children seemed to like him. They were completely at ease with him. I still remember their laughter as little Alexis, deciding he was a rabbit, jumped up and down the room. And then, quite suddenly, Rasputin caught the child's hand and led him to his bedroom, and we three followed. There was something like a hush as though we had found ourselves in church. In Alexis's bedroom no lamps were lit; the only light came from the candles burning in front of some beautiful icons. The child stood very still by the side

> of that giant, whose head was bowed. I knew he was praying. It was all most impressive. I also knew that my little nephew had joined him in prayer.

Yet although she was impressed the grand duchess took an instant dislike to Rasputin when, over the evening tea, he began to ply her with personal questions:

> Was I happy? Did I love my husband? Why didn't I have children? He had no right to ask such questions, nor did I answer them. I am afraid Nicky and Alicky looked rather uncomfortable. I do remember I was relieved at leaving the palace that evening and saying "Thank God he hasn't followed me to the station" as I boarded my private coach on the train for St. Petersburg.[17]

(Rasputin's questions may have been impolite, but they were very much to the point, since the grand duchess was miserably unhappy in a marriage that had been arranged for her, and would end in divorce in a few years' time.)

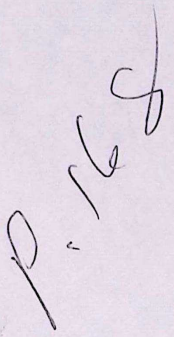
Whatever their aunt may have thought of him, Rasputin seems to have inspired very considerable affection in the other grand duchesses, if we are to judge from the remarkable letters they wrote to him around this time:

> My dearest friend,
>
> I often think of you, your visits and the way you talk about God. It is hard without you, there is no one to tell my troubles to . . . We often go to Anya's; every time I hope to meet you, my dear friend . . . Pray for me and bless me.
>
> Your loving Olga.

> My dear and true friend,
>
> When will you come? Are you going to be stuck in Pokrovskoe much longer? How are your children? . . . When we go to Anya's we all think of you. We would so like to go to Pokrovskoe. When shall we go? Please arrange it, you can do anything. God loves you so. And you say God is so good and kind that he will do anything you ask. So visit us soon, it is so dull without you. Mother is ill without you and it is so sad to see her ill. If you only knew how hard it is to see her ill. But you know because you know everything. I kiss your hand my dear friend I kiss your holy hand.
>
> God bless you, Tatyana.[18]

The tone of these letters is extraordinary in view of the fact that their authors were grand duchesses. They show us how Rasputin presented himself to them, and also indicate how dreadfully bored the girls were at Tsarskoe Selo. With his directness and lack of awe, Rasputin treated them as equals. He charmed, interested, and amused them. Stifled as they were by the claustrophobia of court and family, he brought them a breath of fresh air. They obviously liked him very much, and those who are disposed to find nothing but self-aggrandisement and evil in Rasputin should remember that he was good with horses too, and that animals and children are much harder to deceive than grown-up women or politicians.

CHAPTER 9



RASPUTIN did not always impress adults. When Prince Zhevakhov first met him in 1908 the initial impression he produced was lamentable. Rasputin seemed like a hunted hare, looking warily at his audience, who hung on his every word, however trivial, feeling it to be charged with inner significance, or nervously coming up to kiss his hand. Rasputin seemed uneasy, anxious not to say or do the wrong thing or otherwise alienate his admirers, whose actions and motives appeared to bewilder him. The admirers themselves were "convinced of Rasputin's holiness and for the most part they were a fine selection of the very highest circles, persons of the purest and noblest religious aspirations, whose only fault was that they knew nothing at all about what constituted a genuine *starets*."[1] However, this initial impression was rectified when Rasputin began to preach a sermon on the saving of one's soul, which Zhevakhov said he would recall to his dying day. As he started to preach Rasputin lost all his stuttering hesitancy, and spoke with a

quiet authority. He began by observing that there was little of interest in the lives of saints as such; more important was the way in which they achieved their sanctity, and how one might reconcile the quest for salvation with the secular life. The sermon, incidentally, was frequently interrupted by a hysterical Lokhtina howling protests of adoration, rather like the "Alleluia's" of vociferous Southern Baptists, which Rasputin choked off addressing her in the crudest language. He then continued:

> Salvation is in God. You can't take a step without God. And you will see God when you see nothing else about you. Evil and sin exist because everything hides God and you can't see him. The room you sit in, your affairs, your friends, all hide God from you, because you don't live or think according to Him. What then must you do to see God?
>
> After church pray and go out of town into the fields. Go on and on until Petersburg is out of sight and there is open horizon ahead. Then stop and think about yourself, how insignificant and helpless you are, and you will find the capital will shrink to an ant heap peopled by ants. What then becomes of your pride, power, riches and position? And you feel pitiful, unwanted, useless. Then you will look up and you will see God and feel with all your heart that the Lord God is your only father, that only God the Father needs your soul and only to Him will you surrender it. He alone will support and help you. Then you will know joy and that is the first step to God.
>
> You need go no further and return to the world, to the place you occupied before, cherishing what you have brought back with you like the pupil of your eye.
>
> The kingdom of Heaven is with you. Find God and live with Him and on every highday or Sunday, if only in your mind, leave your affairs and instead of paying calls or going to the theatre, go into the fields to God.

The author concludes:

> I have heard many sermons of great substance, but can remember none of them. The sermon Rasputin preached fifteen years ago I remember to this day. . . .[2]

The secret of Rasputin's power over his audiences resides in his talent for popularising God's truth, a talent that necessarily implies spiritual insight and experience. It is scarcely surprising that

enthusiastic women such as Olga Lokhtina, prone to states of religious ecstasy, should have believed him to be a saint; a belief that Rasputin never did anything to discourage.

* * *

However actively Rasputin might urge his hearers to seek God he never turned his own back upon the life of the flesh. Social success did nothing to check his sexual activity, indeed this increased in sophistication at the top of the range—society ladies—and in frequency at the bottom, with visits to cheap prostitutes. He would regularly gather them up in the streets or places of entertainment, and wearing the heavy gold pectoral cross which the tsarina had given him, take them home or to public bathhouses. He also made advances to ladies of markedly higher degree, mingling religion and sexuality in his own version of the *khlyst* heresy. These ladies too he would take to the bathhouse, sometimes to teach them lessons of humility and self-control, sometimes for other reasons. He had two ways of reconciling sex with spirituality, both of them deriving from the sects.

> All Rasputin's disciples sincerely believed in his power, his teaching and its basic rule that without sin there can be no repentance; repentance is pleasing unto God; in order to repent you must sin in the first place.[3]

Such was a contemporary journalist's interpretation of Rasputin's behaviour; he described it as a form of mysticism that derived from an up-dated sectarian heresy. Akulina Laptinskaya, for many years Rasputin's servant, provides a glimpse of him in action:

> He would be surrounded by his admirers, with whom he also slept. He would do his thing with them quite openly and without shame. He would caress them . . . and when he or they felt like it he would simply take them into his study and do his business . . . I often heard his views, a mixture of religion and debauchery. He would sit there and give instructions to his female admirers.
>
> "Do you think that I degrade you? I don't degrade you, I purify you."
>
> That was his basic idea. He also used the word "grace," meaning that by sleeping with him a woman came into the grace of God.[4]

* * *

He clearly managed to persuade his lovers that they could achieve grace and purification through orgasm; an arrangement that appears to have been satisfactory to all parties.

Rasputin took care to keep news of his mystico-erotic practices from Vyroubova and the court; just as he would always bathe and put on fresh clothes before visiting Tsarskoe Selo, however drunk he had been the night before. He possessed remarkable powers of physical recuperation, and could always make a presentable showing however thick his head. Thus it was not news of his scandalous behaviour that set many officers of the court against him from the start. The empress knew how unpopular he was, which is why she tried to make her acquaintance with Rasputin known to at least one aide-de-camp, a certain Sablin, in a roundabout way. She began by observing that there were persons who acquired extraordinary powers by virtue of their ascetic way of life, going on to remark that funnily enough there was just such a person to be found in the Russia of the present day, and not so very far from Tsarskoe Selo . . .[5] Sablin was in fact one of the few courtiers who would have anything to do with Rasputin, and even then he acted from a sense of moral obligation toward the imperial family. All other officials were unremittingly hostile, their attitude being summed up by the head of the tsar's security service, General Dedyulin. When Nicholas asked him his opinion of the *starets,* he observed: "He is an artful peasant, dishonest, intelligent and with certain powers of suggestion that he knows how to exploit."[6] Nicholas replied that Dedyulin was wrong, that Rasputin "was just a good, religious, simple-minded Russian. When in trouble or assailed with doubts I like to have a talk with him, and invariably feel at peace with myself afterwards."[7]

General Spiridovich enumerated Rasputin's enemies at court, and could find only one enthusiastic partisan; Rasputin was never successful with men. Perhaps unconsciously sensing in him a sexual challenge of a highly irregular kind—that a peasant should constitute a threat or be considered a rival was of course preposterous—they preferred to dismiss him as a shallow charlatan.

Hostility toward Rasputin in court circles increased steadily, and proved damaging. Since Nicholas and Alexandra operated on the principle of "those loyal to us will be loyal to our friends," criticism

of Rasputin increased the isolation of the couple. No one who criticised their Friend could be anything but an enemy. Spiridovich, incidentally, believed that the divisive effect of Rasputin's presence was much more damaging to the dynasty than any revolutionary activity. If ever a ruler needed regular contact with loyal supporters of judgment, ability, and a sophisticated political sense it was Nicholas II; fundamental differences of opinion on the increasingly important issue of Rasputin did much to deny him anything of the sort.

The hostility Rasputin inspired at court began to make his existence a public issue. To many eyes, that he should enjoy the imperial favour cast a slur upon the tsar and tsarina and brought the autocracy into disrepute long before anyone supposed that Rasputin possessed real power. It was sufficient that he should be known to be their intimate for their reputation to suffer gravely. As long as he continued to visit Tsarskoe Selo, Caesar and his wife could not be considered above suspicion, although it is hard to say of what they might have been suspected. From now on Rasputin was to arouse an ever-increasing and wide-spreading hostility, until to most Russians his very name became a synonym for the abomination of desolation.

Yet if we pause for a moment to consider the worst that Rasputin might be thought guilty of, at least in these prewar years before he and the tsarina were believed to be guilty of treason, the worst was not bad at all. He could be considered an adventurer, a womaniser who took advantage of the piety of others, also perhaps a false prophet. But this made him no worse than many other opportunists of the age, and a good deal better than some, such as Prince Andronnikov,[8] who made use of his private oratory to take advantage of young men in need of his protection.

Rasputin inspired indignation for two reasons. In the first place, as a peasant his success at court was considered a breach of protocol tantamount to sacrilege. Secondly, that he could behave as he pleased, and yet persuade people who should have known better that he was a saint, was an intolerable irritant to anyone who hated the sight of a charlatan getting away with it. The anger Rasputin aroused would always be out of proportion to his actions. Certainly he never did anything to warrant his assassination, not at least to Western eyes. However, it is significant that the Russian language

has some very powerful expressions to cover notions of shame and disgrace, *pozor, styd, sram*—and to many educated Russians Rasputin constituted the ultimate disgrace of their age.

Now, late in 1908, Rasputin first came under scrutiny from various police forces. The tsar's personal security service soon decided that he was no security risk and hence no concern of theirs. It was decided that his relationship with the tsar and his family was a purely private affair. Nevertheless the security services decided, with splendid lack of consequence, that the capital would be better off without him. General Dedyulin ordered a detailed investigation into his St. Petersburg life. At the same time the prime minister and minister of the interior, P. A. Stolypin, ordered the Okhrana, or secret police, to look into his Siberian background: all this despite the fact that Rasputin was a private citizen with no official standing of any kind.

The two services came up with a mass of information about his private life that did little credit to him as a man of God. Stolypin compiled a lengthy report, the first of many, which he brought to the tsar. Nicholas, in the words of General Spiridovich, took the matter laughingly and promised to see no more of Rasputin. The minister tried to take matters further and had the police draw up a decree which banished Rasputin from the capital, exiled him to Pokrovskoe and forbade his return for a span of five years.

As is occasionally the case in Russian history, especially in matters involving the bureaucracy, we now ease briefly into the realm of farce. It was necessary that someone serve the decree upon Rasputin. The secret police planned to do so one day in St. Petersburg as he got off the Tsarskoe Selo train. However, Rasputin had been forewarned. As the train came in he jumped out of the still-moving carriage, bolted across the station, leapt into a waiting car and drew quickly away from the policemen who were running helplessly behind. He drove straight to the palace of the grand duchess Militsa and took sanctuary there. The police kept the palace under twenty-four-hour surveillance, which continued for three weeks. Their vigil was brought to an end by a telegram from the governor of Tobolsk announcing Rasputin's arrival in Pokrovskoe. The policeman in charge of the operation reported to Stolypin, asking for permission to travel to Pokrovskoe to serve the decree

there. Stolypin felt that it was all becoming much too difficult and dismissed the officer with the resigned wave of a hand that Russians employ to signify that they have abandoned a struggle and are prepared to settle back and let things take their course.

* * *

Although Rasputin remained capable of preaching and healing to the end, by 1909 the search for God and personal salvation was no longer the prime concern that it had been some years before. Social and material success had made him more interested in power than in spiritual perfection—his principal motive henceforward was to defend and extend his power base. He cannot be said to have made a sudden change of direction, it was rather a case of a steady shifting in emphasis over the years. He had always been ambitious, and would retain his particular brand of sensitivity, but from now on worldly interests manifestly took precedence over other concerns. Even though he might have had his share of hair shirts, chains, and mortification of the flesh in the past, by 1909 there was little of the ascetic about him. He enjoyed material comfort, luxury even, for its own sake and because it showed the world what he had achieved.

Conspicuous display began at home. Rasputin never turned his back on Pokrovskoe. He paid regular visits, once or twice a year, spring and autumn, and continued to do so to the end. His social success had made him a wealthy man, by peasant standards at least. In 1908 he gave the village five thousand roubles for a new church and had a magnificent new *izba* built overlooking the river, furnished handsomely with expensive rugs and good furniture. He also maintained a staff of three or four young servant girls. He needed a relatively comfortable and well-cared-for establishment, because increasingly he tended to invite women from the capital to spend time with him at his home. Although he could scarcely be called a family man, he never neglected his dependants. His relationship with his wife might best be described as an understanding—although she was known to drag peasant girls out of her house by their plaits.[9] She was on the whole tolerant of Rasputin's misdemeanours but was capable, as we shall see, of giving his St. Petersburg lady friends a hard time when they stayed in her house. He also took care of his children. His son, Dmitri, was an

unremarkable young man of limited intelligence who remained content to be an uneducated peasant. His elder daughter, Maria, was different. She was intelligent and very teachable, and Rasputin arranged for her to have a private education, first in Kazan and then in a first-class St. Petersburg girls' school, the Steblin-Kamenskii Institute.

Pokrovskoe's most distinguished visitor in 1909 was Anna Vyroubova. She was sent there by the empress with two other ladies to report on Rasputin's home life and see whether he truly deserved the imperial confidence.[10] Rasputin's behaviour was not exactly exemplary. He paid crude court to one of his guests, and she returned with distinct misgivings as to his saintliness. Rasputin was never one to allow caution to interfere with short-term desires; he was incapable of self-restraint.

Lack of self-restraint is the keynote of one of the most complete of all accounts we have of his treatment of women. It comes from a Mme. Berlatskaya, a widow who also visited Pokrovskoe that year. The story begins with the easing of a soul. Mme. Berlatskaya was labouring under a massive sense of guilt, having recently left a faithless husband who had then committed suicide. Rasputin proved able to bring her comfort, relieving her of her guilt and enabling her to start going to church and receiving the sacraments again. He made her feel that she had been brought back from the dead, and she came to depend on him in the way that a patient depends upon her analyst, feeling herself in his power.

Power for Rasputin never went hand in glove with responsibility. He immediately began to abuse his hold over her. He persuaded her to accompany him to Pokrovskoe, and on the train to Tyumen he joined her in her sleeper and started to caress her intimately. At first she assumed that he was testing her powers of resistance but then, to use the distraught and exclamatory language of a silly but devout woman:

> Because he invited me to convince myself that it was as a man that he loved me, (Heavens, how can God help me to write all this down!), he obliged me to prepare myself as a woman, and began to do what a husband alone is permitted to do . . . having at the time what it is that men have when they are aroused . . . He forced me, caressed and kissed me and lay with me. He then did all he wanted,

> to the end. I suffered as never before, but prayed, giving myself entirely to God.

Afterwards she felt degraded, as she observed him making innumerable religious obeisances with a speed so unnatural that she found it impossible to pray. Next day he congratulated her on the way she had withstood his test, and purified herself of passion. He went on to say that it was his task in life to relieve everyone of their original sin.

> The next night he tested me again, becoming excited and obliging me to acknowledge his excitement. I had to conclude that I must be very dirty, impure and given over to passion since he clearly felt it necessary to subject me to perpetual testing.

When they reached Pokrovskoe Rasputin's wife was less than friendly. She bullied both the lady and the child who travelled with her, giving them little to eat. Rasputin continued to sleep with her on a mattress laid on the floor—until his wife removed it—and then on a thin floor covering, which he felt to be too uncomfortable for him to stay the entire night. However he persisted in making love to her, saying: "This is a heavy stone. I have never known one so heavy."

In Pokrovskoe he made another disciple wash his sexual organs in the bathhouse. "He was quite naked and ordered her in front of everyone and in their sight to wash the parts of his body that are covered up more than others." On the return journey Rasputin travelled second-class, while the woman and her daughter, who had exhausted their funds, were obliged to travel third. They went somewhat short of food, while he ate well and left them his scraps, which they shared.[11]

It is hard at first sight to reconcile such flagrant behaviour with the increasing prominence that Rasputin was beginning to enjoy, but in fact the behaviour is its direct reflection. As his position improved so did his self-confidence, the feeling that he could do as he pleased with anyone he pleased and get away with it. Such escapades became a personal index of his power and importance.

The autocratic tradition, most fully realised by Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Stalin, tends to be interpreted by less sophisticated Russians as the unrestrained exercise of the ruler's

will; one man's right to do as he pleases. *Khochu mogu,* "If I want to I can; there is nothing to stop me," is the way that a Russian peasant, with lifelong experience of the arbitrary rule of those set above him, interprets notions of freedom won through power. Rasputin conceived of his situation as the licence to do what he wanted, and every time he got away with it his self-confidence was further reinforced.

The self-confidence was justified. Day by day Rasputin's hold over the empress was increasing. As Aleksey grew older his attacks became more severe and more frequent. Hitherto his condition had remained a secret, but now that the sickly six-year-old was so often bedridden or carried around by his massive sailor, his condition became more common knowledge. Increasingly Alexandra Fedorovna looked to Rasputin to relieve his suffering and provide her with comfort and advice, while she herself displayed signs of increasing eccentricity and neurosis in the form of extreme religious fervour. As Spiridovich put it, she suffered a *crise de prières* and took to visiting public churches, in the company of Vyroubova, trying to slip unnoticed into the crowd, which was not easy for an empress. She was driven by that most preposterous of Russian beliefs, that true faith resides only in the people, a cast of mind reflected in her increasing interest in Russian saints, pilgrims, people of God; an interest shared by Vyroubova and encouraged if not actually instigated by Rasputin. Persons in her entourage who could observe her closely talked guardedly of "neurasthenia" and the change of life.

CHAPTER
10

THANKS TO Rasputin's personal hold over the tsarina, and to a slightly lesser extent over the tsar, his career now moved into a new phase. No longer a mere friend of the imperial family, Rasputin became a political force. It is ironic that his first purely political action should have been in favour of a man who was to become one of his most dangerous enemies, the monk Iliodor.

Iliodor, in 1909, was much more of a public figure than Rasputin, and a more obvious threat to authority. A brilliant orator and a religious fanatic, he had built up a huge following with his fulminations. According to these the times were decadent, the church corrupted by complacency and good living, and the tsar betrayed, since Russia had passed into the hands of Jews, freemasons, and revolutionaries who were destroying both it and the Christian faith. The tsar was still great but he was surrounded by wicked men. Accordingly Iliodor preached a doctrine of resistance to authority as a first step in the fight against the forces of the

revolution, corruption, and decadence, using a strange blend of monarchism and populism.

Iliodor had made his base in the southern town of Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad, now Volgograd), where his disciples had built him a huge monastery, so crudely constructed that to one observer it seemed like a stage set.[1] From there he preached against the impending revolution, planned by Jews, supported by the intelligentsia and all civil servants, governors and ministers, led by Prime Minister Stolypin, who had sold their souls to its spirit. The monastery possessed an effigy of the revolution in question in the form of a gigantic dragon, the hydra of revolutions. Iliodor would end his sermons by decapitating it. There was also a portrait of Tolstoy which every passer-by was required to spit on.[2]

Iliodor was manifestly preaching sedition, yet the authorities found him strangely difficult to touch. They made various attempts to arrest or restrain him, but his hordes of supporters, and the underground passages with which his monastery was amply provided, appeared for some time to put him beyond the reach of the law. Indeed the farcical efforts of Stremoukhov, the governor of Saratov, to control or arrest him, efforts which made it clear that he was powerless unless he moved with several regiments of troops, provided disturbing evidence of the weakness of the tsarist government in its latter years and its inability to impose its rule.

After a particularly inflammatory sermon in 1909 the tsar himself intervened, ordering Iliodor to leave Tsaritsyn and proceed to the Siberian town of Minsk. Iliodor declined, but on this occasion was successfully evicted from his monastery. His reaction was to protest to the capital in the hope of getting the decree reversed; a perfectly sensible response. As we shall se, the personal nature of tsarist government, whereby the autocrat was unbounded by the rule of law, meant that he was free to override any decree, including his own. Law as such had no absolute authority; it was up to anyone who fell foul of it to persuade authority that his was a special case.

This is precisely what Iliodor now set out to do, and to this effect he visited his old acquaintance Rasputin. He had taken up new quarters in the capital in the apartment of a financial journalist, G. P. Sazonov, a close friend of Iliodor, and another acquaintance of markedly right-wing stamp. In fact Sazonov was a turncoat. He had

originally been a radical, and a close friend of the assassin of Alexander II, Zhelyabov. However, at some time in 1905 he had taken a sudden and violent turn to the right. This helped him materially. He secured a huge government subsidy for his weekly paper, *The Economist,* and he was also granted a licence to start a bank, which he sold at great profit. He did all he could to exploit his relationship with Rasputin, and would take him to smart houses and show him off there. He also tried to use him to help put through a series of financial deals connected with an attempt to break the liquor monopoly held by the state, but nothing came of this.

Rasputin received Iliodor with open arms, taking great care to show the monk how important he had become. He introduced him to Witte, the Taneevs, and to Vyroubova. After Anna had knelt at his feet and kissed his hand he turned to Iliodor and observed with a characteristically boastful ring: "See how important I am, and what do you think of me now?"[3] He also presented him to the tsarina, who encouraged Rasputin to talk to Nicholas and persuade him to reverse the decree. Here is Rasputin's account of the interview. He asked Nicholas to allow Iliodor to return to Tsaritsyn:

> "But how can I do this, since I have already given my consent to his transfer to Minsk? I even signed the order."
>
> "You are the tsar. Act like one. You have given your word and you can take it back. When you threw Iliodor to the dogs to be devoured you signed your name like this, from left to right. All you have to do is to sign it from right to left. Then you will have acted like a real tsar."[4]

This account rings true in one important respect. Rasputin's advice to Nicholas in future years would often begin with the reminder that he was a tsar, with the power to do whatever he pleased regardless of others' opinion—power was a simple matter of *khochu mogu.* Whatever the true facts may be, Iliodor attributed the subsequent reversal of the decree to Rasputin. He made no secret of this, and it rapidly became public knowledge that in church affairs at least Rasputin was able, as no other courtier or personal advisor, to get his own way with the tsar.

That autumn Rasputin, in the company of Bishop Hermogenes, whom he had first met in the capital in 1904 and whose views were

very close to those of Iliodor, came to visit the monk in Tsaritsyn. After Iliodor had explained to his followers that Rasputin was a man of God, a prophet, a miracle worker, free of passion, blessed with grace and powers of exorcism, who enjoyed the friendship of the tsar and tsarina, his enthusiastic and often hysterical devotees warmed to him and gave him a tremendous reception, receiving him, in Iliodor's words, "like an angel of God,"[5] bowing before him and kissing his feet. This was the first time that Rasputin had experienced anything on this scale, and he enjoyed himself enormously. He sent an enthusiastic telegram to the tsar and tsarina describing his reception and suggesting that it would be a good idea if Iliodor were to be made a bishop. He preached a sermon on the theme, "Have faith and conquer all inner devils, enemies and unbelievers," and then announced that he would receive women one by one in the corner of the church where confessions were heard. A queue formed rapidly, and he foretold the future to his clients, the first recorded instance of his practicing clairvoyance.

Yet once again Rasputin proved incapable of self-restraint. When he called on Iliodor's disciples he could not resist kissing the younger and prettier girls with remarkable enthusiasm, while thrusting older women impatiently away. He never seems to have had much time for older women, and would frequently observe to them, "Mother, your love is pleasing, but the spirit of the Lord does not come down to me," implying that the spirit descended via his sexual organs.[6] He also spent rather too long, four hours, praying alone at the bedside of a strikingly beautiful young nun said to be possessed of the devil.[7]

Rasputin stayed in Tsaritsyn for a fortnight before setting off by river for Pokrovskoe in the company of Iliodor. He left triumphantly. With a 160-rouble tea service, and holding bunches of flowers, he and Iliodor set off in a flower-bedecked monastic carriage, accompanied by large crowds of women singing patriotic songs, carrying banners and icons, driving to the jetty where a steamer was waiting to take them to Pokrovskoe. The river journey took a good nine days, which Rasputin devoted largely to talking to Iliodor about himself and boasting:

> The tsar thinks I'm Christ incarnate. The tsar and tsarina bow down to me, kneel to me, kiss my hands. The tsarina has sworn

> that if all turn their backs on Grisha she will not waver and still always consider him her friend.[8]

He went on to describe how he carried the imperial children on his back, kissed and confessed the tsarina. Most of these claims were exaggerated; Nicholas and Alexandra had too much natural dignity to behave in the manner described. Rasputin was indulging in a particular Russian habit, *vranye,* or creative lying designed to make the liar appear interesting and important. Rasputin in his latter years was much given to *vranye,* but because it is more exciting to accept gossip than reject it, too much of what he said was taken at face value. However, all good *vranye* has its elements of truth, and Rasputin's observations about the tsar and tsarina are no exception. Alexandra Fedorovna did indeed remain unswervingly loyal, in the teeth of bitter opposition and an overwhelming body of evidence illustrating Rasputin's loose living. However this may reflect on her political judgment, it says much for her loyalty to her friend.

Rasputin himself made a serious error of judgment on his way to Pokrovskoe with Iliodor. Prone as he was to boasting he did not normally confide in people; he had lovers and hangers-on, not friends. He seems to have thought that in Iliodor he had discovered either a friend or a kindred spirit; certainly an admirer who appeared uncritically impressed by everything he had to say. Perhaps this was enough to persuade him to unburden himself, for he turned the conversation toward sex, telling Iliodor what a lucky man he was, since he could have any woman he wanted, and recounting stories of his own exploits, while flirting openly with women they met on the boat. Iliodor grew increasingly disturbed by Rasputin, finding it impossible to reconcile his behaviour with holiness. He was more disturbed still by what he found at Pokrovskoe. For example, there were two "suspect" serving girls there who tried to share Iliodor's bed with him one night. He subsequently concluded that they were trying to make a *khlyst* of him. In the course of his stay Rasputin continued his boasting, telling Iliodor that he had visited the bathhouse with Vyroubova and others; because, in his words, his penis did not function, he was free of passion. Iliodor was not so sure.

This kind of talk was dangerous enough, but Rasputin went

copies of the issue; an inept move that drew widespread attention to the whole affair, as other papers carried the story of the censor's action.

All kinds of rumours began to circulate about Rasputin. One of the more extravagant made him a tool of the great world conspiracy of the Elders of Zion. According to their "Protocols" the elders make use of the Freemasons as unwitting tools in their battle against the Christian church. It was alleged that the masons, at a conference held in Brussels in 1905, had discussed the possibility of using Rasputin to help bring down the Romanov dynasty. The story seems most unlikely, although there is the tantalising fact that Vyroubova's father was himself a mason.

More serious than wild rumour and even newspaper criticism, Rasputin was losing support in certain quarters. He no longer enjoyed the favour of the Montenegrins. There had been a steady cooling in their relationship with the tsarina after Anastasia's marriage to Grand Duke Nicholas, while Rasputin had transferred his allegiance to Vyroubova and hence the tsarina. Though by now the Montenegrins were of little use as friends they could still be dangerous enemies. More important still, responsible churchmen such as Theophanes had turned from him. Theophanes had had his doubts for some time. He had long been aware of Rasputin's capacity for sexual misdemeanour and had repeatedly begged him to give up that kind of "healing," as Rasputin insisted on referring to it. He now became convinced that Rasputin was not the holy man he gave himself out to be, that he was indeed positively evil. He wrote to Iliodor, who still supported Rasputin, imploring him to defend him no longer, not to be taken in by his protestations, and to recognise him for what he was, a true disciple of the devil.

Theophanes was the first of many to attack Rasputin directly. When his attacks seemed to get him nowhere he asked the tsar to give him an interview. Nicholas declined. He would always do all he could to avoid confrontation of any kind on the issue of Rasputin, however overwhelming the evidence. His refusal to listen may be partly explained as the obstinacy of a weak man, but it is also the reaction of a man terrified of his wife. Besides, it would have taken a strong man indeed to listen to those who urged him to send away the only man in Russia who could alleviate the suffering of his son.

Instead of receiving Theophanes, Nicholas arranged for him to see the tsarina and Vyroubova.

Theophanes spoke against Rasputin for over an hour, accusing him of being in a state of *prelest'*—having given way to spiritual temptation—an ascetic term used to describe one of the pitfalls that threatened Orthodox hermits and holy men. Alexandra countered his arguments with quotations from devotional works evidently prepared in advance. The interview got Theophanes nowhere. Anyone bold enough to criticise Rasputin to the tsarina's face could be sure that he would no longer retain the imperial favour. She was obviously fond of Theophanes, however, for in his case it was eighteen months before he was disgraced; reappointed to the bishopric of Taurida in Astrakhan—whose climate was not at all suited to the frail and potentially tubercular Theophanes.

Rasputin was well aware that he was making new enemies daily, and that it was his private life that had turned once loyal supporters against him. Unfortunately for anyone who would like to think of him as the embodiment of a certain Dostoevskian Russian stereotype, the Holy Sinner, Rasputin does not seem to have experienced, or at least expressed, remorse of any kind when considering his behaviour. The nearest he ever came to remorse was alcoholic depression. When acquaintances taxed him with stories of his disgraceful doings he no longer even bothered to deny them. "Half the tales are lies of course, but as for the rest, we are all human after all," was his usual response.[10] His dominant reaction was not remorse, but fear; the fear that he would no longer get away with doing as he pleased while remaining close to the imperial family. He once confided in Iliodor that he was terrified that news of his sexual activities might reach the tsarina. He dreaded to think what he would do if she "kicked him out" *(ot sebya shugnet)*. Rasputin was confronted with a problem: how to reconcile what he wanted with what he ought to want. The problem was purely practical, conscience had no part to play. Anyone criticising or disapproving was by definition an enemy, to be done down by whatever means possible. In the meantime he would do all he could to keep his position secure while continuing to act as he pleased.

He still enjoyed the increasingly reluctant support of Iliodor, and, more important, of Bishop Hermogenes, Iliodor's chief protec-

tor. Hermogenes himself was something of a demagogue and a militant right-wing patriot, member of the Union of the Russian People and a virulent anti-Semite. A huge, fleshy man with delicate features and a high-pitched voice, it was rumoured that he was a secret castrate. Now, in 1910, he still maintained his support for Rasputin. "He is a servant of God, it is a sin to judge him and think critically of him," he observed to Prince Zhevakhov.[11] Rasputin, who needed all the help he could get, tried to turn this support to advantage in an attempt to give himself official status. One day Iliodor was asked to call on Hermogenes and there, in the bishop's study, he was amazed to find Rasputin wearing a cassock and a priest's pectoral cross—to neither of which he was entitled. He was, according to Iliodor, simpering horribly. It appeared that someone, almost certainly the tsarina, had suggested to Hermogenes that Rasputin should be prepared for the priesthood. The idea was initially Rasputin's: "They'll make me a priest and I'll become the tsar's confessor and I'll stay at court for ever,"[12] he had boasted. Now that Theophanes was in disgrace the way was indeed open for Rasputin to succeed him as the tsar's confessor. Accordingly Hermogenes ordered an allegedly reluctant Iliodor to prepare Rasputin for ordination; instruction was to begin at once. Unfortunately, it became clear almost immediately that Rasputin was incapable of any concentration. Unable to follow the text of the most basic prayers, consistently slipping in his own variants, his mind wandered and he soon began to daydream.

At the end of the second day of instruction it was obvious that Rasputin had no capacity for learning by heart—the first and most important requirement for the priesthood. This did not prevent him from having himself photographed as a priest, cassock, pectoral cross and all—although in later years he would deny that he, an illiterate peasant, had ever attempted to become anything of the sort.

He knew perfectly well that his escapades had come to the attention of Stolypin, and now made an attempt to convince that minister that he was harmless. He asked to see him, and it says much for his importance that the minister agreed to give him an audience, and took the trouble to ensure that the head of the tsar's security forces, Kurlov, attended the interview. Kurlov had never met Rasputin before. He saw:

> A thinnish peasant with a dark red wedge-shaped beard and intelligent piercing eyes. He sat by Stolypin at his big desk and started to point out that they were wrong to consider him a suspect character, for he was the most peaceful and innocuous of men. The minister said nothing, and it was only when Rasputin was about to leave that Stolypin observed that provided he behaved himself he could rest assured that the police would leave him alone. I then told the minister what my impressions were. I felt Rasputin was a certain kind of cunning Russian peasant, who knew what he was doing. He did not strike me as a charlatan. "All the same some day we'll have to reckon with him," observed Stolypin.[13]

Stolypin ordered a second report on his activities to be drawn up:

> It was largely concerned with his private life, a series of drunken and sometimes scandalous and riotous celebrations, a number of sexual liaisons and, recently, dealings with dubious entrepreneurs and backers trying to turn his influence to advantage. Against the advice of his inferiors Stolypin presented the report to the emperor who heard him without saying a word, and with characteristic obstinate calm suggested Stolypin proceed to the business of the day.[14]

Nicholas had too much dignity ever to show his feelings, and it is hard to say precisely what he thought of Rasputin at any time. As far as we can tell he began by having a very high opinion of him, which came to be qualified in the light of criticism and gossip. To the end he valued the calming effect he had upon the empress. "Better one Rasputin than ten fits of hysterics a day," he once observed in an unguarded moment. To the end, he would often act upon Rasputin's advice, as relayed by Vyroubova and the empress, and this only partly out of the fear of a hen-pecked husband and the resignation of a Job. Even now, though he began to realise that the *starets* was less than perfect, he treated unsolicited criticism such as Stolypin's report as a grave breach of etiquette, so grave that he could only pretend that it had not taken place; Rasputin was a personal friend of the family and beyond his minister's proper concern.

In the meantime the tsarina demonstrated that Rasputin still retained her confidence. Inquiring after his family she learnt that his mother and younger daughter were spending some time in the capital expressly to visit the elder girl, Maria, who was at school

there. As a mark of her favour she arranged to have the girls presented to her, and to her own daughters, over tea. Maria Rasputina first heard of the plan when Anna Vyroubova telephoned the flat and coyly invited her and her sister to take tea with her, since a certain family was anxious to meet them. The two girls duly presented themselves at Anna's little house, and waited anxiously in her drawing room, with its elegant, delicate furniture. Suddenly the door opened and the empress came in, followed by her four daughters chattering gaily. It was clear from the way she moved that she was a regular visitor to the house. Nervously Maria started to drop a curtsey, head bowed in the manner appropriate to greeting royalty, but royalty swept up to her, took her by the hand, and raised her up to give her a resounding kiss. She then greeted her sister Varvara with an equal warmth, telling the girls how fond she was of their father and what a remarkable man he was. For all her two years of schooling in the capital, nothing had prepared Maria to deal with such situations. She froze, tongue-tied, and then, overcome by the need to say something, anything, blurted out: "Is it true, little Mother, that you have hundreds of servants?" The empress smiled at her inept question and replied, "Yes, my child . . . I have lots of servants of course, but I could do without them if it were necessary."[15]

Maria Rasputina's portrait of the empress is strangely convincing, and touching too. She appears kind, generous, enthusiastic and relaxed, doing her best to put the peasant girl at her ease. When the pressures of public worry and private grief were absent the tsarina could be warm, cheerful, and a good friend to the weak.

Soon the Rasputin girls found themselves talking easily with the grand duchesses. Maria was almost the exact contemporary of the eldest girl, Olga Nicolaevna, who quizzed her eagerly about life in the capital, and at Pokrovskoe. The girls seldom had the chance to meet anybody of their own age, other than suitable companions with comparable ways of life. The Rasputin girls were different:

> Strictly guarded as they were, more or less prisoners at Tsarskoe Selo, going out only on official occasions, the life of a girl of fourteen living in the town, who went to school with other children, and once a week went to the cinema, sometimes to the circus, seemed to them the rarest and most enviable of wonders.[16]

This must surely have been the most extraordinary tea party ever to have been held in Imperial Russia. Even the most relaxed interpretations of protocol would have found it totally unacceptable for peasant girls to take tea with imperial grand-duchesses and converse freely with them about the wonders of the weekly cinema. Yet, by all accounts, the occasion seems to have been a success, although as far as we know the experiment was not repeated.

Although he could sense storm clouds gathering, Rasputin continued to take appalling chances, possibly because the tsarina's marks of favour had convinced him he could not be touched. Alexandra Fedorovna had encouraged her daughters' nurse, M. J. Vishnyakova, to go to Pokrovskoe for a few weeks' rest, in the company of three other women including Olga Lokhtina. One night Rasputin forced his way into her room and seduced her. On her return she told the empress and also mentioned that on the journey Rasputin had slept with one of her travelling companions, Z. Manstadt. The empress simply refused to believe her, concluded that Rasputin's enemies had induced her to lay false charges against him, and sent her on indefinite leave of absence. The fight against Rasputin was then taken up by a second member of the imperial household, the children's governess, S. I. Tyutcheva, a daughter of the famous nineteenth-century poet. She had long resented the position Rasputin enjoyed with the imperial family and now tried to use the Vishnyakova incident to discredit him for good, protesting vociferously about his behaviour to all and sundry. She was an obstinate, self-important, and silly woman who had already made herself less than popular in the family by taking a hard line on discipline, insisting that certain types of conversation should not be held in front of her charges, and attempting to override parental views with which she disagreed. Her domineering nature had won her the reputation of "a man in skirts."[17] Curiously, Rasputin was not the first peasant that she had had dealings with. During the Japanese war she had worked as a bookkeeper in a welfare organisation run by the tsarina's sister. There she had befriended a peasant in the dispatch department, taken him into her office, and later got him the job of carrying an archbishop's mitre in religious processions. Such was her attachment to her protégé that eyebrows were raised when she was appointed governess to the imperial

family.[18] It is perfectly possible that Rasputin may have antagonised her by not paying her the proper kind of court. In this case she overplayed her hand, offering a series of wildly exaggerated accounts of Rasputin's behaviour. She accused him of going unchaperoned into the bedrooms of the grand duchesses, and treating them with unforgivable familiarity which had distinctly sexual undertones. The tsar summoned her and heard her out:

> So you are another who does not believe in Grigorii Efimovich's holiness . . . And what would you say if I told you that through all these difficult years it is only thanks to his prayers that I have survived?[19]

Nicholas went on to observe that he did not believe a word of what she had to say, could only assume that she had been driven by malice and informed her that she was dismissed.

The next attack upon Rasputin was more serious; it happened by chance and came from a disinterested and unexpected source. Iliodor had returned to Tsaritsyn unrepentant, and continued to preach seditious sermons against the authorities, both secular and ecclesiastic. The Holy Synod ordered him to leave Tsaritsyn and take himself to the monastery of Novosil in the government of Tula in central Russia. Iliodor refused and called once again upon the support of the tsar.

Nicholas reacted weakly. He felt sympathy for Iliodor, and was unwilling to enforce the Synod's order. He was reluctant to intervene in church affairs, equally reluctant to let Iliodor do as he pleased. Accordingly he instructed one of his aides-de-camp, Mandryka, to proceed to Tsaritsyn and attempt to *talk* Iliodor into obeying the Synod's order.

Mandryka was received in Tsaritsyn with great ceremony, as crowds fell to their knees before him imploring him to allow Iliodor to remain among them. Eventually Mandryka persuaded Iliodor to proceed to Novosil. While in Tsaritsyn he called to see a relative, the mother superior of a local convent and an admirer of Rasputin. It transpired that she was in St. Petersburg at the time, but Mandryka was well received by the nuns, who told him all about Father Grigorii, the emperor's favourite. The discovery of Rasputin's existence came as a total shock to the aide-de-camp. He was shocked

still further by a telegram they showed him from Rasputin to the mother superior. It had been sent from Pokrovskoe:

> A relative of yours is coming to Tsaritsyn on a mission that concerns us. Use your influence. Grigorii.

Although Mandryka moved in court circles he had never even heard of Rasputin before, and was most disturbed by what the nuns told him. He made further inquiries and discovered that the emperor's favourite was reputed to be a sectarian and a compulsive womaniser, who used a number of techniques, from exorcism to rape, to get what he wanted. Mandryka returned to St. Petersburg determined to tell the imperial couple everything, drawing up a long report of the holy man's misdeeds.

On Shrove Tuesday 1911 he delivered his report to Nicholas. It covered Rasputin's sexual activities, his probable sectarianism, his disgraceful character, and his attempt to influence Mandryka through the mother superior. Anyone of any decency could only be appalled at the position that Rasputin was permitted to enjoy, and of course Mandryka could only assume that news of his true nature had been kept from the tsar. "It is even rumoured," he concluded, "that this man enjoys the favour of Your Majesty." At this point Mandryka, who was a highly strung person, broke down and sobbed. The tsar fetched him a glass of water, thanked him and permitted him to withdraw.

Some days later the mother superior sent for Mandryka and drily observed that he had ruined his career. Rasputin had not been invited to the palace since his report. Not only had Mandryka slandered a good man, he had made an implacable enemy. In the event Mandryka did not ruin his career; he was made governor of Novgorod in 1914, but whereas he used to lunch regularly with the imperial family, he was never invited to eat with them again.

Rasputin's daughter suggests that yet another scandal took place at this time. Her father had, she reports, made the acquaintance of a Finnish dancer. One evening he spent some hours in a restaurant with her before returning to her house for a party, which rapidly turned into an orgy. Rasputin, falling down drunk, had his photograph taken surrounded by naked women.[20] Shortly afterwards he was given a set of prints and told that he must either leave town

or have them shown to the tsar. Rasputin allegedly gave the matter a lot of thought and decided there was only one thing he could do. He took the prints to Tsarskoe Selo and asked to see the tsar. He showed him the photographs and explained that he was being blackmailed. Nicholas inspected them carefully and then observed with a sigh that Rasputin had been foolish, yielded to temptation, and allowed himself to be exploited by subversives and revolutionaries who would stop at nothing to discredit the monarchy. In the circumstances it would indeed be best if he were to leave the capital for a time.

There is no intrinsic reason to doubt Rasputin's daughter, unless it be that the photographs were never actually used to discredit Rasputin, even though he did not stay away for long. If Nicholas did see such pictures he could no longer have been in any doubt as to Rasputin's frailties, and the fact that he continued to enjoy the imperial favour can only suggest that the hold he had over Nicholas and Alexandra was very strong indeed, that they were almost literally in his power. One also has to assume that the photographic techniques of the age were able to do justice to a late-night orgy—either by use of flash powder or by ensuring that Rasputin and his bevy of lovelies kept still long enough to permit a protracted time exposure.

CHAPTER

11

p. 193

By early 1911 Rasputin's stock was low. The evidence against him had accumulated steadily over the past year, and while Nicholas might have been able to dismiss Tyutcheva's charges as wild exaggerations, he was bound to take the tearful Mandryka much more seriously. According to Spiridovich he ordered Rasputin to appear no more at Tsarskoe Selo, or, as his daughter would have it, advised him to make himself inconspicuous for a while.

Rasputin decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The idea was probably suggested by Taneev, in order to give the appearance that he was seeking to expiate his misdeeds. This is not to say that the pilgrimage was all a sham. Rasputin was capable of reconciling attitudes and values that the Western mind might consider incompatible. He would not have left the capital unless he had had to. He did not feel an overwhelming sense of remorse. Yet since he had to go, and a visit to the Holy Land appeared well advised, why not allow the ritual of pilgrimage to do its work upon

his inner being? In other words, there was no necessary contradiction between the purely political motives for his journey and the pilgrim's cast of mind which he adopted on it. There is nothing to say that someone who enters a church to escape a thunderstorm may not pray devoutly once inside.

Such an interpretation of his attitudes is speculative, yet all one knows of the man suggests that there was more to him than hypocrisy and opportunism. The contradictions of his behaviour stem less from hypocrisy than from solipsism, the belief that he alone in the universe was really real. He had a tremendous sense of ego; anything he might do was right by definition simply because he wanted to do it; he was incapable of being at odds with himself. This is a trait of character that he shares with political demagogues, martyrs, fanatics, and founders of religions, a trait that can make great men or warped eccentrics. Rasputin was no warped eccentric, but the increasingly trivial nature of his ambition, which became reduced to that of a politically minded courtier with powerful appetites, ensured that he fell well short of any kind of greatness; the man has been overshadowed by his myth.

Rasputin's pilgrimage invites such consideration of his motives because it gave rise to his only "book": "My thoughts and reflections; a short description of my journey to the Holy Places and the meditations on religious matters to which they gave rise." The work consists of some twenty thousand words of travel notes and pious reflections, which are designed to convey a sense of Rasputin the simple man of God, moved by sun, sea, and the Holy Places, to profess a naive and natural piety. The book could never have been written by Rasputin, who was incapable of producing anything longer than a scrawled postcard. It consists of impressions that he dictated subsequently to Olga Lokhtina, and which must have been carefully edited. They were initially intended to impress the tsar and tsarina, and to suggest that his pilgrimage had reformed him. Since he was capable of such sincere religious experience, rumours of his scandalous behaviour could safely be discounted. The notes had their desired effect upon Alexandra. In the last year of Rasputin's life, when criticism of him was at its fiercest, the notes were published, in a deluxe edition and at the tsarina's instigation, in an attempt to prove that Rasputin was not the monster that rumour would have him be.

We seldom hear Rasputin's own voice in these notes. They have a stilted literary style that lacks all the rich, idiomatic flavour of his speech, or the obscurantism of his cabled spiritual exhortations. Yet although the dominant tone is a somewhat self-conscious and unctuous display of piety they occasionally strike the kind of simple note that so impressed Prince Zhevakhov when he heard Rasputin preach:

> The sea brings comfort with the utmost ease; when you get up in the morning and the waves talk, dance and delight. And the sun shines on the sea, as if it were rising oh so gently, and then your soul forgets all mankind and looks at the light of the sun, and joy lights up in your heart, and the soul senses the book of life and the wisdom of life—beauty indescribable! The sea wakes you from the dream of life's worries, you think a lot, of your own accord, without effort.[1]

There are flashes of humour too. He condemns the high-ranking Orthodox ecclesiastics because they lack spiritual poverty, which is the only quality respected by the masses. He also points out that many monks had grown fat on high living in their monasteries:

> Of course for God all things are possible. There *are* monks that are born fat; health is a gift of God, and some of them are bearers of the divine spark—that I do not deny.[2]

The writings preach a faith based on naivete, simplicity, and universal love—an essentially popular faith that emphasises the quality of human feeling, love being more important than intelligence or ritual, since only through universal love could man attain faith:

> If you love you will never kill; all commandments are subservient to love, it contains all wisdom, greater than Solomon's, and love alone is real, all the rest is scattered fragments, through love alone can heaven be reached.[3]

The writing possesses one quality characteristic of Rasputin. It is highly immediate, and has no sense of overall plan; it picks up one point or topic after another, always dwelling on the particular and lacking in perspective. Immediately after the passage just quoted he points out that better arrangements should be made for poor pilgrims

travelling to the Holy Land. Precisely the same concern for ordinary people, together with a tendency to concentrate on the trees at the expense of the wood, would characterise the advice he was to give the tsarina on the conduct of the Great War. As for the religious content of the notes, they manage to project a powerful image of faith founded in simplicity and love. Whatever Rasputin's motives may have been in compiling the notes, he must have possessed a certain degree of spiritual insight to have been able to concoct them. Even if he were a charlatan, he had the ability to produce an uncanny imitation of the real thing.

* * *

Rasputin left Russia at the end of February and did not return till the last week of June. He kept in touch with the imperial family, and with Iliodor, largely by telegram. Iliodor had challenged authority yet again. He had escaped from the Novosil monastery, and eluding elaborate attempts to apprehend him, had shut himself up in his Tsaritsyn stronghold, in defiance of Governor Stremoukhov, who had laid siege to the place. There was not much else Stremoukhov could do; he recognised that to capture Iliodor would require a full-scale military action which would have grave consequences for the stability of the province and might well prove unsuccessful in the end. The monk, who had been joined by Hermogenes, was defended, in the words of the governor, "By a fanatical mob of howling, hysterical women, and men, tough barefoot peasants, who shook their fists and swore to kill anybody who tried to touch him."[4] Their loyalty was in part to be explained by a widespread belief, which Iliodor did not discourage, that he was the illegitimate brother of Nicholas II by a father of the purest Russian blood. It had been 150 years since a tsar had had a drop of Russian blood in him. A despairing Stremoukhov felt his was a world in which anything could happen: "Who can guess at all the possibilities in our country, of possibility unlimited?"[5]

The governor, having reached the limit of his authority, went to the capital to consult Stolypin. There he discovered that Iliodor and Hermogenes still enjoyed the obstinate support of the tsar, who believed in Iliodor's character without altogether approving of his actions. Stolypin's response to the breakdown of law in Tsaritsyn was extraordinary, demonstrating the frailty of the administrative

machine, a frailty that began at the top. He suggested that, in the interests of law and order, Stremoukhov should proffer the tsar his resignation in an attempt to bring him to his senses. Stremoukhov agreed, and said he would use the opportunity to tell Nicholas the truth about Iliodor, Hermogenes, and also Rasputin; he produced a photograph of the three of them sitting together. Stolypin agreed.

Next morning Stremoukhov received a telephone call in his hotel room. The caller did not identify himself, but the voice was clearly Stolypin's. It told him not to talk about "the third man" in the photograph when he was at Tsarskoe Selo. The caller then hung up. Nothing can give a clearer indication of Rasputin's prestige. He had no position of any kind, was abroad and under a cloud, and yet the prime minister and minister of the interior felt bound to advise a junior not to discuss Rasputin with the tsar, giving his instructions anonymously and not even daring to mention Rasputin by name.

Nicholas paid no attention to Stremoukhov, other than to reject his resignation; this was largely because Rasputin had been in touch, urging that Iliodor be allowed to remain. Shortly afterwards the Holy Synod sent a telegram to Iliodor: "In consideration of the petitions submitted by the people the tsar condescends to permit the priest Iliodor to return from Novosil to Tsaritysn."[6] Nicholas had relented. It was a triumph for the forces of disorder.

Rasputin made his way back through Russia in the summer of 1911, arriving in Tsaritsyn late in June. According to Iliodor he was no longer given a spectacular welcome by admiring crowds. He was annoyed to see copies of a photograph he had had taken with Iliodor and Hermogenes—the one that the governor had wanted to show the tsar—which had been mutilated to cut him out. According again to Iliodor, when he left he insisted on being given an elaborate send-off and expensive presents. From Tsaritsyn he travelled on to Saratov to call on Hermogenes, and there too he was not received with any remarkable warmth.

It was as if Rasputin, by calling on Iliodor and Hermogenes, was trying to drum up ecclesiastical support. This would also account for his championing of Iliodor over the last two years. He was not usually prone to fighting other peoples' battles, not, at least, to fighting unrewarded. However, now even these eccentric and unreliable churchmen were turning against him.

Rasputin had courted their support on his way to the capital,

uncertain of the reception he would get there. He need not have worried. As Stolypin had already understood, scandals or no scandals, he had become a force that politicians had to reckon with. His return from the Holy Land marked the moment when he began to acquire a measure of real political influence.

By the middle of 1911 Stolypin had lost the support of Nicholas, partly, it has been suggested, because of his continuing opposition to Rasputin. Matters had come to a head when he failed to get through an administrative reform establishing elements of local government in the western provinces. Stolypin offered his resignation, but insisted that the tsar suspend the chamber and enact the legislation by decree. This was duly done, but Stolypin no longer enjoyed the imperial confidence. He could tell from various marks of disfavour—no place on the imperial train on a journey south to Kiev, for example—that politically speaking he was doomed.

The tsar made or dismissed ministers at his discretion, and especially in later years appointments were determined by increasingly peculiar criteria; less concern was displayed for administrative competence and political experience, and more, too much in fact, for that nebulous concept known as "character," which may have a proper part to play in a headmaster's choice of school captain, but which should not be used to determine the right persons to administer the Russian Empire. Rasputin benefited enormously from this bias; of administration and politics he knew nothing, but he and his piercing eyes could read character second to none. Now for the first time, Nicholas actually called upon these gifts. In his search for a new minister of the interior he invited Rasputin to proceed to the town of Nizhny Novgorod and "look into the soul" of its governor, A. N. Khvostov, a young man whose ambitions outstripped his abilities.

Rasputin duly proceeded to Nizhny in the company of Sazonov, and asked Khvostov for an interview. The governor, understandably bewildered by the intense and self-confident peasant, gave him short shrift despite Rasputin's declaration that he had been sent by the tsar to weigh him up for a new and responsible position. It was only after Rasputin left that the terrible possibility dawned upon Khvostov that this Gogolian Government Inspector might have been the real thing. Knowing his Gogol well enough to remember that it was the postmaster's reading of the mail that revealed Khlestakov to

be an imposter, he ran an immediate check on all outgoing letters and telegrams, only to discover that Rasputin had indeed wired Tsarskoe Selo: "He is smart *(shustyer)* but still very young," it read. A few weeks later he was summoned to Nicholas's presence and given a cool reception.

It was not thanks to Rasputin alone that Khvostov failed to get the job. Stolypin's replacement as prime minister, Kokovtsov, had told Nicholas that to make Khvostov a minister would be tantamount to jumping off a cliff—which would not prevent Nicholas from appointing him some four years later. Yet that Nicholas should have made such use of Rasputin in the first place almost defies belief. It can only be explained by a mystic faith on the part of the tsar in Rasputin as a person of exceptional intuitive judgment, someone who could tell at a glance whether a man was "good" or "bad," plumbing the depths of his soul and detecting those qualities which an adroit politician could always conceal from the scrutiny of a tsar, to whom no one told the truth. Rasputin would be Nicholas's "eyes" and help him spy out what would otherwise remain hidden.

Soon afterwards Rasputin displayed visionary power of a different kind. From Nizhny he had gone to Pokrovskoe for a short stay, to be joined there by Vyroubova, and from Pokrovskoe had travelled on to Kiev, where the tsar and tsarina were to celebrate the inauguration of local government in southwest Russia.

It was arranged that Rasputin would stay with the leader of the local branch of a moderate monarchist organisation—"moderate" meant that, unlike the Union of the Russian People, it did not take its defence of the autocracy to the point of lynching Jews. The prospect of Rasputin's stay made the leader nervous; for, as he put it, he was a married man. He was pleasantly surprised to find him a simple, agreeable guest who behaved himself perfectly. Next day Rasputin joined with members of the organisation to watch the tsar parade through the city. The leader had trained his men to produce a "Hurrah" of quite exceptional volume with which to attract the imperial attention. Sure enough the empress turned to them as she passed and they shouted; she noticed Rasputin, who promptly gave her his blessing. Stolypin was riding in the next carriage and when Rasputin saw him he suddenly went pale, crying out, "Death rides behind him, behind Peter. Don't you see him? There he is?"

All that night Rasputin tossed and turned, calling out that something terrible was about to happen, that death was near and that he could do nothing about it.[7]

That night at the Kiev opera house Stolypin was shot down by Bugaev, a terrorist and police spy who was suspected of involvement in an assassination attempt, and who had been admitted to the theatre by official invitation. The circumstances of his admission have never been satisfactorily explained, but it is unlikely that it was the result of conspiracy.

Stolypin died of his wound a few days later, but Rasputin was quick to comfort the tsar and tsarina, assuring them that Stolypin's usefulness was at an end anyway and that the new prime minister, Kokovtsov, was an excellent choice. There is a tantalising possibility that there is more in his remark about Stolypin than meets the eye, that it was indeed an act of something tantamount to clairvoyance on the part of Rasputin. The autopsy revealed Stolypin to be a very sick man, with a matter of months to live.* As far as we know, no one was aware of his condition, least of all Stolypin. Only Rasputin understood that his usefulness was truly at an end.

* I am grateful to Kyril Fitzlyon for telling me this little-known fact.