Preface

Grigory Rasputin, holy man and intimate of the Russian royal family, was murdered in the basement of a St. Petersburg palace in 1916. To his many enemies he was the incarnation of evil genius; he died because they held him to be the real power behind a throne that his malign influence was destroying. Within a few weeks the three-hundred-year-old dynasty was swept away and a way of life perished with it.

Rasputin remains. He is the great survivor from the drowned world of the Romanovs. To some, he was once a saint; he is more often thought of now as "the mad monk." He was not mad, or monk, or saint. He is a complex figure, intelligent, ambitious, idle, generous to a fault, spiritual, and—utterly—amoral.

In his prime, when the censors forbade any public mention of him, newspaper editors were happy to trade heavy fines for the guaranteed increase in circulation Rasputin brought. After his death the memoirs of those who knew him—leading politicians, a defrocked priest, secret police officers, women admirers—became a mini-industry. His murderer, Prince Yusupov, was able to restore some of the fortune seized from him by the Bolsheviks with best-selling accounts of the killing and a slander suit against the Hollywood producers of a Rasputin movie. Eighty years on, Rasputin still inspires books, movies, and rock songs. The basement where he died is a tourist attraction.

Why? His life was remarkable in itself. He was peasant, prophet, and partygoer, a combination that is not common. He had apparent psychic powers, attested to but lacking medical explanation. He was, too, for all the medieval trappings that surrounded him, curiously modern. His skills as a spiritual leader and manipulator of souls match those of the latter-day guru; keep the sex, change drugs to drink and rock 'n' roll to wild Gypsy music, and in his blend of charisma and outrage he is the precursor of the modern superstar. Ra-Ra-Rasputin . . .

But it is in the ageless struggle between good and evil, so strong a motif in his existence, that his fascination truly lies.

Rasputin bewitches because his life is both romantic and repulsive. It can be seen as an actual fairy tale. Born in a Siberian cabin, he makes his way to the distant capital of a great empire and there wins the trust and affection of the tsar and empress. He has gifts of healing and saves the life of their hemophiliac son. Or he can be read as a study in wickedness; he is a hypnotist, who casts his spell over the innocent women he seduces and who leads Russia and its besotted rulers to revolution and ruin.

He is much more than an exhibit in an antique freak show (though it suited Russian Communists, with their belief in the impersonal forces of Marxism, to treat him as such). He was a legend in his lifetime—of few people is that old cliché more apt—and his legend did fatal damage to the reputation of the Romanovs and to the fabric of Russian autocracy. So did the reality that lay behind it; by the end seasoned diplomats and foreign correspondents had not the slightest doubt that, as his killers and the Russian public suspected, Rasputin's influence was corrosive and immense. He is a historic personage.

It is the purpose of this book to show Rasputin, and the society on the edge of extinction in which he operated, in his true colors, not as a moral monochrome but rainbowed, as he was, and recognizably and fallibly human.

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All dates are given here in the Julian calendar that was in use in Russia throughout Rasputin's lifetime. It was twelve days behind the Western Gregorian calendar in the nineteenth century, and thirteen days behind in the twentieth. Thus, for example, the date of December 16, 1916, given for Rasputin's death corresponds to December 29, 1916, in the Western calendar. This applies to events outside as well as within Russia. Rather than consistent transliteration from Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet, common usage is given for family names. First names are anglicized where, as with the tsar, for example, this is appropriate. *Tsar* and *emperor*, *tsarina* and *empress* are interchangeable; Nicholas is most commonly referred to as tsar, his personal preference, and Alexandra as empress, hers. I am indebted to Dr. Igor Bogdanov of St. Petersburg for his great help in skilled translation and painstaking research.

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CHAPTER 1

"Proshchaitye, Papa"

It snowed hard in Petrograd in the hours before the murder.

The fall of 1916 matched the war, bleak and endless, gray skies robbing the city of its energy in the brief hours of daylight. Foul winds drove down the quays by the Neva River, pungent with chemical fumes from munitions factories. Families from territories lost to the Germans huddled in sheds near the railroad stations. Their lamentations hovered in the air; they died of typhus and simple exhaustion, "blown away like gossamer." Two in three streetlamps were unlit. The sidewalks were no longer swept. They filled with rubbish and slush and, from four each morning, with long lines of ill-clad men and garrulous women, waiting for bread.

The city's buildings, in faultless lines of pink granite and yellow- and green-washed stucco, had risen from bogs and marshes on piles driven by gangs of forced laborers two centuries before. When onshore winds raised the level of the Neva, alarm bells warned people to flee to higher stories before the floods poured into basement rooms. Now the city was drowning in its own ill humor.

"Rasputin, Rasputin, Rasputin"; one name pounded like surf on a crumbling shore, in the food lines, salons, rooming houses—universally. "It was like a refrain," a Petrograd lady wrote. "It became a dusk enveloping all our world, eclipsing the sun. How could so pitiful a wretch throw so vast a shadow? It was inexplicable, maddening, almost incredible."

Grigory Rasputin was a muzhik, a dark peasant from a distant Siberian bog, a creature who had shat in the open like an animal when he was a boy, who still sucked soup from the bowl and ate fish with his fingers, whose body gave off a

powerful and acrid odor, who could scarcely scrawl his name, but (what a but!) who it was rumored had the ear—enjoyed the body—of the empress; who, with her, appointed the mightiest officials of state; who treated fawning "duchesses, countesses, famous actresses, and high-ranking persons" worse than servants and maids; who was plotting a separate peace with Germany; who could see the future. Inexplicable, indeed! Incredible, except that he was visible, a shaggy figure with a sable coat thrown over peasant boots and blouse, seen about town, catching cabs, dining at Donon's, reeling out of the Gypsy houses in Novaya Derevnya blind drunk in the early hours. His very eyes betrayed his identity to strangers. The ballerina Tamara Karsavina, the most beautiful dancer of her generation, who had not seen him before, recognized him instantly in the street through their "strange lightness, inconceivable in a peasant face, the eyes of a maniac."

The censors did their best to hide him. They daubed ink over newspaper columns with stories that referred to him; the black blotches were called caviar. Readers knew whom the caviar was protecting, and they invented stories of their own. A society hostess, irritated that her guests talked of nothing else, put up a printed sign in her dining room: "We do not discuss Rasputin here." But they did; nothing would stop them. The talk was at the top. "Dark Powers behind the Throne! German influence at Court! The power of Rasputin! Infamous stories about the empress!" the British ambassador's daughter, Meriel Buchanan, noted of drawing room conversation in her diary. It ran unbroken to the city's lower depths. "The filthy gossip about the tsar's family has now become the property of the street," wrote an agent of the Okhrana secret police.

Crude cartoons passed hands of Rasputin emerging from the naked empress's nipples to tower over Russia, his wild eyes staring from a black cloud of hair and beard. Gambling dens used playing cards in which his head replaced the tsar's on the king of spades. A caricature icon showed him with a vodka bottle in one hand and the naked tsar cradled like the Christ child in the other, while the flames of hell licked at his boots and nude women with angels' wings and black silk stockings flew about his head. A photograph of him with a collection of society women was reproduced by the thousand. Mikhail Rodzianko, a leading politician, said he was horrified to find that "I recognized many of these worshipers from high society"; he himself had "a huge mass of letters from mothers whose daughters had been disgraced by the impudent profligate."

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The country could no longer tell the real from the false because, the red-haired poet Zinaida Gippius thought, it had become a large lunatic asylum. It looked normal enough, like an asylum on open house day, but in fact the inmates were

next page

all mad. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the capital. Its name had been changed from St. Petersburg to the non-Germanic Petrograd at the start of the war. Gippius rechristened it Chertograd, "Devil-town."

For the rich, the young poet Boris Pasternak wrote, city life was "gay with the brilliance of a florist's window in winter." The Americans had yet to join the First War. Though they were doing well enough against the Austrians, the Russians were bleeding against the Germans, more even than their French and British allies. People shut the fighting out of their minds, "dancing a 'last tango' on the rim of trenches filled with forgotten corpses." The heartrending sensuality of the tango, the novelist Alexis Tolstoy thought, had become a death march for a city "tormented by sleepless nights, stupefied and deadened by wine, wealth, and lovemaking without love." Morphine stolen from military hospitals was openly for sale in cabarets. Prohibition had been declared with the onset of war. Underpaid officials were easily bribed to ignore it, and even the pretense of pouring vodka from a teapot had disappeared. Officers overstaying their leave drank cocktails in the American bar of the Hotel de l'Europe with the teenage prostitutes who teemed in the lobbies.

Nightclubs were full of "heroes of the rear, legal deserters." No stigma attached to the "gray ticket men" who had bought exemption from the front, some of them through Rasputin, for a few hundred rubles. A British secret agent, Robert Bruce Lockhart, found his own conduct "puerile and reprehensible." He drank too much, with men for whom he felt contempt. He was ashamed and unhappy, adrift with a senseless ennui. "There is a sort of sickness in the soul," wrote the poet Alexander Blok. Above Russia's deathbed hovered "crows, a raucous, swirling scum."

The suicide rate tripled, when in other countries at war it was falling. Two out of three victims were under twenty-eight. Marriages collapsed as elderly men "discard[ed] their wives and flaunt[ed] their successors in the eyes of society." The grand mistress of the court, Madame Narishkina, calculated that half her circle were divorced. "Have you observed that no one understands the story of Anna Karenina nowadays?" she said of Tolstoy's great novel. "Today, Anna would immediately have divorced her husband and married Vronsky and there the story would have ended." Movies of robbery and murder were blamed for a crime wave. The bishop of Vyatka sought out Empress Alexandra to show her photographs of looted shops and bloated bodies. Men back from the front boasted openly that they had become atheists. The bishop blamed this on their contact with "intellectuals and Jews." Others thought that the church was daily losing its hold because of its servility to the despised autocracy that ruled Russia.

The poor of Petrograd were stacked like cordwood in rooming houses. In the Vyborgsky factory district, the living had less space than the dead in the

municipal cemetery. "Complete darkness," an observer wrote. "The ceiling is so low a tall man cannot stand upright. A specific smell. Legions of cockroaches and bugs. No double window frame and it is piercingly cold." Work accidents were commonplace. "I, for one, never enter the factory without first making the sign of the cross," said the manager of an explosives plant. Workers were prey to intestinal and lung disease, and to speculators. Flour had doubled in price since the start of the war, sugar had risen four times, aspirin fifty times. "It is said in all directions that merchants and shopkeepers are building up huge profits at the expense of the people," the secret police reported.

Spy fever was endemic. It was the easiest explanation for defeat. The head of the Okhrana was told by a government minister, in all earnest, that two aides-de-camp of the German kaiser had been seen strolling past the shops of the Nevsky Prospect without a care in the world, "dressed as civilians with their coat collars turned up." Not a day passed in the zone of armies, the French ambassador complained, "when a Jew isn't hanged on a trumped-up charge of spying." Jews were deported in scores of thousands from the areas behind the front, "wandering over the snows, driven like cattle by platoons of Cossacks, abandoned at the stations, camping in the open around the towns and dying of hunger, weariness, and cold." In the Baltic provinces German barons were accused of signaling to the German fleet from the towers of their castles. A baron was said to have treated the crew of a German aircraft to a feast before waving them off with one of his cows aboard as a present.

A "devastating chaos and elemental anarchy" was approaching, the Okhrana warned. In two years the government had had four prime ministers, four war ministers, and six ministers of the interior. Rasputin's hand was seen behind each appointment. His minion Boris Stürmer was prime minister in the fall of 1916. Stürmer, a "shallow and dishonest creature who emits an intolerable odor of falseness," excited disgust. He maddened the genial American ambassador, David Francis, by gazing at himself in a mirror during appointments with enraptured admiration, twirling the waxed ends of his mustaches. "Absolutely unprincipled, double faced," his fellow conservatives said, "a complete nullity, finished at fifty." Rasputin was held to have gifted the second most powerful position of state, that of interior minister, to Alexander Dmitrievich Protopopov. He strutted in high boots and an operatic uniform he had designed himself. "A small, gray-haired man, with restless nervous movements and bright wild eyes that shifted all the time," a contemporary wrote, adding that he was possibly syphilitic—he suffered from hallucinations, leg ulcers, and paresis, a partial form of paralysis characteristic of syphilitics—and "certainly not quite sane."

The autocrat of all the Russias, Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov, was 490 miles to the south in the provincial town of Mogilev. It was a pleasant place, with views across a wooded valley to the Dnieper River. Its Jews had been deported, however, and replaced by a transient population of staff officers, and the town had acquired a melancholy that suited the word from which its name was derived, *mogila*, "a grave." The Bristol, a four-ruble-a-night hotel on an avenue of leafless chestnuts, had been commandeered for the Stavka, the supreme army headquarters. The tsar took daily walks by the river with his English setters. In the evenings he watched movies. His favorite was a twenty-two-reel detective serial called *The Secrets of New York*.

He had appointed himself commander in chief the year before. Despite five million casualties, and the loss of Warsaw and his Polish territories, the tsar was confident that the army remained loyal. He followed its movements on maps hung in the hotel's café chantant. He was happy—"my brain is resting here," he wrote—for he was far from the intrigues of Petrograd. His army was, in reality, in such psychosis that fresh troops arriving in the line seemed demented. "It was not that they screamed or did anything violent," an officer remarked. "They simply marched into camp, shoulders hunched, heads down, and if they looked up as they passed, their faces wore a vacant expression that is the beginning of insanity."

In the fall offensive of 1916, at Kovel on the central front, a Guards army of the Semyonovsky and Preobrazhensky regiments attacked across open, marshy country seventeen times in three months. The Preobrazhenskys, the British military attaché Gen. Alfred Knox wrote, were "physically the finest human animals in Europe." Since Peter the Great first dressed them in bottle green uniforms and insisted that each man stand over six feet tall, every tsar had been honorary colonel of the regiment. The commander of the assault, Gen. Alexander Bezobrazov, was thought by his peers to be "of limited intelligence and unbelievably stubborn." One of his corps commanders, the tsar's uncle Grand Duke Paul, was a fine dancer, a skilled philanderer, a dashing figure in close-fitting strawberry britches and short hussar riding boots; alone of four brothers, he would soon prove loyal to his nephew. Unfortunately, however, he "knew absolutely nothing about military affairs." The commander of the other corps suffered from a defect, too; whenever in danger he "lost all presence of mind and was unable to conduct operations because his nerves could not stand the sound of rifle fire."

The guardsmen were sent into a swamp. German aircraft strafed them as they struggled in the mud, then refueled and rearmed, and returned to feast on the bottle green mass. "The wounded sank slowly in the marsh, and it was impossible to send them help," Knox wrote. "The Russian Command for some unknown reason seems always to choose a bog to drown in." In less than a

fortnight four out of five of the empire's finest troops were lost. Half-trained reinforcements were ordered to continue the assault. They advanced in long, thin lines, dressing to the left, officers at the head, sergeant majors behind to shoot deserters. They made no attempt to maneuver; their officers did not think them capable of it. So many corpses lay in no-man's-land that the Germans refused a truce to bury them. Despite a terrible stench of putrefaction, the heaps were a physical obstacle to fresh Russian assaults. By the time the offensive was called off in November, the Russians were bombarding their own jump-off trenches to force their men into the attack. The bodies were swallowed slowly in the quicksands. Months later an officer posted there, Prince Obolensky, found that "still above the sand one could see the tops of their bayonets."

As the casualty reports from the "Kovel pit" flooded back to the Stavka, Nicholas was obliged to dismiss Bezobrazov. He did so unwillingly. "What an honest and well-bred man he is!" he wrote to Empress Alexandra. "I have given him leave for two months. . . . I have promised that if some vacancies occur in the Guards Corps to appoint him there!"

The tsar's troops no longer thought of themselves as Russian soldiers; "they were just men who were going to die." They told each other that the government had been paid a billion rubles by Berlin to ensure that as few of them as possible survived the war. Their most special hatred was reserved for the German-born empress; they thought that she was in league with the enemy, that she talked to Germany on a radio concealed under the eaves of her palace, that she passed secrets to her sister, Princess Irene of Prussia, that to accept a decoration from her meant certain death. They were sure that she was sleeping with Grigory Rasputin. When Nicholas attended medal ceremonies to award the Cross of St. George, they laughed and called it the "Georgiy cross": "Tsar with Georgiy, tsarina with Grigory." They called her Nemka, "the German woman."

Through the fall Alexandra rarely left the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoye Selo, the "tsar's village" a half-hour train ride from the capital. Her nerves troubled her; she lay for much of the day on a chaise longue in her mauve boudoir, its carpets, curtains, and pillows of that color, its furniture mauve and white, a Scottish terrier at her feet. She despised Petrograd and its scandalmongers. To her Russia was the countryside, uncomplaining, loyal, eternal; stands of birch on the plain, a stream, a village, a windmill and white and gilt church, log huts along a road of mud or snow. Rasputin, the honest peasant in blouse and boots, simple and holy, her Friend, was its personification. Her mail from the villages, she told a rare visitor, reassured her that "the real Russia, poor, humble, peasant Russia, is with me. If I showed you the telegrams and letters I receive every day from all parts of the empire, you'd see it yourself."

The missives were suspiciously similar. "Oh our beloved sovereign, mother and guardian of our adored tsarevich," many began, "save us from our ene-

mies, save Russia!" They were forged by the secret police on the orders of Protopopov, Rasputin's friend. Genuine letters intercepted by the Okhrana told a different tale. The muzhik was naturally meek and fatalistic, the court grand master had warned; he would accept an injustice but continue to ponder it. At some point he would demand an accounting; "and, when the muzhik ceases to be meek, he becomes terrifying." That point was being reached. "Perhaps the landowners are getting rich, various rogues are getting richer, but the people, the common people, are being beggared," a writer from Irkutsk complained. The peasants were growing "more furious every day." In the sweet-scented wilderness of rural Russia, Alexander Blok wrote, were "twisted, unhappy, and browbeaten people with ideas and beliefs from before the Flood."

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The mood on the streets became "violent, unprecedented" in October. The Okhrana said that it was no longer possible to prosecute all who made "overt and brazen insults" against the tsar and his empress. The numbers were too great for the courts to cope. Sending a letter by diplomatic bag to avoid the censors, Robert Wilton, the London *Times* man in Petrograd, warned that the dynasty was in danger: "I hear that banners inscribed 'Down with the Romanovs' have been found in workmen's houses." Strikers murdered a foreman in a French-owned vehicle plant. Troops from the 181st Infantry Regiment who were called in opened fire on the police instead of the strikers. At the front shell-shocked men were shot for cowardice; in the capital the authorities were too frightened of their own garrison to impose the death sentence on mutineers. Every day the police arrested soldiers for picking pockets at streetcar stops. The military dared not punish them, the Okhrana chief complained, and the thieves were back on the streets within hours.

On October 26 a French spiritualist and magician called Papus died. Years before he had conducted séances with Nicholas and Alexandra at which he had conjured up the spirit of Alexander III, the tsar's dead father. Alexander had warned—so Papus claimed—that revolution would one day strike Russia with unparalleled violence. Papus said that he could avert the prophecy, but only as long as he lived. Now he was gone, and shortly before his death he had written about Rasputin. "Cabalistically speaking," he said, "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."

At the start of November, Vladimir Purishkevich, an arch reactionary, the self-styled "most extreme of the Rights," dined with Nicholas in Mogilev. He had gone there to warn the tsar that Rasputin was savaging the reputation of the monarchy. He hoped the tsar's aides would back him up but found their

"self-love" was too great for them to risk their careers by speaking out. Disgusted, he returned to Petrograd to attack Rasputin openly in the state Duma, Russia's parliament. He compared him to False Dmitri, a horror figure in Russian history, a pretender to the throne, with facial warts and malformed arms. Purishkevich railed at the "filthy, depraved, corrupt peasant" to whose advice "Russia's empress listens above all others."

"It cannot be that Rasputin's recommendation is enough for the most infamous persons to be nominated to the highest posts," he went on. "Ministers! If you are true patriots, go over there, to the tsar's Stavka, fall at the tsar's feet and ask that Russia be redeemed from Rasputin and all his followers, great and small." A young aristocrat, Prince Felix Yusupov, a onetime transvestite married to the tsar's niece, listened to the speech. He was much impressed and arranged to meet Purishkevich.

With "disquieting news coming to us from all sides," the Okhrana chief worked on a plan to use police and Cossacks armed with machine guns to put down an uprising in the city. He suspected that Duma members and the army high command were plotting to overthrow the tsar and murder Rasputin. He intercepted mail sent by suspects and was alarmed to find that they were beginning to use special confidential messengers. Gray skies devoured the outlines of buildings, and bitter winds muttered in the streets.

Nicholas reviewed the Guards Brigade at the Stavka in early December. One officer had accidentally cut off the ear of his Irish hunter with his saber. He fastened it back on with a little screw, like an earring. It fell off in front of the tsar. It was thought a bad omen.

On December 8 the Union of Towns, an important municipal body, went into secret session. It passed a resolution: "The government, now become an instrument of the dark forces, is driving Russia to her ruin and is shattering the imperial throne. In this grave hour the country requires a government worthy of a great people. There is not a day to lose!" Secrets were no longer kept. The resolution was circulated in roneoscript in thousands of copies. "Dark forces" was simple code for Grigory Rasputin and those about him. A pamphlet, written in poetic, old-style Russian, made the rounds. It was addressed to "Father Grigory, new saint of the devil, reviler of Christ's teachings, ruiner of the Russian land, defiler of wives and maidens." Its refrain urged Rasputin to rejoice: "Rejoice at the tsar's dulled mind, rejoice at the tsarina's delectation . . . at their daughters' seduction . . . at Protopopov's promotion . . . at voluptuousness, at the wagging spine and shaking hips . . . at the propagation of dark forces . . . at the German stronghold. Rejoice, foul receptacle of Satan!"

"Oh, how terrible an autocracy is without an autocrat!" a leading monarchist, Vasily Shulgin, loyal, patrician, wrote in his diary. "The tsar offends the nation by what he allows to go on in the palace . . . while the country offends

the tsar by its terrible suspicions." The empress was sleeping badly; she had a dream in which she lay on an operating table while a surgeon cut off her arm.

Frantic debauchery—he liked the word *frantic* enough to be using it as a nickname for a young woman he was trying to seduce—had turned Rasputin's sturdy frame "gaunt and cadaverous." The increasing malevolence of the anecdotes circulating about him kept his bodyguards on edge in December. He was said to be a German spy; he used a radio to talk to Berlin; he was fucking the tsar's beautiful daughters as well as the tsar's wife. His underpants flew over the royal palaces in place of the double-headed imperial eagle. At night he drove in a black car across the Palace Bridge and fired shots at random, killing and wounding for pleasure; he was the first drive-by killer.

He was at risk himself, and he knew it. "Do you know that I shall soon die in terrible pain?" he said, or so the French ambassador reported. "But what can I do? God has sent me to save our dear sovereign and Holy Russia. Despite my terrible sins I am a Christ in miniature." His name was becoming a byword for evil, Meriel Buchanan wrote, "though many people, held in a kind of superstitious dread, dared not pronounce it, believing that by doing so they brought down ill luck on their heads. 'The Unmentionable,' 'the Nameless One'—so they would whisper."

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Then came the snow.

It fell all morning on Friday, December 16, in thick, spinning disks, throwing a blanket over the dirt and topping the yellow- and green-washed buildings with a brilliant white crust. Rasputin went to a bathhouse with a guard of Okhrana men. He drank heavily at lunch and went to sleep in his apartment. In the late afternoon the skies cleared and the temperature fell. The sun glowed and the empress noted the "wee pink clouds" that reflected it. The scummy floes drifting on the Neva became a solid, luminescent sheet beneath the untainted air. The curse of the ghastly autumn was broken, Meriel Buchanan wrote, "and the golden spires and snow-covered roofs shone beneath a cold, clear sky."

The night was windless; the stars were out and sound carried. Maria Rasputin heard a car driving down Gorokhovaya ulitsa. It braked outside Number 64, a five-story brick apartment house a block away from the Fontanka Canal, one of the three main canals that bisected the heart of the city, their frozen waters colored by the pastel stucco and classical lines of the buildings that fronted them. Maria lived in a comfortable third-floor apartment with her younger sister, Varya, and her father, Grigory. She was seventeen.

She pulled back the curtain and looked down through the double window. A lone figure got out of the backseat; his greatcoat collar was turned up, and the flaps of his fur cap were down, so she could not make out his face.

The man slammed the door of the black limousine. Footsteps ringing on the hard snow, he passed to the yard and the back of the house. It was 11:00 P.M. Visitors who came late to see Maria's father often used the back stairs; a couple of Okhrana agents were always stationed at the front. The rear doorbell of the apartment sounded. Maria climbed back into bed beside her sister and fell asleep. She was used to her father's odd hours.

She woke when she heard Rasputin call to the maid for his boots. She slipped out of bed into the hallway. It was dark, and she almost bumped into her father.

"Oh, Maria!" he said. "Did we awaken you?"

"Yes, Papa, but no matter. Are you going out?"

"I must go, Marochka," he said, using the affectionate pet name.

"You should not. You know what Minister Protopopov said?" She referred to the interior minister. The Okhrana agents cooling their heels downstairs were Protopopov's; the minister had put them on particular alert, because his men had gotten wind from informers in a gambling house of a plot being mounted against his benefactor. Protopopov had called earlier—he visited Rasputin most evenings—and had made the Siberian promise not to go out.

"Yes, I know," Rasputin said. "But it's an important matter."

Maria was frightened for her father. She had seen him stabbed in the stomach by a woman two years before. She knew, from girls at school, from glances in the street and allusions in the newspapers, that others wished him ill. Her unease increased when she caught a glimpse of her father's visitor. He was in Rasputin's study, lounging against a desk strewn with papers and bowls of fruit and bottles given by admirers. He was a young man, tall and slender—"rather prettier than handsome," she thought—and he had unbuttoned his greatcoat to show his finely cut evening clothes. He still wore his fur cap, as though to prove that a prince had no need to uncover his head in front of a muzhik.

"I am very tired," Rasputin said to the young man. "Also, I have been quite ill. Must it be tonight? Can it not wait?"

"No, Otyets Grigory, it cannot wait."

Rasputin sighed. "Very well, moy malenki, give me a moment to change into a fresh blouse." *Otyets* is "father"; *moy malenki* is "my little one." The intimacy between the older man and his visitor was confirmed when Rasputin went into his room and Maria saw him root through his chest of drawers and pull out his favorite blouse. Its blue satin was embroidered with gold sunflowers; Empress Alexandra had stitched it for him herself.

When he had been a wanderer in the boggy vastness of western Siberia, Rasputin had told Maria, he had spent a whole year searching for God without once changing his clothes. He had given up women, and alcohol, too, at various times. Now he was back on them—Maria was used to the womanizing, but

his heavy drinking worried her because it combined with the lingering effects of the knife attack to undermine his health—but he had become fastidious.

This was his third change of clothes on Friday. He put on his finest pair of breeches, the blue velvet ones. Maria and the maid Katya helped him on with them, Maria with her finger to her lips so that her sleeping sister would not be wakened. He tied a golden sash around his blouse. Maria watched him splash his favorite cologne on his ears and neck and comb it through his beard; the young man would later say that Rasputin smelled of cheap soap.

Katya brought his boots. She smiled when he struck a pose for her, and his tiredness lifted. He put on a beaver overcoat, a present from a wealthy Petrograd banker and speculator, Ignati Porfiryevich Manus, whose niece had been moribund with fever until Rasputin's healing intercession had revived her. He made to leave.

"Papa, Papa." Maria flew to him and clutched his arm, with a premonition of evil. Words would not come, but she thought he understood. He kissed her and wiped away her tears with his fingers.

"Do not fear, Marochka," he said. "Nothing can happen to me unless it is God's will." He helped her into bed and kissed the sleeping Varya on the cheek. He made the sign of the cross over his children, right to left, in the Russian style. Then he went.

Maria cleared the window of frost. Footsteps snapped in the snow. The young man gripped Rasputin by the arm and half-helped, half-pushed him into the limousine. The door slammed, and the wheels spun briefly on the ice as the car sped away. Maria fell into disturbed slumber, waking herself at some point to cry aloud, "Proshchaitye, Papa." Farewell, Papa.

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The murder was a sensation. The story was broken by six words, complete with screamer, in the evening edition of the *Stock Exchange Gazette:* GRIGORY RASPUTIN HAS CEASED TO EXIST! Alive, he had been protected by the censor. His obituarists had fewer constraints. They turned the death of the "court pilgrim–debauchee" into a great political event. Newspapers doubled their print runs, splashing the forbidden name in their largest typefaces. Telegraph operators on the railroad network slipped the news into routine reports of train movements. Travelers in sleds took it from the rail depots to frozen villages.

The bridge from which the victim's body was dumped into the Neva became "a place to take a walk for nearly all of Petrograd. People come here in automobiles and in carriages. Some stay for a long time at the railings." Sightseers tried to get into 64 Gorokhovaya ulitsa. Police sealed off the house. A hearse pulled up, and the crowd hissed with disappointment when it discharged wreaths and yards of mourning crepe instead of a corpse.

A cabaret artiste addressed her audience as she went onstage: "Let me congratulate you with great joy." The audience applauded. Society ladies wrote to the presumed murderer to thank him for saving Russia, and they lit candles for him.

In the backwoods peasants cursed the killer. "They say that beside the tsar was an ordinary peasant like them," a Kostroma landowner, Prince O, told a diplomat. "He defended the people against the court and they killed him." A woman of noble family, overjoyed at the assassination, expected the wounded soldiers in a hospital she visited to share her elation. They were hostile and silent. "Yes," one of them told her, "only one peasant managed to get as far as the throne, and it was him that the nobility murdered." The French ambassador recalled that the dead man had claimed to have a vision as he passed the Peter and Paul Fortress, whose iron-bound punishment cells had housed a glittering clientele of opponents of the regime. "I see many people tortured there," Rasputin had said. "Not individuals but whole crowds; masses, clouds of bodies, several grand dukes and hundreds of counts. The Neva will be red with blood." The editor of *Kolokol*, Skvortsov, wrote that ordinary Russians regarded the murder as a sign of evil.

Other journalists reveled in it. They discovered that the body had been taken in great secrecy in a metallic casket from the mortuary of a Petrograd clinic to a chapel a few miles from the city. From there, they said, it was driven in a Red Cross automobile to the Nikolaevsky railroad station for transportation to the deceased's home village in Siberia. They found out that the postmortem was carried out by a professor from the military medical academy and that none of the clinic's own staff were present.

They reported with glee that "today in Petrograd an interesting photographic card passed many hands on which Rasputin is shown in the company of his high-ranking women admirers." Among them, they noted carefully, was the empress's favorite, Anna Vyrubova. They wrote openly of the victim's lusts, and his fulfillment of the crude peasant dream: "If I was tsar, I'd steal hundreds of rubles and eat fat all day long." Fate had given Rasputin all he had ever wanted, they said: "A lot of vodka, a lot of mutton, a lot of embroidered shirts, a lot of money, and a lot—too much—of 'woman supply.' "

They got things wrong—the dead man was a fish eater who disliked meat, and his remains were in Tsarskoye Selo—but they excited horror well enough. They described a "vaudeville of state" in which a "gilded slush" of ministers, bishops, princes, and princesses had danced attendance on the lowborn Siberian. "But why did they dance?" they asked. "Why didn't the princes and counts hold back the women of their circle, who so readily, with such a mystical reverence, paid Rasputin their 'women's dues'?" They refrained from naming the empress in the context of Rasputin's "dues"; it was a detail they could be sure their readers would supply for themselves.

They said he was a criminal. "He has been sued in court for horse rustling," reported *Russkoye Selo.* "He has been sued in court for perjury. He has been condemned to be flogged by a local court." The Moscow newspaper referred to the khlysts, an outlawed religious sect with a line in orgies and flagellation. "He staged khlyst prayers over a pit," the newspaper continued, "and showed 'corporal bitterness' in convents." That meant whipping nuns. His influence, unprecedented in a Siberian, unthinkable in a peasant, was explained. "He was cheap," said *Russkoye Slovo.* "He was elementary and simple and comfortable in all respects. Imagine a patron who is able to 'fix' an affair for a small consideration or for 'women supply.' . . . Old foxers, intriguers, dodgers, and political rogues said: 'If there was no Rasputin, he ought to have been invented!' "

Why was he dead? "In this drink-sodden, low-class intrigue," theorized the obituarist Alexander Yablonsky, "there were reefs that Rasputin did not see. He did not notice that he had gathered a coalition of all sorts of hatreds around himself. He did not notice that he was but false teeth in somebody else's mouth, and he did not realize what sorts of nuts were being cracked by those teeth . . .

"For Europe, Rasputin was an anecdote, not a fact," Yablonsky concluded. "For us, however, he was not only a fact. He was an epoch."

CHAPTER 2

Grischa

The epoch was difficult to date. The victim's place of birth—a village of rough wooden cabins set in forests and marshes on a Siberian riverbank—was known. His age was uncertain. Rasputin was illiterate until he was well into his teens. The notes he scrawled in his prime—biblical sayings, jerky and half-formed thoughts for women admirers, requests for favors—were unpunctuated and hard to read. He kept no diary. His life was full of gaps, impulses, and wanderings. He was pious and lustful, crystal and mud; his great sleight of mind enabled him to conceal the sinner from those he wished to see only the saint. The censor saw to it that little was written about him while he was alive. Much of what came later was more concerned with exploiting his mystique than with establishing facts. If he knew his date of birth, and most Russian peasants did not, he made no effort to record it. It did not concern him; he was not an astrologer.

It came to be of interest only after his death. His daughter Maria, with legend most likely in mind, claimed that a fiery meteor burst across the night sky as Anna Egorovna, wife of Efim Aklovlevich Rasputin, a carter and farmer, gave birth to her second son. Maria gave her father's birth weight as seven pounds and the date as January 23, 1871. That date corresponds to January 10 in the Julian calendar used in prerevolutionary Russia. The same day appears in the register of baptisms in Tyumen, the nearest city to his birthplace, with the year as 1869. If this is correct—it is the most likely—then he was three weeks short of his forty-eighth birthday when the black automobile collected him for his last ride.

Reporters covering the murder at the time put Rasputin's age at fifty. Six months later the new provisional government set up an Extraordinary Commission of Inquiry to examine Rasputin and the decay of the autocracy. Evidence from witnesses who had known Rasputin in Siberia and elsewhere was collected by its chief investigator, F. P. Stimson, a respected lawyer from Kharkov. Stimson wasted few words on his subject's origins, and he used different dates.

"Grigory Efimovich Rasputin was born in the sloboda Pokrovskoye of Tyumen district, Tobolsk province, in 1864 or 1865," he recorded. "His parents were healthy, nobody insane among his kin, and they lived the way average peasants live." It was understandable that he added four or five years to Rasputin's age. His subject had raddled himself with drink and women in his final months.

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Grischa, as he was called, began life as a sturdy infant. He stood at six months and toddled at eight. It was as well, for rural Siberia was primitive and no place for the weak. He had a one in five chance of dying before he reached his teens, of diphtheria, cholera, influenza. The nearest doctor was in Tyumen, seventy miles away by river or by Trakt 4, the rough road linking Tyumen and the provincial capital in Tobolsk. Years later, with a deep stomach wound from the first attempt to murder him, his oxlike constitution alone pulled him through the journey. Medicine in Pokrovskoye was no more than vodka for antiseptic, herbal teas for fevers, and slabs of raw meat to draw the infection from wounds.

The village was on a bank high above the Tura River. A landing stage of wooden poles and planks stuck out beyond the reeds for riverboats to Tyumen and Tobolsk, 120 miles to the north. Twice a month yellow and black prison barges with cages of iron mesh passed the village on their way to Tobolsk, a reminder of Siberia's use as a dumping ground for convicts and exiles. Cleared pasture, water meadows, and fields of black earth stretched back from the bank for two miles before running into marshes and forests of poplar, aspen, larch, and birch. The unpaved main street was a mile-long river of dirt without sidewalks or shade trees. Pigs routed along it. It was lined on both sides by cabins built of double planks against the cold, painted green and red, and caulked with oakum, behind stout limed fences. The roofs were shingled with bark. In spring and autumn the farm carts mired to their axles in mud. In summer they dragged clouds of dust and midges behind them. Crude sleds, frames of wooden poles lashed together with rope, were used in winter.

The only building of note was a stone and wooden church with a gilt onion dome. The *kabachok*, the village tavern, served rough Siberian vodka and beer; Rasputin's addiction to sweet wines came after he left the village and began to

visit monasteries where wine and Madeira were drunk. A general store sold salted fish, farm tools, plows and harrows, lamps and oil. Horses were hitched to posts outside it. The barns and cattle sheds were in the village, and the countryside was empty.

Its monotony reminded Western travelers of "the sadness of the sea," a waste across which dirt tracks wound like the wakes of ships. The earth was monochrome until, like sails looming out of a sea haze, a church pierced the gloom in whirls of color. Beside it the village was "like a hem of rubbish thrown about." Though native Siberians like Rasputin were lyrical about their land, even the most high-spirited of men from European Russia fell prey to melancholy there. "In the summer our lives were made wretched by midges," the revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote of his exile. "They even bit to death a cow which had lost its way in the woods. . . . In the spring and autumn the village was buried in mud." In winter cockroaches "filled the cabin with their rustlings."

Cattle, corn, and cartage brought Pokrovskoye a modest prosperity. The region was known for its butter and wheat. Though Trakt 4 was deeply rutted in summer and humped with ice mounds in winter, its travelers brought in rubles. Villagers lodged them, and hired out horses and *telegas*, unsprung carts in which passengers lay on hay with their knees to their chins to protect their spines against the incessant jars and twists. A telega, the American journalist George Kennan wrote, "will simply jolt a man's soul out in less than twenty-four hours." Bargemen and boatmen worked the river after ice melt.

Efim Rasputin, Grischa's father, was a newcomer to the village. The villagers gave him the nickname Novykh, the "new one"; his son was sometimes to sign himself Grigory Novykh after he learned to write, or, more accurately, to scribble in a large and unformed hand. It was often said that the root of the name Rasputin was *raspoutstvo*, Russian for "debauchery," and that it was foisted on the family as an accurate slur. The Rasputins themselves said that it came from *raspoutye*, "crossroads," a more likely derivation since the name was uncommon but not unique. It was rumored that Efim had gotten drunk while working as a coachman at Saratov on the Volga, lost or sold his horses, and fled to Siberia.

The story was typical. Siberia was founded on runaways, religious dissenters, bankrupts, cutthroats, the swill of the frontier. Every few months convoys of convicts, gray columns with yellow diamonds sewn on their coats, shuffled in chains out of European Russia to cross the Ural Mountains west of Pokrovskoye. They were on their way to the huge holding prison in Tyumen, where they were crammed 160 to a cell to await transport to distant mines and logging camps. The air, Kennan found, was "laden with fever germs from unventilated hospital wards, fetid odors from diseased human lungs and unclean human bodies, and the stench arising from unemptied excrement buckets." A

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third of the fifteen thousand prisoners who arrived at Tyumen each year in Grischa's childhood did not survive to continue their journey; Siberians were aware of the lethal power of the distant tsar. Drivers like Efim, *yamshchiki,* were often ex-convicts and formed a distinct fraternity of chancers and smugglers. A group of Americans who crossed Siberia at this time employed six drivers, all of whom they found to be convicted murderers.

His fellow villagers knew Efim as a driver plying Trakt 4, with sidelines in farming and horse trading, and a drinker. In summer he wore a cotton blouse and coarse woolen trousers with sandals made of the plaited bark of lime trees. He added a sheepskin coat, an armiak cloth jacket, felt boots, and a fur cap above his basin haircut for winter. Grischa stayed faithful to peasant fashion in the days of his fame, though his boots were made of dressed leather and the empress embroidered his silken blouses.

Efim was comfortably off by village standards, rich by those of peasants in European Russia, whose crude, chimneyless huts were built of logs. His single-story cabin was double planked with four rooms, furnished with rough wooden benches. He had money enough to afford glass in the big windows, in place of the stretched animal bladders used by the poorest peasants. He had oil lamps, too, and not tallow candles, in front of the icons in the main room. Low barns ran around a muddy yard, pungent with animal and human dung heaps, where cattle and horses wintered. The family slept in their clothes on wooden shelves near a log-burning brick stove, with piles of bug-infested sheepskins for a mattress. A samovar simmered on the stove for tea; Grischa always thought coffee a sign of great wealth. He ate bread—white bread, he proudly recalled, rather than the brown bread suffered by peasants in European Russia—and fish and cabbage soup, from metal bowls. He chewed wild garlic against scurvy. Though the peasants shat in their yards, the village had a bathhouse where they sweated in a steam room and beat the dirt from their skin with birch twigs. Rasputin loved bathhouses, though he always retained a musty peasant odor that society ladies found "thrilling."

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Grischa did not start talking until he was two and a half. Then the words tumbled out with vivid imagination. Recovering from a bout of fever, he told his mother that a "beautiful lady" had sat at his bedside to soothe him. He helped with the livestock, rounding up cattle and herding them in the yard. He learned to ride in the arched bareback Siberian style. He had no schooling.

He collected kindling in the forests and played hide-and-seek with his elder brother, Mischa. Siberian children played brodyagi and soldiers. *Brodyagi* were escaped convicts. Each summer several hundred went loose until they were betrayed by bounty hunters or gave themselves up at the onset of winter. October

was the high point of the year. At the village fete the children danced to an accordion, the girls in scarves and best dresses, while their parents sat mellow with vodka. Peddlers in black frock coats and black waistcoats with glass buttons sold cheap colored prints of the tsar and famous generals and views of St. Petersburg. It was a rare reminder of the Russia west of the Urals.

When the Russians had first penetrated Siberia three centuries before, the Cossack brigand Yermak Timofeyovich defeated the Tartars not far from Pokrovskoye. The frontier had long since passed east, but the region was still called Zatatarskoe Beloto, the "marsh beyond the Tartars." It remained a place of superstition and legend, of miraculous icons and holy manifestations, where hunters flew through the air by telepathy. Spirits were said to live in the forests. *Leshii,* with bluish skin and goggle eyes, imitated birdsong, whistled and clapped, and protected convicts. The water spirit, *vodyanoi,* caused the Tura River to flood when it got drunk. In the cabins lurked the hairy *domovoi,* breaking windows or protecting the house according to its mood.

Little Grischa, his mother said, became so rapt in staring at the sky that at first she feared he was "not quite right in the head." Then, along with his imagination, he developed powers. He had a way with animals and became a horse whisperer. Efim Rasputin had a favorite story of how his son's gift first showed itself. Efim mentioned at the midday meal that a horse had gone lame and might have pulled a hamstring. Grischa got up from the table and went out to the barn. His father followed and saw him place his hand on the hamstring. Grischa stood in silence, eyes closed and head thrown back. When he was done he stepped back, patted the horse, and said: "You're all better." Efim led the horse out into the yard and walked it up and down. Its lameness had gone.

The boy became a sort of "spiritual veterinarian"—his daughter's phrase—to the livestock of Pokrovskoye. He talked to sick cattle and horses, whose joints were distended by the strain of hauling carts on potholed roads, and cured them with a few whispers and a comforting hand. He extended his healing from the beasts of the field to the villagers. He eased away bad backs and fevers. Word spread that he was gifted with precognition and clairvoyance. He discovered missing objects—a ring, a rake, a plow. A horse was stolen. A meeting was called to discuss the theft. Grischa pointed at one of the richest peasants and declared that he was the thief. The villagers followed the man home, found the horse in his yard, and, in the Siberian fashion, beat him half to death.

Sitting in the warm, while his mother baked bread in the big stove, Grischa often suddenly chirped out, "A stranger is coming." A traveler would be seen on the trakt within an hour. He also predicted deaths among the peasants, a less welcome gift that had his father muttering about the work of the *dyavol,* the devil.

This, at least, is what his daughter Maria wrote later. The provisional government inquiry found village witnesses to have a much less charitable view of

her father. "They note that Rasputin's father drank vodka heavily," the investigator wrote. "As a boy Rasputin was always dirty and untidy so that boys of his age called him a 'snotter.' " It served her father's memory well, of course, for Maria to establish that his gifts were clear even in childhood. Some of her claims stretch belief to the limit; here they appear to sit oddly with those of his fellow villagers. The mature Rasputin, however, had the same genius as the child for creating apparently irreconcilable impressions; his character was magnetic, in the sense of polarity, repelling or attracting those who came within its field. There is no reason to disbelieve his daughter's family recollections of his early ability to soothe; no reason either to reject the villagers' account of a layabout in the making. Both traits run through his adult life.

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When he was eight, Grischa lost his brother Mischa. The boys liked to swim in the river, whose waters, dark and rusty, were fed by bogs thick in iron salts. On airless August days they splashed in the shallows where the cattle drank. Picnickers took their spot one day, and the brothers went farther downstream. Mischa drifted out into the torpid current, dragging Grischa with him. A farmer pulled the boys out, but Mischa developed pneumonia. The Pokrovskoye midwife struggled to cope. Ten-year-old Mischa died.

Grischa became depressed, alternately moodily quiet and hyperactive. His mother found him difficult. "I never knew what to expect next," she told her granddaughter. The boy wandered among the forest larch and birch or made a pest of himself around the house. He had no friends to take his brother's place, and no stimulations to feed his imagination and intelligence. The outside world was guesswork. He had never seen an electric light, a steamboat, or a railroad train. He knew they existed—peddlers sold pictures of them—but none had yet reached Siberia. It was so vast, stretching north to the Arctic, south toward China, east for 4,000 miles to the Pacific, that Siberians lived on the outer margin of Russian consciousness. Tyumen was 2,543 versts from St. Petersburg—some 1,670 miles away—and, until the Trans-Siberian Railroad reached it in 1885, the journey took six weeks.

Grischa's horizons were bound by the dull rhythms of the village and fieldwork. In the long winter the fields were frozen. Arctic air advanced from the Kara Sea in a crystal mantle, and dawn and sunset were chilled into bands of salmon pink and violet blue. By day the sun melted the snow on the cabin roofs though the air temperature remained below freezing. At night it could plunge to fifty below. When southwesterlies blew, violent storms dumped thick snow on Pokrovskoye, the falling flakes mingling with those blown from the ground in a maelstrom that blinded those foolhardy enough to venture outdoors. In spring the fields were plowed and planted, and firewood cut. In August, with temperatures sometimes climbing into the nineties, the men cut the wheat and

rye with scythes in another brief burst of labor while the women followed with sickles to reap what was left. The grain was threshed with flails, iron chains attached to wooden handles. In the fall a string of cyclones brought heavy showers, and the village was mud bound. The cycle of drudgery then repeated itself.

Russia was alive elsewhere. It was throwing up great writers, musicians, and new industrialists; its revolutionaries were famed through Europe for their intensity and love of violence. The empire was still racing east at a thousand miles a decade, engorging the khanates of Central Asia. In Pokrovskoye, eternal silence was master. St. Petersburg was the dark side of the moon. Politics were irrelevant to the peasants; no politician came calling, they had no vote. Newspapers meant nothing to men who could not read. As to ideas, no university existed in Siberia's 4.6 million square miles and none would until 1888. Grischa was listless and bored.

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Monotony and vast and freezing distance often conspired to make Siberians religious. The beauty of the Orthodox service, the hypnotic chants, the ecstatic Easter "Christ Is Risen! Christ Is Risen!" fell on arid minds like mystic liquid. Wandering pilgrims in rags, *stranniky*, passed through Pokrovskoye on the trakt, tapping on doors and asking for a night's lodgings as they made their way east to the Abalatsky Monastery or northwest to pray before the relics at Verkhoturye. Icons, the face of the Virgin or a saint blazing from a background of somber oils, were paraded at every event; they followed the dead to the cemetery and newlyweds to the marriage bed. On Sundays incense and the priest's rich vestments replaced shabby work clothes and the interminable odor of farm animals. Singing and ceremony—Grischa always loved to sing—were bridges to the unimaginable outside world, which he craved. Candles caught the gleam of the icons and the bright kerchiefs of the women. Illiterate, bookless minds filled with stories of damnation and salvation.

At a service when Grischa was fourteen, the village priest, Otyets Pavel, read a passage from the Bible that impressed him. "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation," the priest said. "Neither say they, Lo here! or Lo there! for behold the Kingdom of God is within you." His parents walked home for their Sunday meal. Grischa wandered off to the woods and experienced ecstasy under a big larch tree.

He lay on the ground, lost in meditation. A scintilla, a spark, grew in his mind, "nearer and nearer, brightening as it came, until what had been a soft golden glow suddenly erupted in a blinding white flash." The boy prayed, tears wetting his face. Then he raced home to tell his mother: "I can only say . . . I almost saw God." She was frightened, fearing blasphemy. "Only great saints can see God," she told him. "Whatever you do, don't tell your father. He'd certainly

punish you." Years later Rasputin took his own children back to the larch tree. He told them how he had realized, on that Sunday, that "God is here, inside, this moment—forever."

Efim Rasputin worried about his son. Grischa did little work on the farm, although he was a strong, sturdy lad whose voice acquired the low tones and unstressed, booming vowels of the Siberian accent as it broke. He mooned about, without friends. Sometimes he got into fights with other boys who called him *malodushni.* It is curious that they used that word, "coward," for Rasputin showed great nerve in adult life. He was shrewd, though, and skilled at tactical withdrawals; perhaps the boys used it in that sense. He did not feel lonely. "God is my companion," he told his mother of his religious experience.

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As an adult Rasputin often referred to his childhood flashes of insight into the divine. His religious intensity was natural in a country shot through with Christian fervor, and Siberia gave those whom it did not cow a matching wildness and grandeur of spirit. His sense of the presence of God was unforced and simple, a part of his belief in himself, as strong a streak in him as his sexuality. The evidence of his first sexual experience comes secondhand, from his daughter. She maintained that it was a pseudo-rape at the hands of a general's wife, and that it affected him deeply. The investigator noted nothing more than a healthy interest in village girls. The alleged incident took place when Grischa drove a grain cart to Tyumen.

The woman in question was Madame Irina Kubasova, the striking daughter of an artillery colonel, who had married her off at eighteen to his commanding officer to settle his gambling debts. General Kubasov was forty years older than his bride. He resigned his commission, quit his regimental quarters in Moscow, and retired to his estate outside Tyumen to enjoy her.

He saw a young blonde in a carriage in the main street, and followed her in his cart until she disappeared through the crested iron gates of the Kubasov estate. He sat on a wall for some time before driving home. He saw the carriage outside a fashionable clothes shop on his next visit. A lady's maid crossed the street. "My mistress bids me give you this message," she said. "In one hour, you are to take a seat upon a certain wall. I think you know the place."

Grischa drove out of town and sat on the wall, swinging his feet, gazing across lawns that were as large as the Rasputin farm. A pond lay beneath a slope, crossed by a rustic footbridge that led to a summerhouse. Irina Kubasova arrived in a "cascade of golden curls . . . a dress of some pale green material, tight in the bodice to show off her sensual breasts." Maria Rasputin described how her father was led to the summerhouse, where, reaching down the front of his trousers, Kubasova "grasped him gently, releasing him for a moment, then

touching him again." She went into the next room, telling Grischa to come to her quickly.

Stripping off his clothes, Grischa followed her into a darkened chamber, where she lay, still fully clothed, on a sofa. She raised a shapely arm and said, "*Teper!*" "Now!" At this, four maidservants burst into the room from behind the heavy curtains. A fifth girl stepped forward with a bucket of cold water and threw it over him. The maids, urged on by their mistress, were on him "like a pack of she-wolves tearing at a stray lamb, teasing and tormenting him, touching his outthrust organ in those lascivious ways that only as a group would they have dared employ." It was a divertissement, a cruel game played by a bored young woman. Once they had finished with him, the girls carried Grischa out and threw him on the ground in front of the summerhouse. One of them, Dunia Bekyeshova, took pity on him and left him his clothes.

Humiliated, "his whole being one amorphous mass of unadulterated misery," the sixteen-year-old returned to Pokrovskoye in his cart, shivering in a blanket on the rough wooden seat. The episode left him with nightmares, in which the women became she-wolves who tore at his flesh, urged on by Irina Kubasova. His mother knew something was wrong; but he was too ashamed to tell anyone, sitting hangdog in the barn with only his favorite horse, Ivan, for company.

The incident did no long-term harm to Rasputin's remarkable sexual self-confidence; he enjoyed a natural and easygoing affinity with women until his death. Shortly after the incident a young village widow, Natalya Petrovna Stepanova, took a wanderer into her cabin and her bed. She was spotted by the local gossip, the *splyenitza*, who alerted the village. Efim Rasputin was one of those who caught her in flagrante and hauled her off to Otyets Pavel. The priest proclaimed the punishment for a woman caught in sin; she was to be stripped naked and whipped out of the village.

Her dress was ripped off—Maria says by Efim Akovlevich, Rasputin's father—her hair was shorn with shears, and she was tied to the saddle of a horse. The horse dragged her between a double line of vengeful villagers, eyes popping with lust, lips drawn back in snarls, who beat her with sticks and leather straps. Years later, Rasputin told his daughter, he was "still horrified at the memory." Bleeding and unconscious, Natalya Petrovna was pulled out of the village. Grischa found her in a field. He comforted her. As he touched each of the wounds in turn, the bleeding stopped. The bruises disappeared. He washed the mud from her and built her a shelter. Later he brought her an old dress from home, a pair of shoes, a kerchief to hide her head, and a can of borscht.

The following day Grischa attended a village wedding. Two boys gave him vodka; unused to the fiery spirit, he almost choked on it. The lads talked about

finding a woman. Grischa, drunk, said he knew where one was. He led them to Natalya Petrovna's refuge. Their noisy arrival terrified her. Grischa insisted they leave her in peace, before rushing off awash with tears and guilt.

Slowly his mysticism returned. After his farm work he went to the forest to pray. "I have been dreaming about God since early childhood," he recollected to a journalist from the paper *Novoye Vremya* two decades later. "When I was fifteen, in my village, in the summertime, when the sun shone warmly and the birds sang heavenly songs, I walked along the path and did not dare go along the middle of it. I was dreaming about God. My soul was longing to fly to afar. I often wept and did not know where the tears came from and what they were for."

His youth passed in "some kind of meditation, a kind of dream." He believed in the good, he said, and he was loved in the village. He had long talks with his comrades "about God, about nature, about birds." He often sat with the old men of the village, listening to their stories about the lives of the saints, about selflessness and great deeds, about the tsars and Ivan the Terrible . . .

When he was eighteen the brilliant heavenly light returned to him. He was plowing when it exploded from the furrows, becoming a vision of the Virgin, surrounded by throbbing light, her hand above his head in a gesture of blessing. Trembling, he led the plow horse back to the barn. It was, he told his daughter, his "awakening."

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Moments of prayer and generosity ran side by side with epic debauchery in Rasputin's later life. It is no surprise that the introverted, sensitive boy and the forest mysticism he described to *Novoye Vremya* were strangers to the investigator. His witnesses remembered a lout, a hardnose with a swagger. "Rasputin started to drink vodka at fifteen, and after his marriage at twenty started to drink more," he reported. Villagers gave evidence that the "snotter" was also a thief.

At age nineteen he met a girl from another village to whom he was to remain faithful, in his own fashion, for the rest of his life. They met at a festival at the Abalatsky Monastery; they both loved to dance and sing. She was three years older, a pretty girl with dark eyes and blond hair, Praskovya Fedorovna Dubrovina. They married following a six-month courtship. The year is uncertain; the investigator did not give it, but it was probably 1889. She was a tolerant woman. Her new husband continued to spend his evenings in the *kabachok*, the tavern. Grischa remained a slob in village opinion, with his father's taste for knocking back cheap Siberian vodka from wax-topped bottles, and an eye for anything left lying around.

"He was known to the villagers as a man who liked drinking and leading a depraved life," wrote the obituarist Alexander Yablonsky. "His usual pastimes

were drinking, debauchs, fights and vile abuse. . . . He used to go to Tyumen to get bread or hay and came back home without money, drunk, beaten, and often without horses." The tutor to the imperial family, Pierre Gilliard, made no bones about Rasputin's thieving. "Like everybody else, he looked around for things unguarded or forgotten and stole them," he wrote. "Soon he distinguished himself with boldness in these ventures while his dissipation gave him the reputation of a reckless reveler."

A witness, E. I. Kartavtsev, gave similar evidence. He was sixty-seven years old at the time of the investigation and a neighbor of the Rasputin family in Pokrovskoye. "I caught Grigory stealing my fence poles," he said. "He had cut them up and put them in his cart and was about to drive off when I caught him in the act. I demanded that Grigory take them to the constable, and when he refused and made to strike me with an ax, I, in my turn, hit him with a perch so hard that blood ran out of his nose and his mouth in a stream and he fell to the ground unconscious. At first I thought I'd killed him. When he started to move I made him come to take him to the constable. Rasputin didn't feel like going, but I hit him several times with a fist in the face, after which he went to the constable voluntarily."

Soon after the theft of the poles, Kartavtsev said that a pair of his horses were stolen from his meadow. "On the night of the theft I guarded these horses myself," he told the investigator. "I saw that Rasputin approached them with his pals, Konstantin and Trofim, but I didn't think much of it until a few hours later I discovered the horses were not there. Right after that I went home to check whether Rasputin was in. He was there the following day, but his pals had gone."

Others characterized the teenage Rasputin "as a sly, impudent man, of wild, loose, and effusive nature." When drunk he showed off by harnessing his father's horses and galloping them around the yard. He "used foul language in front of not only strangers but his parents as well." It was a habit he kept; he used drunken oaths to shock people he wished to unsettle, and admitted as much to *Novoye Vremya*. "When life touched me," Rasputin told the newspaper, "I used to hide somewhere in a corner and pray secretly. I was unsatisfied, couldn't find an answer to many things. And I was sad and I took to drinking."

After the thefts of the poles and the Kartavtsev horses, the villagers met to discuss exiling Rasputin and his comrades to eastern Siberia. Konstantin and Trofim were expelled from the community for horse stealing. Rasputin survived, but he faced charges of stealing the poles in the local court. He was also accused of stealing a consignment of furs that went missing as he was driving them by cart to Tyumen; he counterclaimed that he had been attacked by robbers. He abruptly left the village for Verkhoturye Monastery, more than 250 miles to the northwest, a place famous for its relics of St. Simeon the Just. The

visit was decisive; all witnesses say that he was profoundly changed on his return. They do not agree on why he went. "Soon God brought me to reason," he said himself. "I gave up drinking, I followed another path."

Rasputin always denied being a thief. Slyly, he told his daughter that, since he was convinced that other people shared his second sight, and so could track down any stolen object, he could never bring himself to steal. She believed his departure was the result of giving a ride to a young divinity student in his cart. He told the student of his mystic experiences. Deeply impressed, the student urged him to do God's bidding and go to the monastery to seek advice from the monks. In an agony of indecision, Rasputin knelt in front of the family icon in the early hours to pray for guidance. His wife found him. The young couple talked it over and decided that he should leave for the monastery.

Rasputin spun a similar story to the imperial family. He told them, the tutor Gilliard reported, that he was hired to drive a priest to the monastery. The priest found the lad to have an eager intelligence and natural gifts. He made Grischa confess to his sins and tried to make him devote his ill-used ardor to God. "These persuasions impressed Grigory so much that he was filled with the wish to abandon his dark and dissolute life," Gilliard wrote. "He stayed in the Verkhoturye Monastery for a long time." In the Yablonsky variation, Grischa was hired to drive to Tyumen by a young theological student, Miletiy Zaborovsky, who later distinguished himself as rector of the Tomsk seminary. As they drove, "Zaborovsky made a strong impression upon him and held this influence upon him for a long time." It was, Yablonsky says, this telega fare who inspired Rasputin to leave for the monastery.

The truth seems simpler. At the time, the investigator reported, Rasputin "said he had to do it instead of his father, who had made a vow to walk to this monastery on foot, but that was a pretense." Witnesses told him that Rasputin had stirred up so much trouble for himself that he thought it best to make himself scarce. Better a stint in a monastery than a criminal record.

CHAPTER 3

Monastery Man

The three months Rasputin spent at the monastery were a watershed. The investigator found that his time at Verkhoturye "ends the first, early, wild, and loose period of his life," after which "Rasputin was to become a different person for a long time." After he returned villagers saw a new quality coexisting with the lust and cunning. They found it difficult to define, but it was abnormal, remarkable. He had found his mission in life.

The monastery was a walled complex of white-painted chapels, cells, refectories, and domes in the eastern foothills of the Urals. It was one of the oldest in Siberia, for Verkhoturye had been the Russian gateway into Siberia three centuries before. Hermits lived in huts in the surrounding forests in simplicity and self-denial. They ate black bread and water, and slept on bare mud in celebration of poverty. These retreats were called *skites*, and their occupants, holy men with a special grace from God, were known as *staretsy*, "elders." They were often former strannik wanderers who settled in forest glades to meditate and pray. Pilgrims from across Russia visited them for advice and spiritual healing. Grand dukes and Guards officers, "plebeians and the most nobly born," sought out the starets Father Ambroise in the Optina Pustyn, a famous hermitage in Kaluga province, to confess to him their sins and sufferings and to listen to his advice and teaching; so did Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy.

A *starets*, Elder Zosima, was described by Dostoyevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* in terms similar to an Indian guru. "The elder takes your soul and your will into his soul and will," he wrote. "Having chosen an elder, you surrender your will and give it to him in complete obedience, with com-

plete self-abnegation." The person who offered such obedience attained in return "a total freedom, that is, freedom from himself, and to avoid the lot of those who live without ever finding the self within themselves." The obligations to the elder were of a different order from the vows of obedience practiced in monasteries; the binder and the bound were indissolubly linked in perpetual confession.

Rasputin lodged in a stone-floored cell at Verkhoturye, sleeping on a narrow wooden cot with a thin mat on a base of woven cords. He made daily expeditions through thick woods to the skite of Makari, a renowned starets who had eased the souls of important men in his travels across Russia. Makari was a fifty-year-old who had squandered an inheritance on drink, cards, and whores before being struck by a sudden aversion to pleasure. He wore penitential chains and kept a flock of raucous chickens, torturing himself with hunger before overcoming temptation and presenting the eggs to the monastery. Rasputin told him of his own lusts, his shame, the light he had seen in the Pokrovskoye Forest, and his fear that it was mere hallucination.

Ideas, half formed but vivid, tumbled from him. Makari found a troubled and powerful character at the onset of manhood; Rasputin listened, rapt, to his stories of St. Petersburg. He noted the starets's stock-in-trade, what his daughter called "that strange force of will . . . that almost magnetic glance," which he was to acquire so strongly himself. For his part Makari sensed the young peasant's spirituality and intensity. Like Zosima, who formed "close soul-attachments precisely to those who were more sinful," he listened to the peasant's confessions with sympathy. They prayed together, successful starets and acolyte. Makari told Rasputin that God was everywhere, not simply in holy places. "My son, I have seen that your vision was real," he assured Rasputin. "The Holy Mother did come to you, and you must follow her."

To be a starets was thought a noble calling, an expression of selflessness. To a sly man, and references to Rasputin's "foxiness" match even those to his eyes, it was a career, the most brilliant open to a peasant and the one most suited to Rasputin's temperament. A handful of his peasant contemporaries hauled themselves out of the ranks of the army to become generals; a few became writers and scholars; rather more succeeded in commerce. Rasputin was indisciplined, unbookish, and no tradesman. The church offered little to an ambitious and religious peasant with a wife. The married "white clergy" served as parish priests, confined to the villages; paid a pittance of sixty rubles a year, they extracted what more they could from baptisms, weddings, and funerals, and by saying prayers for the souls of the dead. They were distinguished from their parishioners only by their clerical habits and the length of their beards. The heights of the Orthodox hierarchy were reserved for the celibate and educated "black clergy."

No barriers, however, applied to staretsy. Dostoyevsky's Elder Zosima was a former army officer from a landowning family. Others were peasants, and some, the "holy fools," were half-wits. The requirements were self-confidence, insight into unhappy minds, and the ability to calm them; Rasputin possessed all of these. A good starets dressed himself up in philosophy, complex or homespun, but the fundamental skill was to seek out nervous and troubled people and lead them by the nose. Certainly effort and sacrifice were needed to acquire the carapace of a holy man. Rasputin's exceptional persistence and physical endurance were equal to the prologue as a pilgrim, roaming on foot from shrine to shrine. The eventual rewards were glittering: influence, fame, mastery, the temporal exploitation of spiritual gifts. Rasputin discovered his career.

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After absorbing all he could from Makari, Rasputin returned to Pokrovskoye. The visit had changed him. "It left anguish in his soul," the investigator concluded, "in the form of extreme nervousness, constant restless, jerky movements, incoherent speech, the permanent interchange of extreme nervous agitation and subsequent depression." The lout had found God and turned manic depressive.

Sophisticated enemies were to recognize the tensions caused by extravagant gifts of insight and persuasion to a wayward mind. "His remarkable intelligence was in search of some unknown religious path," wrote the politician Mikhail Rodzianko. "It is clear that his soul lacked firm Christian principles, therefore in his outlook on life there were no corresponding moral virtues." He had qualities of perception and spirituality, Rodzianko conceded, but these were present in "a man entirely free from any morality, greedy for profit, brave to the point of impudence."

His fellow villagers had a plainer view. They thought Rasputin was crazed. "I went with my mother to Tyumen and on the way met Rasputin returning from Verkhoturye," the witness Podshivalov said. "He seemed to me to have become a madman. He was coming home then without his hat, with loose, flowing hair, and he sang something all the time and gesticulated." His neighbor Raspopov saw him praying in the village church. "Rasputin impressed me as a man not in his right mind," he recollected. "Standing in the church, he stared wildly and looked about him and very often began singing in a loud voice."

Rasputin was so unhinged, the obituarist Yablonsky said, that he would appear in church before the priest arrived, take his place in the choir, and strike his head on the floor until blood flowed. "He started to speak mysteriously, incoherently, laying claims to prophecy and foretelling," Yablonsky added. "When asked something, he would be silent for a long time as if thinking hard, and then, sort of half awake, utter a few mysterious desultory phrases."

That Rasputin became "a 'new' man" was beyond dispute; the investigator reported that he "gave up drinking, smoking, eating meat, he started to shun people, he prayed a lot, he learned to read church Slavonic." He stopped smoking and meat eating for good; drink was another matter. He committed parts of the Bible—phrases, verses, half chapters—to memory and mumbled them as he walked. He pored over the intricacies of the Orthodox liturgy. The villagers did not know why. Some thought that the beating he had taken from Kartavtsev was responsible. Kartavtsev himself claimed that his victim "became somewhat strange, even doltish." They did not yet suspect that the "snotter" was a guru in the making, an apprentice starets.

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Within a month of his return to the village, Rasputin set out on new pilgrimages. It was a rite of passage for a starets to undergo hardship and self-denial as proof of spirituality. A classic route involved isolation in a forest skite or a cell in a hermitage; though he was often misdescribed as one, Rasputin was not a monk, and he was far from solitary. He was bursting with curiosity about people and places. The pilgrim trail was the natural place for him to win his holy spurs. "During a number of years Rasputin visited scores of cloisters in Siberia and Russia," the investigator noted. "From his journeys he sometimes returned with two or three women wanderers clothed in monastic garments."

He became a strannik wanderer, a raw-boned young man, his face pale and intense, with a nose that seemed slapped on with a trowel. His farmboy wrists were thick, his fingers slim and long, playing constantly with his beard. He wore a sheepskin coat, boots, and a peasant cap, and carried a backpack with a spare blouse and bark sandals, a cross and Bible, water bottle, knife, icon, and an emergency loaf of bread. His feet were bound to the calf with strips of cloth, and he muttered, "*Kyrie eleison, Kyrie eleison,*" "Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy," to their rhythm as he walked.

A ragged army of similar believers and mystics traversed the empire, bowed with fatigue, plodding with staffs in their hands. Some went barefoot in winter with chains on their legs, rejoicing in the trail of blood they left on the snow. They worried the police. The Okhrana chief Vassilyev thought they represented the "out-and-out anarchist element among Russian peasants"; the strannik, he said, "possesses no ID papers or else false ones, he conceals his real name with the utmost persistence, and thus succeeds in avoiding all social obligations." They survived thanks to sympathizers in the villages, who "supplied them secretly with food and lodging in dark cellars," asking in return that they light candles for them in some distant holy place, or bring holy water the next time they called.

Passing through these hidden rooms, the wanderers became *podpolniky*, "underground men," free from official identity and earthly restraint. It was

Vassilyev's duty to suppress them, in the interest of public order, but he admitted that "in practice this was uncommonly difficult." Ordinary folk admired their fervor and endurance. Russians had a special feeling for the Sermon on the Mount—"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"—and pitied those in need. They remembered the robbers next to the crucified Christ and thought them *neshastnye,* "unfortunates." It was an honor to give a strannik food and shelter.

Rasputin spoke later of his wandering years to his daughter and to a monk, Iliodor, who took verbatim notes of his conversations. In them the pilgrim talked of the hope of "finding the road to salvation" that drove him to abandon his happy existence in Pokrovskoye, where, he said, "I loved the world and everything in it. . . . I drove, I fished, I plowed, and my life was pretty easy for a peasant." He walked up to thirty miles a day, often along riverbanks, where he felt close to nature and to a Savior who had walked on water. He was often hungry and did not change his underclothing, or touch his flesh with his hands, for six months at a time. "I did this for the sake of experience and trial," he said.

Storms, wind, and rain passed over him. He fasted on hot days and worked with peasants in the fields to pay for food, at times rushing into the bushes to pray. He slept in doss-houses, cloisters, and peasant cabins, often walking for three days at a stretch, eating little. The trakts had post stations every twenty miles with fresh horses for richer travelers; there he bedded down in the stables. On lesser routes he slept in the rough between villages. Sometimes he wore penitential chains. "I found greatest comfort in daily readings from the Gospel," Iliodor quotes him, "though I did more thinking than reading." He was attacked more than once by wolves, but they did him no harm. His only dread was of the devil. "The evil one disturbed me, saying, 'You are exalted, you have no fears,' " he claimed.

He wandered as far as Mount Athos, two thousand miles from Pokrovskoye, descending the Volga and crossing the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea for the Greek peninsula, whose ancient monasteries clung to rocky sea cliffs amid stands of pine and oleander. It was the holiest fastness of the Orthodox Church. Since the eleventh century it had been the preserve of bearded men, for no man with a smooth face and no female of any sort was allowed entry. Even cows were excluded; the cattle grazing in the steep fields were all bulls. Seeing a young novice being ravaged by monks in the woods, Rasputin found "nothing but dirt, vermin, and moral filth," and turned back for Siberia.

Occasional sightings were reported back to Pokrovskoye. Rasputin's age made him stand out, for it was unusual for a strannik to be in his prime. For most, wanderings were an interlude between the end of their working lives and death. They sold their farm tools and livestock, distributed the money to their children, and set off for the holy places. They were working for their tickets to

heaven; Rasputin was preparing for life. He was seen in a monastery in the Urals; he appeared among the fishermen of the upper Tura, helping them bring in their nets, teaching them psalms, and revealing that he was sent to them by God. Other accounts had him holding strange ceremonies with girls in forest deeps, weaving crosses from boughs, kissing the women, and then dancing and singing. The caresses and songs, he said, cheered the Lord.

He developed the inner hardness typical of the strannik. Okhrana agents found it impossible to interrogate men toughened by hunger and distance, and made impervious to temporal authority by their faith. A fresh complaint, more serious than theft, had been received by the police. A veil dancer with a traveling circus, Lisavera Nikolaievna Bul, claimed that Rasputin had attempted to murder her in September 1900. She told police in Tobolsk that she had seen him forcibly interfering with two young girls in a field. When she intervened to protect them, Rasputin attacked her, and she had to flee and hide. The police had their doubts—the alleged incident had taken place several hundred miles from Tobolsk and Bul claimed to have covered the distance to the provincial capital at impossible speed—and Rasputin breezily denied any knowledge of it.

His self-confidence, already remarkable, was further strengthened by the fund of stories he picked up on the road. He transfixed listeners with his talk of holy places, the silence of the Siberian forests, and the feral beauty of the open steppe; of boats laden with sheep and fruit on great rivers and Tartar town bazaars flashing with primal colors—all recounted with "that absent look in which seemed mirrored the lands he had visited and the strange adventures he had met."

Praskovya ran the farm while her husband was away. She did it well enough to afford two servants, Katya Ivanovna, a tough, leathery woman, and Dunia Bekyeshova, the pretty ladies' maid who had taken pity on poor Grischa and left him clothes during the summerhouse humiliation by her mistress. Maria Rasputin says that Dunia had fallen in love with her father and was happy simply to be in his home. He roamed so widely that Praskovya took him for a stranger on his sudden reappearances. He entered the kitchen without knocking, smiling through the tangle of his beard. Then his wife would cry "Grischa!" and fall into his arms.

He returned often enough to father three children, his son, Dmitry, in 1897, and the girls, Maria and Varvara, in 1898 and 1900. While he was in the village he practiced the healing of souls. The men laughed at the idea of his becoming a starets. The women were less sure. They began calling on him for advice, bringing with them hysterical girls, lame widows, sick children. Sometimes they went with him to pray in the forests, where they made crosses in the trees. He calmed them, listened, inspired serenity. News spread that Pokrovskoye harbored a healer who was a reader of thoughts and an interpreter of inner secrets.

He also dug out a pit—some called it a chapel—under the stables in one of his barns. He explained to Iliodor that he built it and hung it with candles and icons he had collected on his travels because it felt good to pray there, kneeling on the beaten earth. He cried with anguish and penitence, chanting "Lord have mercy upon us," and when his mood changed wildly sang psalms and songs of jubilation. "Whenever I was free during the day I'd return there, and I found that my thoughts did not scatter in that narrow place," he told Iliodor. The nature of those thoughts, and of what took place in the chapel, perverted, perhaps non-Orthodox, became matters of mystery and concern that spread as far as the provincial capital, Tobolsk. Rasputin was gaining a reputation.

Meetings were held in the "chapel under the floor." They were attended by a small circle of admirers, including his brother-in-law Nikolai Raspopov and two sisters, Katya and Dunia Pechyorkins. Villagers told the investigator that their attempts to find out what was happening were "without success, for it was impossible for a stranger to get to these gatherings." Strange rumors were afloat. Before the meetings the Pechyorkins girls were said to wash Rasputin in the bathhouse, "drink the water in which he washed," then carry him to the dugout, where they "sing church verses and dance."

The journalist "E.S.," who interviewed villagers for the magazine *Svoboda* shortly after Rasputin's murder, wrote of sex orgies taking place under the barn. "As soon as the stars appear in the night sky," he was told, "Rasputin and his household and admirers bring logs into a pit and set a fire." A basin with incense and roots was placed in a tripod over the fire to give off a thick scent of lust. "Holding each other's hands," E.S. continued, "men and women go around the pit and sing, repeating one phrase: 'Our sin for the sake of repentance, O God!' " Sighs and moans were heard as they ran around the fire, faster and faster. "The fire dies out, and Rasputin's voice is heard in the darkness: 'Test your flesh.' Everybody throws himself on the ground. A melee takes place, and an unrestrained orgy starts, the so-called 'mutual sin.' "

Rasputin's healing sessions were already a challenge to the authority of Father Pyotr, the new village priest in Pokrovskoye. The priest seized on the subterranean chapel as evidence that his rival was a blasphemer. His insistence that Rasputin had created a cult of "sacrificial praying" persuaded the bishop of Tobolsk to launch an investigation. It was the first in a series of attempts to discover whether the young Rasputin had strayed into heresy during his wandering years.

The question became critical once Rasputin was close to the throne. Conventional Russia had a particular horror of cults. The reasons were partly moral—

official reports stressed that cults led to "monstrous scenes of sensuality"—and partly political. Since Peter the Great, reformed Orthodoxy had been the state religion of Russia. The tsar had spiritual as well as temporal authority, and to leave his church was tantamount to sedition.

Priests swore an oath of loyalty to the tsar. They were often police informers, obliged to override the secrecy of the confessional and report any member of their flock who expressed treasonable or rebellious views. This included membership in a cult, for which Rasputin was investigated. His later status as the "Friend" of the imperial family thus had a particular resonance; the head of the church was consorting with a suspected heretic.

Siberia was a dumping ground for sectarians and cultists, with whom young Rasputin could have come into contact. The most numerous were the Old Believers, *staroviery.* In the mid-seventeenth century Russian Orthodox liturgy had been reformed to bring it back in line with Greek Orthodoxy. The differences were arcane and largely numerical—the Russian cross had eight points to the Greek four; the Greeks extended three fingers to make the sign of the cross against the Russians' two—but the leader of the staroviery, Archpriest Avvakum, accepted Siberian exile and death at the stake rather than submit to Greek practice.

Thousands followed him across the Urals. Many were burned in fires set by police agents or by themselves, for they believed that Moscow was the third and last Rome; the changes in Orthodox liturgy were evidence to them of the rule of the Antichrist and the beginning of the end of the world. The persecution continued as the investigation into Rasputin began. A bishop, Methodius, who had given the sacraments to an Old Believer, was transported to Siberia in irons and then, manacled to a horse, ordered to ride for seven hundred miles to his place of exile. He died, aged seventy-eight, on the track. Old Believers, however, were known and respected for their sobriety, discipline, hard work, and financial acumen.

Rasputin showed no signs of these qualities, and he made the sign of the cross with three fingers. There were other, more bizarre sects; they revealed the intensity of the Russian soul but, with a single exception, no obvious links to Rasputin. *Raskolniks* held the government and all its works to flow from the Antichrist. The first Russian census was held in 1898, while Rasputin was wandering. The people of one raskolnik village dug four tunnels when they heard of it. As the census takers approached, they held their own burial service and jumped singing into the tunnels, walling them up to die of suffocation. Strangling was the preserve of *dushtely,* who cut short the pain of the terminally ill by choking them from "motives of human pity and retrospective pity for Christ and His Calvary." In another extreme of sacrifice, a peasant, transported to Siberia for slaying his wife and children under the inspiration of Abraham's

near-slaying of Isaac, nailed his feet and left hand to a cross before driving his right hand back onto a nail placed in the crosspiece. He was found under a crown of thorns, declaring that he was dying for the sins of the world.

Communities of Siberian *skoptsy*, "eunuchs," believed that sexual abstinence was a prerequisite for entry into Paradise. Their biblical reference was Matthew 19:12: "For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," Matthew quoted Jesus. "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." The skoptsy held that the first apostles were castrates who had undergone baptism by fire. They cut off their testicles to achieve a similar state of grace, destroying the infected tissue in the wound with a branding iron. Some strove for perfect purity by having the penis itself hacked off. Skoptsy were prosperous and law-abiding, but a visitor was unnerved by their high-pitched voices, "womenlike hips," and beardless faces.

Dyrniky, "holers," prayed to the sky through holes in the roofs of their cabins. *Kamenshchiky* defied the sins of the world in remote mountain fastnesses. *Bezpopovty* thought that the world would soon end, so corrupted was it by the priesthood. They knelt for hours, their mouths opened to the rainy sky to receive drops of blessing they believed were distilled in heaven. Worshipers of the Holy Ghost breathed deeply as they prayed, hoping to inhale the third person of the Trinity. The famous portrait painter Borovikovsky collapsed through breathing too intensely during one of these prayer sessions. Members of the sect claimed that he had died of a surfeit of the Holy Ghost. Communities of *dukhobory*, "spirit warriors" known as Siberian Quakers, were pacifists who stripped naked when Cossack recruiting sergeants came calling.

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Rasputin was no pacifist, castrate, or priest hater. Elements in his life, however—lust, power over women, the chapel-pit—provided ready ammunition for those wishing to link him with the cult that provided the most vicarious thrill of disapproval, the *khlysty*. The word, meaning "whips," repulsed and thrilled respectable Russia. Khlysty existed in small groups called arks, each of which was led by a "pilot." They drew their name from the birch rods they used to flagellate each other to reach ecstasy. Their number was officially put at 120,000; the cult was illegal, and this figure, and much of the supposition about them, was guesswork.

The cult had strong Siberian roots, running back to the seventeenth century. It was founded by an army deserter, Danilo Filipov, who denied that a barrier existed between the human and the divine. He claimed to be a living God and declared his follower Ivan Suslov to be his Christ. Filipov was exiled to

Siberia. Suslov was crucified on the Kremlin wall in Moscow. In khlyst legend he rose from the dead and was again tortured, flayed, and crucified; the shroud in which the body was wrapped turned into a second skin, and he rose again from the dead before ascending to heaven in 1718 at the age of one hundred.

In its early stages self-denial was central to khlysty. Filipov laid down twelve commandments. His followers were forbidden to drink alcohol, to swear, or to marry; if already married they had to abandon their wives and call their children "sins." They could then take "spiritual wives," but no sex was permitted. If a man could be divine, however, as they believed, it followed that he was beyond sin. A cult leader named Radaev was the first to exploit this teaching by using his supposed divinity to pleasure himself. He told his disciples that chastity was no more than the sin of pride. He did not act of his own will, he said, but through the urgings of God. If he wished to have sex with a woman, she was obliged to consent because his demand expressed the will of God. The Radaev line was attractive to charismatic men who imposed themselves as "pilots" or "Christs" on obedient flocks. Arks were established, whose members were appointed Holy Mothers, apostles, angels, and prophetesses by their pilots.

Pilots admonished their followers to lead blameless, sex-free lives between rituals. These were held in forest clearings or secret dugouts beneath barns and cabins—hence the interest aroused by Rasputin's underground chapel. The rite began with singing and drumming in air heated by bonfires. Urged on by drumrolls, the members of the ark danced themselves into the state of *radeinie*, "frenzy," necessary to ensure their possession by the Holy Spirit. As this was attained, with the help of birch-branch whips, they began to prophesy and to shout nonsense words in what they called "the language of Jerusalem." Possessed, they shook, stamped, and fell to the ground until—using sin to drive out sin—they began indiscriminately to fuck. This they called the love of Christ.

Khlysty were secretive, since conviction of being one of them brought a long prison term and an uncomradely flogging by a prison warder. Okhrana interrogations of cultists confirmed, however, that they believed that man could be reunited with God during his lifetime, and that Christ was constantly reincarnated to walk on earth in the form of a peasant. They insisted that sin was necessary for unity with God, for without sin there could be no repentance, and without repentance there could be no redemption. "This doubtful view of morals led them to all manner of extremely grave sexual excesses," the Okhrana's Vassilyev wrote, "which over and over again brought them into conflict with the authorities of both church and state."

Horrified churchmen were told by ex-khlysts of ceremonies where the bonfire became a pillar of flame that, surrounded by swallows, soared into the sky; where the pilot took women by falling on them "in the form of a sweet-smelling cloud," and where there was no sin. Others spoke of dancing around boiling

cauldrons that gave off a golden steam. A pilot described how the devil had come to him each day in the guise of an angel, bringing books from heaven that revealed all the thoughts and sins of his novices. Armed with this insight, the pilot explained that he had easily convinced the novices of his saintliness and the need to obey his demands for sex.

The head of the tsar's secret service, Gen. Alexander Spiridovich, described how half-naked khlysts knelt in front of the pilot and the Blessed Mother to be whipped, before forming a moving circle and turning the rods on themselves while chanting:

> *I whip. I whip. I search for Christ.*
> *Come down to us, Christ, from the seventh heaven,*
> *Come with us, Christ, into the sacred circle,*
> *Come down to us,*
> *Holy Spirit of the Lord.*

The celebrants wore white or black robes of calico, "tunics of fervor" that commemorated the robe worn by Ivan Suslov during his crucifixion. They began their rites with chanting. First a man started to beat his feet in rhythm to the song; a woman joined him. As they became sexually aroused, the others waved their robed arms like strange white birds. After this came the "fervor of David," in which the chanting and the rhythmic shaking of the body became more urgent as the khlysts sensed the approach of the Holy Ghost. They began to whip each other, crying, "Mortify my flesh!" As they approached hysteria, the pilot took a woman, and "all surrendered to debauchery, without regard to age or parentage." Spiridovich, a sober and professional policeman, estimated that there were khlyst arks in at least thirty Russian provinces at the time of Rasputin's wanderings.

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The only evidence that Rasputin fell in with khlysty during his roamings came from his daughter Maria. Lodging with a peasant family whose daughter was ill with fever, he soothed the child and was invited by the grateful parents to a ceremony they were holding that night in a barn. The father, a stocky man with a short, blond beard, was a khlyst pilot. He wore a black robe. A fire was lit, and the devotees danced around him in increasing frenzy.

Commanding them to love one another, the pilot dropped his robe. Rasputin, "not," his daughter said, "wishing to be conspicuous," also stripped naked. As a woman flung herself on the pilot, Rasputin was tugged to the ground by the pilot's wife. Women outnumbered men, so he had "to serve double, even triple duty" until the pilot, equally exhausted, donned his robe and announced the

ceremony to be over. The congregation dressed and walked home with "an air of respectability." Rasputin left the family the next morning, kneeling to pray in a hidden spot for fear that the night's sex had offended God. "To his great joy," his daughter wrote, "he found that prayer came easily." Finding that meditation flowed so easily after a khlyst orgy, Rasputin concluded that the khlysts were "obviously on the right track."

Maria Rasputin, writing many years after her father's death, had a vested interest in supplying her audience with the erotic and the bizarre. Other of her claims—that her father took part in a black mass in which the Lord's Prayer was recited in reverse while wine was poured into the navel of a girl lying naked on an altar; that another khlyst pilot lectured her father on world religions, stressing the erotic nature of Hindu temple statuary and convincing him that early Christians believed in "love feasts"—seem fanciful.

It is possible, however, even likely that Rasputin came across khlysty in his time on the road; khlysts were numerous enough, and all Russia had heard of them. In his conversations with Iliodor, he admitted that his fellow stranniky had developed a lassitude toward evil, and that "only one in a hundred" of them followed in the true footsteps of Christ. "It is good to wander, but not for many years," he said. "I met pilgrims who wandered for a lifetime, and it happened that the enemy [the devil] had sown his heresies among the poor souls."

Certainly Rasputin shared the khlyst philosophy that sin is a necessary part of redemption. It provided a convenient justification for his lifestyle, and he was often recorded using it as an excuse for his excesses. The journalist from *Svoboda* quoted a remark Rasputin made as a young man that was classic to khlyst thinking: "I hold myself a higher being and one can be saved only through me," villagers in Pokrovskoye cited Rasputin as saying. "To achieve this, one ought to merge with me, body and soul. Everything that issues from me is a source of light, which absolves from sin." As an older man Rasputin told women that making love to him would purify them of sin; it was an explicit part of his seduction technique.

If he borrowed freely from the khlysty, however, no formal proof that Rasputin was a member of the cult was established. Father Beriozkin, the leader of the bishop of Tobolsk's investigating party, found no evidence to substantiate Father Pyotr's charges when he arrived in Pokrovskoye. Women who had taken part in prayer meetings in the underground chapel denied that any orgies had taken place. They said that Rasputin simply prayed, fasted, and "served God in the deepest contrition and submission." Police visited the cellar and found only icons and candles.

Rasputin became powerful enough to ensure that later investigations were short-lived. After his death the provisional government inquiry took a worldly view of his early escapades; it found that he suffered "terrible explosions of sen-

suality" but dismissed the cult accusation as unprovable. His conquests were ascribed to the easy virtue of Siberian women; Western travelers described how posses of them staggered about after village fetes with ribbons in their hair, blind drunk, setting straw bales alight and jumping over them, throwing snow at men and trying to drag them to the ground, "slipping over together shrieking on the ice, throwing up their legs, and revealing the most remarkable sights."

The bishop's men duly returned to Tobolsk, leaving Father Pyotr in angry silence and Rasputin as a peasant worthy of ecclesiastical interrogation, set aside from the herd of Pokrovskoye. The suspicion, however, lingered, its destructive capacity intact.

CHAPTER 4

Breakthrough

Rasputin liked to leave Pokrovskoye in the late spring and return in the fall to spend the winter. It was a pattern that stayed with him for much of his life. Siberians love their winters for the clarity of the sky and the purity of the air. His traveling season also meant that he avoided the hard labor of plowing and harvesting; his father jeered that he "turned pilgrim out of laziness." His summer expedition of 1903 took him to the holy places of Kiev.

Half a million other pilgrims visited the old capital of Orthodoxy that year. They lodged in great communal dormitories, eating bread and drinking holy water, kissing the gold cross on the sarcophagus of St. Sergei, and trembling "as in fever" when they approached the catacombs of the Pecherskaya Monastery, which housed the remains of a hundred saints. "The silence seems to breathe," Rasputin recalled, "and the saints sleep simply without silver shrines in oak coffins. . . . They were martyred by barbarians, now we torture ourselves. . . . These sanctuaries were hewn from the rock by the hand of God." He was overcome by a sense of his own worthlessness, and his soul "filled with a great sadness" as he reflected on the vanity of life.

He was in a more boisterous mood when he met Aron Simanovich, a jeweler to whom he made these remarks, a compulsive gambler and influence peddler whose family had shops in the city. Simanovich had no interest in run-of-the-mill pilgrims, but he instantly recognized the young Siberian as an exceptional character. He found a "real Russian peasant," a robust fellow of medium height, with heavy, thick, chestnut hair that fell to his shoulders and gave him a monkish look. His beard was tangled, but he carried a comb to slick

his oiled hair over a bump on his forehead. It was his eyes that set him apart from the pilgrim mass; they "riveted a man and at the same time caused an unpleasant feeling."

The future interested Rasputin very little, Simanovich thought; he was "altogether a careless man and lived only in the present." He did not like regular work because he was "a lazy man," but he was physically strong. He prayed "little and unwillingly" but talked incessantly about God. He enjoyed having long conversations on religion, and his lack of education did not prevent him from philosophizing. The spiritual life interested him greatly. "He differed from other doubtful personalities, clairvoyants, foretellers, and the like by an amazing willpower," Simanovich noticed. "His strong personality required the exposure of power. He liked to give orders and to be in command over people." This "yearning for power" was a key to his character and career. Rasputin needed to have influence over people; only the profession of starets offered it to him, a peasant. Simanovich later became his close confidant; eventually he became his biographer, writing with considerable insight into his character. He recognized that the young Rasputin was masterful and mentally tough, and he marked him down as a future contact for a third reason, equally important to a man dealing with the vanity and foibles of the rich: "he was a connoisseur of the human psyche."

On the long return to Siberia, Rasputin stopped at the midway point in Kazan. The ancient Bogoroditsky Convent in the city had been built to house the icon of the Black Virgin of Kazan, whose darkly sensual and majestic features were said to have been dug up from the earth to perform miracles for those who prayed before her. The icon was so precious that it had been moved first to Moscow and then to St. Petersburg, but a likeness remained in Kazan that reminded Rasputin of his vision in Pokrovskoye. The city itself had been the Tartar capital, a place of mosques, before it was sacked by Ivan the Terrible; Tartars in blue and silver coats and red leather slippers still haggled with Chinese and Turks in its markets. Rafts of timber floated down the mile-wide Volga, and barges filled with southern convicts were hauled upriver on their mournful passage to Siberia. Twenty-kopeck whores worked cheap bars built on stilts along the waterfront. Houses of lavender, crimson, and chocolate stood on high slopes above the river. They were decorated with belvederes, straggling annexes, balconies, pigeon houses, the courtyards overgrown with grass. Kazan was a city of ideas; Leo Tolstoy and Lenin had studied at its university, where Nikolai Lobachevski had originated the theory of non-Euclidian geometry.

Here Rasputin met society people for the first time. Yablonsky said that this happened after he fell in with the widow of a rich merchant, Madame Bashmakova, on his pilgrimage. "Bashmakova had just buried her husband and

was in great sorrow," the obituarist wrote. "She took him to Kazan and introduced him to prominent merchants." She may have; she could also have been a creature of hearsay. Yablonsky is alone in citing her as the person who brought Rasputin out of peasant Russia and gave him his first scent of the world above it. The secret police, whose meticulous reports became the only reliable guide to a shapeless life, were not yet interested in him; he was another ragged figure with backpack and Bible to them. It is plausible that Bashmakova provided the breakthrough. Such women—"nervous, with wretched soul, with a grief they could not get rid of"—were to become a vital part of his circle. The church could not give them the religious consolation they craved, but Rasputin's skills as a starets "almost always brought elevation, interest, and, to a mournful soul, cheerfulness, hope, solace, and even joy."

He was able to exploit the high-strung, those with inner tensions that inhibited their powers of observation. His time with Makari in the forests of Verkhoturye was paying handsome dividends. His critics, such as Georgiy Chavelski, chaplain to the armed forces, allowed that "you couldn't not notice him." His personality and speech bore the imprint of "something mysterious," with piercing eyes in deep sockets and an unkempt beard. His movements remained jerky, and his speech, laced with references to God, was "abrupt, nebulous, and enigmatic." His opinions were bold, audacious, imperative; he expressed them with absolute conviction, regardless of the person he was talking to. "All that surprised and astounded some," said Chavelski, "and subjugated others."

Rasputin made a deep impression on Kazan's clerical elite. Father Michael, a teacher at the theological academy and a future bishop, introduced him to Andrey, the bishop of Kazan, and to Archimandrite Chrisanthos, a fashionable preacher and the head of the Orthodox mission to Korea. Rasputin was passing the point where he was seen as a simple pilgrim. Those who admired him now thought of him as a starets, exceptionally young, perhaps, but full-fledged; those who did not called him a *yurodivye*, a holy fool. The clerics found him natural and sincere. It was an important breakthrough, in terms of class and intellect; Andrey was born a prince, while Father Michael, a lean and nervous Jewish convert, was a leading church thinker.

Social superiors and the rich did not inhibit Rasputin; he retained the wanderer's indifference to authority. They were more easily malleable than the poor, particularly if they had a religious bent or a melancholy for him to work on. They had rarely—the women almost never—spoken at any length with a peasant, and never on a subject as intimate as the soul; factors and land agents dealt with the ex-serfs on country estates that their owners visited only for a few months in the summer. Yet nine out of ten Russians were peasants. The image of the devout muzhik was sentimental—even patriotic—bedrock to such people; unchallenging, inferior, a person they could patronize with a

warm glow of charity. Rasputin, who never dressed or behaved as anything but a peasant, with a fierce pride in his origins, was the ideal made flesh. "In his natural coarseness they perceived only the simplicity of a man belonging to the lower classes," the imperial tutor Gilliard wrote. "They were enraptured with the 'naïveté' of this simple soul."

Rasputin talked to the clerics of his visions, the forces that drove him to seek salvation on the road, his struggle to attain God. The merchants' ladies found him exotic, animal. "A striking attitude, simple and imaginative speech; eyes that seemed to pierce you," one recollected. "A strong and powerful character; this, and the fact that the starets seemed to have the gift of hypnotizing those around him." Rasputin exercised the slick charisma of the khlyst pilot on them with effect. "I do not know of any instance of any lady actually giving herself to him or joining him in orgies," a horrified Kazan worthy wrote. "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."

Temptation and denial; they were becoming Rasputin's stock-in-trade. In another incident he stressed temptation and salvation, a headier brew. "I was walking down the street and I witnessed the following picture," a respectable Kazan matron, the mother of twenty- and sixteen-year-old girls, wrote in a letter published in the magazine *Svoboda* after the murder. "Grigory Rasputin comes out of the bathhouse with my two daughters. One should be a mother to comprehend the horror and madness that seized me. I stopped and could not utter a word. I was just standing like this, silent. 'The real light of salvation has shone now'; those were the words of the starets." A bathhouse, salvation—conquest.

Provincial Russia was quiet and lethargic, overlaid with "the torpidity of peace, the calm on land which is found at sea." The governor's mansion and the Orthodox cathedral stood above Kazan, stolid and authoritarian, while the sluggish river ran at its foot. In its streets gendarmes saluted passing officials like metronomes; "half the population of Russia," a visiting Scotsman wrote, "seems made up of officials engaged in governing the other half." Rasputin broke its placid calm—a matron bedded, girls led astray, the acrid whiff of sex, and the man a peasant!—but the outrage did not reach Bishop Andrey. Rasputin's indiscretions were wild and unconcealed, but they did not pierce him in the eyes of those who believed in him; they smashed against the piety of his exterior. The bishop wrote to Archimandrite Feofan, inspector of the St. Petersburg theological academy, to tell him that he had met a man of God.

It was a gracious and trusting favor. Feofan was a thin little figure, tubercular, black hair sticking to a bony skull. But he was a man of influence, spiritual

adviser and confessor to the empress, a saintly and trusting thinker with a penchant for yurodivy and peasant prophets. Andrey suggested that Rasputin visit the archimandrite in St. Petersburg. He supplied a letter of introduction.

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Rasputin returned to Pokrovskoye from Kazan in the early fall. The evidence of E. A. Kazakova is the earliest in a number of statements recorded by the investigator on his relations with his women admirers. She confirmed the strange goings-on in the village bathhouse and the khlystlike pattern of his modus operandi. She first met him on September 19, 1903, the day her sister Raisa Alexandrovna was buried. (Did Yablonsky mistake Kazakova for Bashmakova, and dead sister for dead husband? Perhaps, though capitalizing on grief was a constant in Rasputin's career.)

She testified: "A man in peasant clothes came to my apartment and, after kissing a lay sister who was reading the psalm book, asked if he could see me. When I came out to the stranger, he introduced himself as Grigory Efimovich Rasputin. He kissed me and said that there was something he wanted to talk to me about. I was extremely surprised by such behavior and said it was the day of my sister's funeral and I had no time to talk. He left."

Madame Kazakova was intrigued enough to make inquiries about the pushy peasant's conduct in Pokrovskoye. "I had private information that Rasputin preached in the village," she continued. "He told young girls that wanderers visit holy places in the disguise of novices, and that they rape girls and forbid them to say anything about it. To avoid these temptations, according to Rasputin's teaching, they had to kiss him until it was disgusting to be kissed."

Rasputin went to see Madame Kazakova again in October. "I asked him first thing whether it was true what I had heard about him," she said. "At first he said it was the teaching of the devil. But then he started to concur with this teaching. He said that the person confessing of sins to him should not be ashamed as he takes on the sin of the person.

"To verify the thoroughness of confession, he invited young girls and women to go with him to the bathhouse. Rasputin said that by kissing women and girls, he strengthened them against passion, while he himself looked on all people as his relatives."

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In December, Rasputin prepared to take up Bishop Andrey's introduction and make a preliminary reconnaissance of the capital. All Russians who felt their imagination mired in the darkness of the provinces strove to visit the city. It was the symbol of success, vibrant with riches, floating on the waters of the Neva "like a bark overladen with precious goods." Country folk turned their

steps to it by instinct. "It is as if Petersburg all by itself, with its name, its streets, its fog, rain, and snow, could resolve something or shed light on something," a provincial wrote. They swept into it on a huge wave, more than a thousand a week, most to become factory drudges, sleeping under rags on wooden shelves, a handful to succeed beyond their wildest hopes.

"He did not come to St. Petersburg by railway," Aron Simanovich said, "but on foot, and barefoot." It is a pretty legend, but no more. By 1903 the Trans-Siberian Railroad linked Tyumen with Moscow, where travelers transferred to the St. Petersburg line. Regular steamers sailed from Pokrovskoye to Tyumen, and the journey time from the village to the capital was cut from several weeks to four days.

The Trans-Siberian was cheap, fifteen rubles, or about $7.50, for a thousand miles. Immigrants attracted by grants of 140 acres of free land were pouring into Siberia at a rate of half a million a year. The railroad laid on seatless boxcars for them, "stables on wheels," Bassett Digby of the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* reported, packed with bearded ruffians with "flat, animal faces and wild, bloodshot eyes, one's conception of a shipwrecked crew after ten years on a desert island." On outward journeys from Moscow, the first car behind the locomotive had armed Cossacks at each end and heavily barred windows through which manacled hands stretched out; it was the arrestante wagon, transporting convicts and politicals to Siberian exile. The degree of degradation in fifth class shocked Digby, but Rasputin was inured to squalor, and the ticket was within his meager pocket.

He had an open and imaginative mind. He was fascinated by new inventions. He became a heavy user of automobiles, the telephone, and the telegraph, and bought himself a gramophone. Once he could afford it he traveled first class on trains, seducing women in sleeping compartments.

CHAPTER 5

Peter

Rasputin came to St. Petersburg like a projectile from the medieval past, tattered, black, muttering. The signs of his years on the road were unmistakable. He wore a cheap gray coat, with beggars' pockets that bulged as if full of food. His trousers were threadbare; the seat "flapped like a torn old hammock," the monk Iliodor wrote. They hung over peasant boots that were blackened with tar; it became part of his seduction technique to leave traces of tar on the skirts of fashionable ladies whom he embraced, as a keepsake. Ragged, dirty hair, with a rough middle parting like a tavern waiter's, ran into a tangled beard that looked like black sheepskin pasted onto his pale face. His lips were blue and sensual; above them his mustaches protruded "like two worn-out brushes." His eyes were steel gray, deep set under bushy eyebrows, sinking into pinpoints when he was angry. His fingernails were filthy and turned in; his hands were pockmarked. His body gave off "an indeterminate disagreeable smell."

Peasants—most peasants—found St. Petersburg awesome, foreign, almost astral after the villages; it sucked them in as unskilled laborers and gave them the witless faces of zombies. "Apart from muscle power, nothing significant is required—neither literacy, skill, nor even quick-wittedness," an observer wrote. "To carry iron, to load and unload wagons, to fetch and carry all kinds of heavy weights, to dig and prop up pits, these are some of the tasks of the chernorobachi. But his chief task is to survive on seventy kopecks a day." They clung to country practices, messing together in factory barracks, chewing sunflower seeds, whose black husks lay on the sidewalks like a carpet of flies, am-

35 cents.

bling past the glittering shops and hotels on their hours off with doltish wonderment.

From the moment of one's arrival at the Nikolaevsky railroad station, in its heart, the city clearly demonstrated Peter the Great's purpose in building it. It concentrated the power of the giant land, in politics, commerce, the arts; but it was not Russian, or truly European. It was moored at a swampy extremity of the empire it ruled, on a level with Greenland and southern Alaska, damp with sea fog in winter and hazed with the smoke of burning forests when summer lightning struck. Everything in it breathed falsehood, the novelist Nikolai Gogol thought; "the foreigners who have grown fat there no longer look like foreigners, while the Russian inhabitants have become somehow foreign, and are no longer either one thing or another." It had a smell, insistent, penetrating—"of leather, of sheepskin coats, of cabbage soup and sunflower oil"—and its crowds, Tartars in brilliant embroidered jackets, portly, turbaned mullahs, Kalmyks in shaggy caps, coachmen in long, padded gowns of sapphire blue and low, squashed top hats, seemed "so strange and unknown" that foreign visitors asked themselves if this could still be Europe.

It was built above water, bisected by canals and the smooth, gunmetal waters of the Neva. Its great architects, Rastrelli, Rossi, were Italian; the water, and the painted baroque palaces and avenues they set in angular formal gardens, provided its nickname, the Venice of the North. Its streets were wide and perfectly straight. The Nevsky Prospect ran for two and a half miles, flanked with palaces, churches, and arcades, green, red, and ocher, from the monument to St. Alexander Nevsky to the high, gilded spire of the Admiralty. The Morskaya, with luxury shops and hotels, opened onto immense twin squares dominated by the marble and granite Cathedral of St. Isaac. The colonnade of the Kazan Cathedral was modeled on St. Peter's in Rome. Tsars prayed before its miraculous icon of the Virgin of Kazan in time of war.

The skyline was even and linear, pierced by domes and spires and the new chimneys of power plants and factories; the bright facades were colonnaded and balconied, the prodigious squares artfully positioned. It was unmistakably a city built to a prescription by autocrats. It was dynastic, too; statues of Romanovs glared blindly at its flat horizons. Peter the Great reared his horse above a rock in the Senate Square, sitting astride Russia, Pushkin thought, "on her haunches rearing." He was dressed as a Roman emperor—fittingly, for *tsar* was a corruption of the Latin *caesar*. An embankment of pink Finnish granite faced the Neva along its southern bank. Along it ran the physical evidence of Romanov power: the barracks of crack infantry regiments, the artillery school, the imperial stud, foreign embassies, courthouses. The brownish ocher of the Winter Palace and the Hermitage fronted the river for five hundred yards; here the family housed a magnificent collection of paintings and antiquities that

spilled into basements. The windows of Nicholas II's study looked out over the cobbles of the palace square to an elegant crescent, a third of a mile long, which housed the general staff and the finance and foreign ministries.

On the northern shore, a golden spire soared as a landmark over the river and the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul. Generations of Romanovs were buried there. Close by was the fortress, its thick walls surrounded by water, in whose cells, their windows covered with iron sheets, generations of their enemies had languished. The summer palaces, parks, and gardens of the Romanovs were spread on the coast and inland, at Peterhof, Gatchina, Tsarskoye Selo. The city was bright with the colors of Romanov soldiers: Knights Guards in silver breastplates; Horse Grenadiers, whose silk-covered helmets ended in strips of yellow and red that floated in the wind. Others reflected the vastness of the empire; the Heir Apparent's Cossacks, in light blue uniforms, descendants of freebooters who had fled from serfdom in old Muscovy to the free lands of the lower Don and Dnieper, specialists now in repression, charging strikers in their short-stirruped style and sabering Jews in pogroms; Caucasians in red cloaks; Mongol troopers, their faces broad and flat, "with little black eyes, distant from each other like [those of] the Chinese."

Aristocrats and diplomats met at the Imperial Yacht Club on the Morskaya; with 150 members, it was the most exclusive in the empire. Tennis players, and less distinguished sailors, used the River Yacht Club on the Dvortzovaya Naberezhnava. Good food, political chat, and cards had been offered at the nearby English Club since 1770. Trotting races were held in Semyonovsky Square in fall and winter; the summer racecourse was on the Kolomyagskoye Chaussée. Skaters traced patterns in the Ice Palace of the Aquarium. Photography was popular; the imperial family were keen amateur photographers, and Rasputin loved to have his picture taken. Kodak had a busy shop at Bolshaya Konyushennaya. The winter circus and the all-year cirque moderne were often sold out. The five public theaters were thriving.

Many foreign businessmen were based in the city. Anglican, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic churches catered to them; there was a British-American Congregational chapel. Watkins's English bookshop on the Morskaya provided them with books, and they played golf on a nine-hole course. Russia's economy, the fastest growing of any major country, was fueled by investment from abroad. British and French investors held millions of rubles in "Russian Fives," high-yielding government bonds. Four out of five of the country's share transactions were handled in the stock exchange at the tip of Vasilevsky Island, next to an animal market where rare birds from Central Asia and dogs from the northern ice fields were sold. The city's banks controlled the mines and oil wells that Western engineers were sinking to slice out the mineral wealth of Siberia, the Don basin, and the hot shores of the Caspian.

The big hotels were European in standard but not in price. The Europe on the corner of Nevsky and Mikhailovskaya had rooms with baths from 7.5 rubles, about three dollars; dinner in its sumptuous rooms cost 3 rubles. The Cubat and the Bear were the grandest restaurants. The Donon was a favorite with a small garden for summer. Dinner cost 2.5 rubles, a dollar. Germans ate at Leinners on the Nevsky. Dominique's French restaurant was a haunt of officers—it had a billiard room. Filippov's on the Nevsky was the fashionable place for fast food, pies, and pastries. The rich traveled by *troika,* three-horse sleighs and carriages, glamorous and expensive, from 8 to 20 rubles by distance. *Izvoshchiks,* one-horse cabs that took two passengers, with hoods and rubber tires, cost 20 kopecks a quarter hour. Streetcars, electric, steam, and horse driven, were three kopecks a ride; city transportation suited the poor.

The poor were ill served in other respects. Students were a distinct group, a "university proletariat" with thin, pinched faces, in blue caps and shabby greatcoats, aged prematurely from hunger and exhaustion. Livelier souls formed circles to plot revolution and carry out assassinations; the Okhrana devoted much attention to spying on them. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's elder brother had been hanged for planning to kill the tsar with a bomb concealed in a medical dictionary; three government ministers had been murdered by students since the turn of the century. In the slums of the Vyborg district, families of workers shared small rooms, *kamorky,* each marking out its space with blankets, sleeping on cots that touched each other. The streets were "ashy and indistinct," turning the passersby into shadows. The faces of the "gray human streams" who toiled in the industrial plants were "utterly smoke-sodden . . . with bluish veins." Single men lived on plank shelves that reached to the ceilings of dormitories, their diet black bread and cabbage soup with cucumber, fresh in summer, salted in winter.

A vigor strode the city; it was busy with the future, a world center of ballet, petroleum chemistry, opera, physiology. It had become a rage in the West, for its ballet, for its fabulous Fabergé jewelery, for its caviar and the vodka used in newfangled cocktails. Young Vaslav Nijinsky was starting his career at the imperial ballet school, from which Fokine and Pavlova had recently graduated; Diaghilev was editing *Mir Iskousstva, World of Art.* The great bass Fyodor Chaliapin, born in a slum, was bringing an actor's craft to opera for the first time. Prokofiev had just entered the conservatory, to be taught by Rimsky-Korsakov, as Rachmaninov had been before him; Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* was attracting the interest of Stanislavsky and his new "method" acting. Ivan Pavlov was about to win a Nobel Prize for his experiments on conditioned reflexes at the Institute of Experimental Medicine; Dmitri Mendeleyev, formulator of the periodic law, was still professor at the university's chemistry faculty.

It was, too, a nervous time, of extreme thoughts, fear, of the poet Valery Bryusov's Pale Horse, whose apocalyptic rider charged with a deadening shriek

into the storm of cars, buses, whirling signs, cracking whips, and screaming newsboys. "Time quivers and the Look is Terror," Bryusov wrote. "In letters of fire the Horseman's scroll spells Death. The crowd tramples madly. Terror stays no one." Then the sudden dream of destruction passed; "only a woman from a whorehouse and an escaped madman still stretch their hands toward the vanished vision."

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Rasputin took to it, without fuss. The city, restless and satiated, was ready for him. Its summer nights were "phosphorescent, crazy, voluptuous," the novelist Alexis Tolstoy wrote, and in the long winter darkness, green tables flashed with gold and couples embraced behind its windows as troikas galloped outside. A new fever had come with the boom, and the city craved sensation. The law courts were crowded "with hysterical women, listening eagerly to details of bloody and prurient crimes."

Hatred and contempt stalked the rich-poor divide. Nijinsky had come from a poor family. When he won five hundred rubles in one of the new gambling clubs, he picked up six pinched-faced whores on the Nevsky. He had often pitied them, and he wanted to celebrate his good fortune by buying them dinner. They snatched and wolfed the food, slobbering wine from the bottle. He was so disgusted that he could not eat; he flung his winnings at them and left the restaurant. "It is too terrible," he said. "I won't do it again."

War with Japan was close; the interior minister welcomed the prospect of a "small victorious war" to keep Russians' minds off revolution, and strikes crippled big engineering plants. The end of the world was approaching, the philosopher Vladimir Solovyev thought. He could smell it, like "some obvious but quite subtle scent—just as a traveler nearing the sea feels the sea breeze before he sees the sea." Dawn and sunset glowed with a wash of surreal rose as the sun caught a veil of ash thrown high in the atmosphere by a volcanic explosion in distant Martinique. Malice was on the streets. This caused in society, and particularly in high society, a "heightened nervous and sensual life, weird combinations of religiousness and sensuality." Spiritualism in hot rooms behind closed curtains vied with prayer in church. It was a time of séances, table rapping, tarot cards, of "neo-Christianity," where soul was united with flesh.

Credulity lurked below the surface cynicism. Holy fools, clairvoyants, and magicians were snapped up by hostesses to be put on display in their drawing rooms. A provincial simpleton, Mitya of Kozelsk, half deaf, half dumb, deformed and dwarfish, with two stumps for arms, entranced aristocrats and churchmen with his screechings and crippled walk. The monks of Optina Pustyn, Dostoyevsky's monastery, had thought him blessed; a sexton, Egorov, claimed that, by praying before an icon of St. Nicholas, he was able to detect the divine meaning behind Mitya's yelpings and howling. Egorov became his

interpreter and brought him to the capital. A highborn girl from the Smolny Institute, the best school for young ladies in Russia, married the dwarf in a fit of religious exaltation.

It was to Rasputin's advantage to be crude, a "man of the people," a *varnak.* This was the slang for Siberian settlers and deportees, from the letters *V, R, N,* and *K* which were branded on the foreheads of convicts with irons, denoting "thief," "robber," and "punished by knout." The knout was a whip of raw elkhide that could flay a man's backbone open. Siberians were famously indifferent to it and the authority that wielded it. They treated high-ranking Russian officials as equals, to the latter's astonishment; they were untainted by the serfdom that, though it had been abolished shortly before Rasputin's birth, still cowed the peasants of European Russia.

The lands east of the Urals were too vast for the capital to comprehend. Russian exiles bound for Siberia were allowed to stop at the boundary post that marked the separation of Europe and Asia. Many put their lips to the western side of the cold brick pillar before dragging their fetters into Asia; one scratched the single word *Maria* on it, the American journalist George Kennan wrote, as if in crossing the Siberian line he was leaving "not only home and country, but life itself." When Siberians crossed the Urals in the opposite direction, they spoke of "going to Russia." No Russian ruler had ever visited their homeland. They were thought exotic, prey to strange cults and criminality, thrilling and dangerous—qualities for which the salons of St. Petersburg yearned. Rasputin stepped into a cultivated soil, the investigator thought, "and it dragged him in."

He roomed at a monastery lodging, gave his letter of introduction to Feofan, and delighted him. The frail little archimandrite talked to him in front of an audience of theological students on the problem of sin. Rasputin argued that sin was indispensable to God. "How is that possible," Feofan asked, "when our Savior and all the great saints of the Orthodox Church have denounced sin as the work of Satan?" Rasputin's reply was khlystlike and daring. "Certainly our Savior and the holy fathers have denounced sin, since it is the work of the Evil One," he said. "But how can you drive out evil except by sincere repentance? And how can you sincerely repent, if you have not sinned?"

He sensed a weakness in the archimandrite and allowed his voice to rise with anger. "Away with your Scriptures!" he shouted. "Truly, I warn you, stop this useless labor so that you can stand before the Lord. . . . Stop brooding over whence sin comes, on how many prayers a man must say a day, how long he must fast to escape from sin! Sin, if sin lurks in you. . . . Sin, then you will repent and drive evil from you. So long as you bear sin secretly within you, and fearfully hide it with fasting and prayer, so long you will remain a hypocrite and hateful to the Lord. The filth must be expelled, do you hear, little father?"

Feofan mumbled a defense, but Rasputin fixed "bright, glittering eyes" on him and beat him with words "like a shower of stones" until the archiman-

drite's feeble body began to tremble. When Rasputin had finished, Feofan bowed his birdlike scholar's head, and said simply: "Yes, little father, that is correct, you speak the truth." The unworldly cleric had heard, from gossip current among the capital's mystic dabblers, that Rasputin had predicted a recent three-month drought. The Siberian made so forceful an impression on him that he now attributed to him rainmaking powers. Grigory, he told his students, like the prophet Elijah, could shut the sky, creating a drought until "he commands the heavens to open" with teeming rainstorms. It was a sad fact in St. Petersburg, Prince Dzhevakov, a high synod official, wrote, that society and priests "preferred to take a sinner for a saint than run the risk of taking a saint for a sinner."

Feofan showed off his new discovery to Ioann of Kronstadt, a priest at the Andreevesky Cathedral on the fortress island of Kronstadt. This was the base of the Russian Baltic fleet, a ninety-minute steamer ride from the city. Ioann had a large following of "ecstatic pilgrims, hysterical women, and beggars living on church handouts." Confession in Russia is heard immediately before communion. The crowds waiting for communion were so great that, to break the log-jam, Ioann ordered his followers to call out their sins in unison. The cathedral echoed to sobbing and the shouting of sins. He published mystical material in the popular magazines *Groza*, "Thunder," and *Mayak*, "Lighthouse." His disciples called him the "incarnation of God" and referred to his first follower, a mystic called Porfiriya Kiseleva, as "our Lady." Ioann was an extreme monarchist who had been summoned to pray at the deathbed of Tsar Alexander III a decade before. Although his intercession had failed, the red-bearded priest remained much in favor at court.

Rasputin went unannounced to a service at the cathedral, taking communion with beggars and pilgrims. His inner spirituality was so intense—or he made it seem so, for Rasputin was always master of his emotions—that he trembled and rocked on his feet. Ioann recognized this in the same terms as Makari. "My son, I can feel your presence in God's house," he told the rough Siberian. "The divine spark is within you." Rasputin told of his vision of the Virgin, and Ioann blessed him as a true starets.

Ioann passed Rasputin along the clerical network to dine with Bishop Hermogen of Saratov on December 16, 1903. The bishop was a big-shouldered ex-lawyer, a fierce and bushy reactionary with a taste for prosecuting any writer he found to have liberal tendencies. Also present was Hermogen's protégé Sergei Trufanov, a fiery preacher and Jew-baiter who had adopted the monastic name of Iliodor.

These were powerful potential allies. Hermogen's dislike of liberals made him popular at court. Iliodor was theatrical and puritanical. He attracted huge congregations for bitter, flowing sermons that stigmatized intellectuals as "all Jews" and praised the Russians as a God-bearing people who should shun the

corrupt West. He dressed a big doll in a Jewish caftan and had it carried in procession to a bonfire for burning. He despised the nobility as a block between the peasants and their beloved ruler; this endeared him to the tsar and ordinary Russians alike. He was raising money to build a monastery called Mount Tabor at Tsaritsyn on the Volga; its focus was to be a great tower set on a hill built of excavated earth from which he would harangue the masses with his "sermons from the Mount." The violence of his attacks on governors and police chiefs outraged the government, which he said was in Satan's clutches, but he enjoyed the protection of the tsar.

Hermogen and Iliodor took the shabbiness and dirt that Rasputin exuded as signs of inner holiness. He made an excellent impression on them. He flattered them. As they began talking, Rasputin seized the bishop's hand and cried: "I like thee." Hermogen burst out laughing with delight that the peasant had used the familiar pronoun to a bishop; the new starets, simple and open, seemed the muzhik of a reactionary's dreams. Rasputin turned to Iliodor and patted him on the shoulder. "Here's a man who prays deeply," he said. "Oh, how deeply he prays!" They were photographed together, Hermogen sitting in good humor in the center, Rasputin gazing warily at the camera, neatly dressed in a black cassock but with peasant boots beneath the hem. Iliodor's face is taut, his lips pursed and his eyes cold and quizzing.

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The three already looked a trio. Vassilyev, who was to watch Rasputin meeting new people when he became the secret police chief, admired his technique. Rasputin was boastful and offhand with those he thought unimportant, talking in riddles and leaving them bemused. But with those he thought of consequence, he was observant and attentive. He strained to follow the thread of a discussion, his head thrown back with concentration. He often made intelligent deductions and was careful never to put questions that would reveal his ignorance. He fitted in easily with extreme monarchists. In politics, Vassilyev said, he was "neither a Left nor a Right"; his instincts were sometimes liberal, sometimes authoritarian, but monarchy was always "a kind of religion" for him. He could not conceive of Russia without a tsar. His fundamental principle was "pacification of the enemies of the tsar." Political parties, policies, and ideology went "far beyond his horizon." His most acute sense was an intuition of who could secure his advancement and who was hostile.

The capital seethed with new ideas, with Reds, socialists, anarchists, Slavophils, Communists, nihilists. Sixteen thousand "politicals" had been sent into Siberian exile in 1901 alone. Leftists had no use for a peasant with an age-old line in mysticism. The establishment—corrupt, lethargic, fearful of its privileges, prey to intriguers—was more fertile ground. Reactionaries made no

demands on Rasputin. He had only to express a fear of God and love of the tsar for them to embrace him as a "true Russian," untainted by city thought, a loyal blockhead of the type they earnestly prayed would save them if—when—"Red Peter" turned on them.

It was an easy role, and profitable. He was introduced to Countess Ignateva, a society hostess and dabbler in right-wing politics. She was married to Count Alexis Pavlovich Ignatev, a former interior minister and right-winger who figured prominently—soon enough, fatally—on the death lists of socialist assassination squads. An "unstable person of limited intelligence," she was well placed to help Rasputin infiltrate the capital. Her "black salon"—black for reaction, Black against Red—was a haven for the autocracy's nervous hirelings. Bankers and arms dealers intrigued to win contracts for the coming war against Japan. Officers and would-be ministers, egged on by fanatical priests, worked on half-baked plans to reconquer Constantinople for Orthodoxy. Occultists held séances in her drawing room and claimed that the freshly canonized St. Serafim of Saratov hovered above the table, ringed in fire, to proclaim that a great prophet had come among them. Her guests mixed autocratic politics and mysticism, a combination ideally suited for Rasputin.

He spoke in curt, almost incomprehensible phrases; he made no attempt to adapt his manners to polite society; he fascinated during his brief visit, especially the women. Some saw him after his return to Pokrovskoye. Madame Kazakova visited him again in the village in May 1904, with her daughters Ekaterina and Naria. His fame and his women admirers were growing. "I saw Rasputin surrounded by a number of important-looking ladies," she testified to the investigator. "They regarded him as a great righteous man. They cut his nails and sewed them up to remember him by. Rasputin shamelessly embraced and kissed these ladies while walking around." She grilled him on his morals. "He said there's nothing to be ashamed of," she concluded, "because all people are his kinsfolk."

The Pokrovskoye priest obtained letters written to him by wellborn admirers named Berlandskaya, Silvers, and Manchtet. Father Pyotr remained convinced that Rasputin was a secret khlyst, and he filed the letters carefully for a future ecclesiastical investigation. They show that Rasputin's intelligence readily detected the ladies' unhappiness; a few words, a comparison were enough to lift it. The case of Khionia Berlandskaya was typical of the "nervous women with wretched souls" who clung to him. Her husband had killed himself, and "she grieved, ascribing his suicide to the fact that he had learned about her infidelity to him." She was inconsolable until she met Rasputin. He told her simply that Christ himself could not prevent a disciple from hanging himself, she wrote, and her burden disappeared. Those who came to see Elder Zosima entered trembling and afraid, Dostoyevsky had written; but they "always came

out radiant and joyous, and the blackest of faces turned to happy ones." Rasputin had acquired that skill, though his intimacy with his soul companions seemed to go further than the aged elder's. In their letters Berlandskaya and Manchtet wrote that acquaintance with him opened a new era for them and that they were the better for it. They also casually remarked what Rasputin had taught them. "In this respect they use one and the same phrase," the investigator said, "that Rasputin taught them 'holy sacraments.' "

The investigator admitted that one could only guess at the meaning of these "holy sacraments." Evidence from other witnesses provided the clue. A woman who had baked communion bread at the Pokrovskoye church testified that, as she was going down into the subterranean chapel with him, Rasputin had once come close to raping her. He assured her that it would not be sinful, for "the Holy Trinity was within him." Sex, it seemed, was an essential part of the holy sacraments.

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Though he cannot have been aware of the significance of the first, two key events in the rise of Rasputin occurred later in 1904. On July 31 the empress gave birth to a son, Alexis, and—on some unrecorded date during his summer wandering—the Siberian met two sisters, grand duchesses, the daughters of the king of Montenegro. They were meddling, dubbed "the crows" by society for their striking black hair and raucous chattering. They dabbled in the supernatural and wizardry, and they had position.

Though their father was "widely renowned for his cupidity and lack of scruples," the sisters were ladies of the highest society and intimate with the tsar and empress. Militsa, known as Montenegrin Number One, was married to the tsar's cousin, the weak-chested Grand Duke Peter. Montenegrin Number Two, Anastasia, was married to Prince George Leuchtenberg, who returned to Biarritz shortly after the ceremony to resume a long-standing liaison with a courtesan. She was already on close terms with the tsar's tall and dashing soldier cousin Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, whom she later married after her divorce from the prince. Not having much in the way of husbands, the sisters devoted themselves to social climbing and the occult.

Militsa was the cleverer of the two, with a voguish interest in Oriental religions and mystic and ascetic literature. She learned Persian to be able to read Persian mystics in the original and had written a brief book, *Selected Quotations from the Holy Fathers.* The sisters were dark and stylish, with knowing, haughty eyes and an avaricious slant to the mouth. They nagged officials constantly for handouts; after her husband lost heavily in stock exchange gambling, Militsa damned the finance minister Sergei Witte for his "insolence" when he refused to repair the damage with funds from the State Bank. They were more skillful in

building a friendship with the imperial couple. They treated Alexandra with exaggerated deference—"they bowed, they scraped"—and nursed her when she was ill with dysentery, doing "the work of chambermaids," emptying her chamber pot and changing her linen.

The sisters were infected, Witte wrote, by "that disease known by such names as spiritualism and occultism." Grand Duke Nicholas was equally inclined to mysticism. "One cannot call the grand duke mad," Witte said. "Neither can one call him normal." He once asked Witte whether he thought the tsar was human or divine. When Witte said human, the grand duke said that he "was neither, but something in between."

Bored, seeking new sensations, the sisters made an incognito pilgrimage to Kiev and stumbled across Rasputin. This, at least, is the claim of Aron Simanovich; others said that Feofan introduced the starets to the sisters, and the investigator accepted this version. Simanovich, however, insisted that he was in Kiev himself when the Montenegrins put up at the Mikhailovsky Monastery. One morning they glimpsed a simple wanderer chopping wood in the monastery backyard. It was Rasputin, earning his board and lodging. They fell into conversation with him; Rasputin told them of his adventures, the monks and monasteries he had visited. He said that he often preached at railroad stations and steamship landings. He was proud of his talents as a preacher and said that he could outargue educated theologians.

The sisters were intrigued; they invited him for tea. There was fire as well as persuasiveness in his stories, and "his gray, penetrating eyes were shining so suggestively that his listeners were seized by an admiration for him." When he found out the identities of his new acquaintances, he made special efforts to win their favor. He rarely boasted of his gifts, but Simanovich suggested that he made an exception for the sisters, telling them that he could cure all manner of diseases, and that he could foretell the future and divert impending disasters. He had "realized immediately," Simanovich wrote, "what brilliant opportunities were opening." He was on his best behavior, looking at the ladies intently and bowing deferentially to them.

The meetings continued; the sisters stood Rasputin to treats, pastries, and candies. He loved sugar in any form—sweet wine, cakes, buns; he sucked his tea through lumps of it. Simanovich noted of his mouth that "instead of teeth there showed some black rootlets." Far from repelling the Montenegrins, however, he swayed them into "a kind of mystic worship." Their hearts were "searching for a wonder worker," and they were convinced that one stood in front of them. He excited them. Forecasting the impact that Rasputin would exert "upon the nervous and mystically inclined tsar and tsarina," Militsa saw in him a new weapon for strengthening her hold on the imperial couple. She had plans to introduce him at court.

CHAPTER 6

Blood Royal

The Montenegrins' target was the empress. The sisters knew her and her weaknesses well. They had already introduced her to one holy man, Dr. Philippe, a Frenchman with striking similarities to Rasputin; he had started well—brilliantly—but had fallen from grace, and they were looking for a successor. The key to Alexandra was her grandmother, Queen Victoria. The English monarch was a dynastic breeding machine. Her nine children and thirty-five grandchildren included kings of England, the German kaiser, the queen of Spain, and Alexandra, empress of Russia. Victoria died three years before Rasputin first went to St. Petersburg, but she bequeathed him a legacy. She was a carrier of hemophilia.

The disease impairs blood clotting. Victims are unable to synthesize factor VIII, a protein that enables healthy blood to coagulate. The slightest wound can produce prolonged bleeding. Internal bleeding can begin for no apparent cause, with such violence and pain that joints become deformed. Hemophilia is almost invariably sex-linked, transmitted through the female line to male infants only. Victoria had passed the disease on to two of her five daughters, who in turn passed it to their sons. Care was taken to protect the victims from accidental knocks and falls—some were dressed in bizarre padded suits—but most were dead by age thirty.

Alexandra's parents were Prince Ludwig of Hesse, ruler of a grand duchy of wine valleys and forested hills on the banks of the Rhine, and Victoria's daughter Princess Alice. Mother and daughter had much in common, in events and in character. Both were married in mourning to foreigners. Both were ill at

ease in their adopted countries and disliked at court; they remained deeply in love with their husbands, a rarity in arranged dynastic alliances; they suffered from the nervous debility and exhaustion then labeled neurasthenia. Each had a hemophiliac son.

Alice married her German prince when she was nineteen. The ceremony was overshadowed by the death of her father, Prince Albert, six months before. Queen Victoria wore black; "Alice's wedding," she wrote, "was more like a funeral." When Princess Alice arrived in Darmstadt, the little capital of Hesse, a relative wrote that she was thought "a foreigner, come from distant England." Her marriage was happy, though, and she had seven children. The sixth was born in June 1872, three years after Anna Egorovna had given birth to Grigory Rasputin in her Siberian cabin. The infant was christened Alix—" 'Alix' we gave for Alice as they murder my name here," her mother explained. She was not known as Alexandra until she left for Russia. Rasputin had no known godparents; Baby Alix had the future rulers of England and Russia, Edward VII and Alexander III, their wives, an English princess, and the duke of Cambridge.

Hemophilia was already known to be in the family. Alice's younger brother Leopold had developed telltale bruises and bleeding shortly after his birth, and constant hemorrhages had lamed him. Alice proved to be a carrier. Her son Friedrich Wilhelm, "Frittie," cut his ear when he was two and bled continuously. A year later he ran across his mother's room while she was practicing Chopin's Funeral March on the piano and tried to steady himself on the bow window. It was unlatched, and he fell two stories into the garden. He died of a brain hemorrhage that evening. On each anniversary of his death, Alix was taken to the crypt where he was buried.

Alix was happy as a small child—nicknamed Sunny, a "sweet, merry little person, always laughing and a dimple in one cheek"—until her mother died. The children developed diphtheria, which proved fatal for the youngest, four-year-old May. Alice embraced her surviving son, Ernie, when she broke the news to him; the British prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli, called it "the kiss of death," for she caught the disease. Exhausted and depressed from childbearing, she succumbed to it. At six Alix was motherless; a brother and sister had also gone. The Darmstadt palace was dark; her mother's room was left as it had been when she was alive, her bed draped with black crepe. Little Sunny became moody and listless. "Poor old Grandmamma will try to be a mother to you," Victoria wrote to her. Alix spent much of the year in England with her, in castles still in mourning for her grandfather, whose bed was turned down each night and whose chamber pot was scrubbed each morning, as if he had used it.

While young Rasputin played pitch and toss with pig knuckles in the dirt and learned the essentials of peasant survival—how to hold a scythe and drive a cart—Victoria taught Alix the arts of ruling. She was drilled in deportment,

learning to hold her head high and still for ten minutes at a time; she did the cercle, practicing social graces by touring a room and talking to pieces of furniture as if they were people. She was painfully shy outside the family—an excellent pianist, with a real flair for Wagner, she reddened with embarrassment when her grandmother made her play for visitors at Windsor—and she covered it with a contrived hauteur that, though undeniably regal, brought her little sympathy.

Her tutor, "Madgie" Jackson—a woman of "hard ways and crabbed, bad temper," Victoria thought—encouraged Alix to reject the meek role expected of women and their exclusion from politics. The girl became self-willed and stubborn, alert to ideas and confident in her own. She knew that women could be powerful and historic figures; her grandmother ruled over a quarter of the world's population. She was well grounded, in the arts, in languages, in mathematics, and in morbidity.

Alix made her first visit to Russia in 1884, at the time Rasputin was suffering his alleged torment at the hands of the lascivious general's wife in Tyumen. She attended the marriage of her elder sister Ella to the Russian Grand Duke Serge, dining with her tsar-godfather Alexander III on June 8. Her second cousin, the heir apparent, Tsarevich Nicholas, noted his first meeting with her in his diary that evening: "I sat next to little twelve-year-old Alix, and I liked her awfully much," he wrote. He was sixteen, a handsome young man, whose neat and regular features were relieved of a certain bland weakness by striking blue eyes. It was a happy year for Alix, but it held a distant warning. Her hemophiliac uncle Leopold was wintering in Cannes when he accidentally struck his head and died of a brain hemorrhage.

She returned to Russia five years later, this time in winter, to sledge with Nicholas by torchlight on structures of wooden planks and scaffolding sprayed with water to form ice hills. They ate blinis and caviar, and a ball was held for her. Alix had become a beauty, tall and slender, with striking chestnut hair and blue-gray eyes, and, an observer wrote, "a singular wistful and sweet sadness that never goes quite away even when she smiles." Nicholas, now a Guards officer, fell in love.

Alix was back in Russia the following summer, staying with her sister Ella on Grand Duke Serge's Ilinskoye estate on the Moscow River. She went rowing, picnicked on cold boar and smoked sturgeon, and picked wild berries in the woods. She disliked cities and was nervous in society; the hay-scented, green-shadowed countryside she saw now remained for her the real Russia, as she thought the peasants, dusty figures in linden-bark sandals who bared their heads and knelt as her carriage passed, true Russians.

Although she did not meet Nicholas on this trip, the cousins remained constant. Alix refused to marry Eddy, the eldest son of the Prince of Wales;

Nicholas said that he would rather enter a monastery than become engaged to the German kaiser's ugly sister Margaret. He parted from his young mistress, a striking ballerina, Mathilde Kschessinskaya. They agreed to meet near a barn on the Volkhonsky Highway to say good-bye. She came out from St. Petersburg by carriage; he rode his horse from the nearby army camp where he was stationed. They wept. "When the tsarevich departed for camp," she wrote, "I remained by the barn and watched him go until he was no longer in sight." At the end of 1891 Nicholas wrote in his diary: "My dream is to someday marry Alix H[esse]. I have loved her for a long while." He was to remain faithful to her for life; death did not part them.

Alix's father died in 1892, he collapsed in front of her at lunch; she took to her bed with hysteria—and her brother Ernest became grand duke of Hesse. Nicholas attended his marriage in the spring of 1894 to represent Russia. Alix was at the station to meet him, and they dined by candlelight that evening to a string quartet playing Mendelssohn. Nicholas saw her alone the next morning and proposed. She looked "particularly pretty, but extremely sad." The bride of the Russian heir was obliged to be Orthodox; she wished to remain a Lutheran, and sobbed to him: "No, I cannot." Her cousin Willy, the German kaiser, reminded her that other German princesses—Catherine the Great, her own sister Ella—had converted on marrying Russians. He said it was her "bounden duty" to do so.

Willy seized Nicholas the next day, took some flowers from a vase, and, thrusting them into his hand, sent him off to propose again. Alix was waiting for him in a room overlooking the palace garden, the windows closed against a violent spring thunderstorm. She accepted; they both cried like children. "O God, what a mountain has rolled from my shoulders," Nicholas wrote in his diary that evening. "The whole day I have been walking in a dream."

The union, so fateful, was made. Rasputin's reaction, if any, is unknown; Europe's great matchmaker, Queen Victoria, viewed it with foreboding. Her doubts were not about Nicholas—"I like him very much"—but about Russia. "The more I think of sweet Alicky's marriage the more unhappy I am," she wrote, "on account of the Country, the Policy and the differences with us and the awful insecurity to which that sweet Child will be exposed. . . . All my fears about her future marriage now show themselves so strongly when I think of her *so* young and most likely to be placed on that very unsafe throne, her dear life and above all her Husband's constantly threatened and unable to see her but rarely. . . . She has *no parents* and I am her only Grandparent."

In fact, Alix found "the Policy" of her new country much to her liking. Autocracy had been dinned into Nicholas by his tutor Constantine Pobedonostsev, a cold-eyed lawyer in steel-rimmed glasses and bow tie, a reactionary who thought parliamentary democracy "one of the vainest of human delusions,"

serving only the "personal ambition, vanity, and self-interest of its members." Nicholas was not stupid—he was fluent in five languages, speaking English without a trace of an accent, and he was taught political economy, history, international law, military science, and chemistry by outstanding teachers—but he had no intellectual curiosity and accepted the role of tsar as he received it, by rote. Alix took to absolutism easily, by nature. Otherwise awkward in her new country, she never questioned its system of government, or her place in it, other than to bitterly condemn its spasmodic lurches to liberalism; this acceptance she maintained despite the general loathing of its absolutism, shared by her imperious grandmother, that spread across the English-speaking world and beyond.

Alix was as foreign to Russia in other respects as her unhappy mother had been to Darmstadt. She learned fluent, English-accented Russian—Alexander III sent his personal confessor to Windsor to instruct her in the language and the Orthodox catechism before the marriage—but she arrived as a German princess. Russians, with a historic distaste that stretched back to medieval battles against the Teutonic knights, called her "the German woman." It was unfair, for she was more English than German. English was her mother tongue, and it was her language of love. Nicholas courted her in it, and their letters and notes were written in it. Religion and politics apart, her tastes were English. Like her mother, she bought her furniture by mail order from Maples department store in London and hung her walls with pastoral watercolors of the Scottish highlands. Her favorite writer was the romantic novelist Marie Corelli, the pseudonym of Mary Mackay, who was hugely popular in England—William Gladstone and Oscar Wilde read her—and almost unknown outside it.

Critics detested Corelli as a "self-righteous, sentimental moralist, lacking self-criticism or a sense of the absurd." Alix was pilloried on the same grounds. Petersburg society, malicious and demanding, found her stubborn and provincial. She dressed badly, with her mother's passion for mauve. She was gauche, they said, she danced poorly, she had no small talk. Her French, the language of polite society, was hesitant and stumbling. She represented no great dynastic alliance; she was a poor catch for a Romanov heir. Her new home was not kindly disposed toward her, and her old one was glad to see her go. When the engagement was announced, according to the finance minister Sergei Witte, the Russian ambassador asked the marshal of the Hesse court how Alix had matured since he had first known her as a child. After making sure that nobody could overhear, the marshal whispered: "How lucky we are that you are taking her from us."

Alexander III was dying, his body poisoned by kidney failure. Nicholas asked his fiancée to join him at the sickbed in the Livadia Palace in the Crimea. The

grand marshal of the court forgot to order an imperial railroad train to wait for her at the Russian frontier as she crossed from Berlin. She caught a standard passenger train, which gave her a rare glimpse of lowborn Russians. The tsar struggled into dress uniform to receive her as a future Russian empress. He was too weak to stand. He sat on a chair in his bedroom, struggling for breath, his great frame shrunken and yellow.

The autocrat in her soul was at once on display. Alix was offended that the tsar's doctors reported first to Empress Marie, ignoring her fiancé's precedence as heir. It seemed not to occur to her that the family was in shock, that none had expected the giant monarch to be felled, that all naturally deferred to the empress in her grief. "Sweet child, pray to God. He will comfort you. . . . Your Sunny is praying for you and the beloved patient. . . . Darling boysy, me loves you oh so very tenderly and deep," she wrote in Nicholas's diary. "Be firm. . . . if the Dr. [Doctor] has any wishes or needs anything, make him come *direct* to you. Don't let others be put first and you left out; you are Father's dear son and must be told all and be asked about everything. Show your own mind and don't let others forget who you *are*. Forgive me lovy."

The words are haunting; Alix wrote them at age twenty-two, when she was an inexperienced princess from an obscure principality, to a man to whom she was not yet married but who would in a few hours inherit one seventh of the land area of the globe. In them she defined the future, for nothing was to change through war, scandal, and revolution. She loved Nicholas, fiercely, but she already found him weak, too ready to "let others be put first." She would scold him, bully him to be firm; she regretted it, "forgive me lovy," but she did it for his sake. She alone, with God, would defend his interests; she would make sure that others never "forget who you *are*." The notes she wrote him—in a flowing English hand, full of underlinings and the hasty abbreviations of a mind that thought impulsively as it wrote, in this Victorian baby language, "darling boysy," with the same allusions to God and prayer, and above all, with the same insistence on his power and primacy—filled volumes by the end. She was his love, his friend, his adviser; she was his absolutism. From this first note her letters show it all. They were a reprise for the Russian empire.

In the afternoon of October 19, 1894, Alexander was given the last rites, rallied enough to say a short prayer and kiss his wife, and expired. Empress Marie collapsed into Alix's arms, an intimacy that was not to resume. Nicholas ran from the room and cried on the shoulder of his brother-in-law Sandro, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich. What would become of him, he sobbed, of Sandro, of Alix and his mother, of Russia itself? "I am not prepared to be tsar," he said. "I know nothing of this business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers." Nicholas was twenty-six. Death had sought him out before. His grandfather, Alexander II, liberator of the serfs, had been killed by a bomb in the streets of the capital thirteen years before. Leo Tolstoy had appealed

to the new tsar to spare the terrorists, to "put forward another ideal, higher than theirs, greater and more generous." Alexander III hanged them. His task was to restore the autocracy, and he did so, with such vigor that the terrorists shuffling in chains to Siberia admitted that theirs had become "a cottage industry."

Nicholas loved his father, the great "Bear" who rose at seven, washed in ice-cold water, wore a peasant's blouse and worn-down boots, who was strong enough to bend a silver ruble in his hand and tear decks of cards in half to amuse his children, who cursed violently and often. The son knew that his younger brother Michael was his father's favorite—Michael could throw a pitcher of water over him and the Bear would laugh, whereas Nicholas would have "got what for"—and that he was in every way his father's reverse. He was slim and slight, dressed beautifully, was exquisitely polite—even revolutionaries admired his manners—and never swore. Fine qualities, no doubt, for the constitutional monarch of a quiet country—his German cousin Willy thought him best suited to be "a country gentleman growing turnips"—but not for a Russian autocrat. Rasputin, who benefited greatly from his character, said that Nicholas had "no insides," no guts.

Nicholas also lacked an instinct to rule. Under his grandfather liberalism had made some strides; jury trials, local government elections, a public state budget were introduced. The terrorist bomb had done that in; his father's years of repression had mirrored Pobedonostsev's dictum that Russia was "an icy desert and the abode of the 'Bad Man,' " which must be governed by a strong tsar contemptuous of the "cheap and shallow ecstasies" of reform. But the essential question of government—autocracy or accountability?—remained. The autocrat needed application and drive to justify his semi-divine status. When Pobedonostsev tried to tutor Nicholas in the intricacies of government, he found his student "became actively absorbed in picking his nose." Victoria made sure that Alix had a grounding in statecraft. Alexander, expecting to live well into the next century, was happy to let young Nicky enjoy the airhead life of a Guards officer; he could catch up on the business of ruling later. Alexander had no illusions about his son.

"What?" he growled when his finance minister, Sergei Witte, suggested that Nicholas be made president of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. "Have you ever had a serious conversation with him?"

"No, Sire," Witte said. "I have never had the pleasure of having such a conversation with the heir."

"He is still absolutely a child, he has only infantile judgments, how will he be able to be president of a committee?"

The young man unfit to run a committee was now to inherit an empire. Sandro felt a sense of "imminent catastrophe" as he watched his future ruler break down. An altar was set up on the palace lawns, and the Romanovs formed a

semicircle around it. The guns of the fleet at Yalta boomed as a priest administered the imperial oath of allegiance and Nicholas, weeping, was proclaimed emperor and autocrat of all the Russias, the Sovereign Tsar Nicholas II.

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The next day, as an autumnal storm swept in from the Black Sea, Alix was confirmed into the Russian church. She wore black; the palace was hung with black. Only the family was present as she renounced the "heresies" of her childhood Protestantism in a firm voice and repeated the Orthodox creed. The names given her at birth—the names of her English mother and aunts, Alix Victoria Helena Louise Beatrice—were swept away. Alix became Alexandra Fedorovna. She was anointed with oil on her forehead, eyelids, neck and throat, and wrists and palms; she then took holy communion with her fiancé and his widowed mother. Nicholas wanted to marry her at once, in private, in the Livadia Palace while his dead father lay in the chapel guarded by Cossacks. His uncles said that a tsar must wed in public.

The journey to Moscow with the corpse took a week as the funeral train stopped in cities on the route for services. Eight black horses with purple bands on their harnesses pulled the coffin through the Moscow streets to the Kremlin, halting outside ten churches while litanies were sung from the steps. "She has come to us behind a coffin," onlookers said of the foreign princess half-masked by driving sleet. A crowd of dignitaries waited at the station as the train slowly drew through dripping fog into St. Petersburg. Sergei Witte watched Nicholas step down with two blondes. At first the politician mistook Alexandra for her aunt, the Princess of Wales. "The young lady who turned out to be our future empress seemed not only less good looking but also less sympathetic than her aunt," he recalled. "Of course she too was pretty then, and still is, but her mouth always seems to be set in anger." The cortege took four hours to cross the city to the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul, muffled drums and church bells tolling. The coffin was displayed in the cathedral for seventeen days. Twice each day Alexandra attended services with her fiancé. She had to kiss the dead tsar's lips; he had not been embalmed for three days after his death, his face was a "dreadful color," and he gave off a terrible smell.

Nicholas insisted that the marriage, planned for the following spring, be brought forward to the week after the funeral. It was his mother's birthday, and protocol allowed court mourning to be lifted for twenty-four hours. His haste was such that his bride had no trousseau. Praskovya Fedorovna Rasputin's wedding five years earlier was witnessed by a few Siberian peasants; no record of it was made. Thousands lined the Nevsky Prospect as Alexandra Fedorovna was driven to the Winter Palace; armed guardsmen were posted every few feet along the route, while secret policemen mingled with the crowds looking for

signs of assassins. The bride wore a tiara of diamonds set in platinum, with a wreath of orange blossoms from the imperial conservatory in Warsaw, and a diamond necklace of 475 carats.

It took more than twenty minutes for the wedding procession to pass the three thousand guests in the rooms and halls of the palace, officers drawing their swords to salute her; her mouth trembled slightly, which an onlooker found relieved the "habitual hard expression" that detracted from her classic beauty. "One's feelings one can imagine," Alexandra wrote. "One day in deepest mourning lamenting a beloved one, the next day in smartest clothes being married." The court returned to mourning after the ceremony in the white and gold palace chapel; there was no reception or honeymoon. "At last united, bound for life," Alexandra wrote in Nicholas's diary on their wedding night, "and when this life is ended, we meet again in the other world and remain together for eternity. Yours, yours."

The young couple were happy but lonely. Their relations with the other Romanovs started poorly. The dowager empress was Danish. Experienced and practical, she was well placed to help Alexandra cope with the strains of becoming a Russian empress. Instead, she felt that she was losing her son to an obstinate outsider. She insisted that her name be placed first in the daily prayers for the imperial family in the Orthodox Mass. Alexandra resented this, and the tension was obvious in the Anichkov Palace, the dowager empress's residence, where the newly marrieds were at first obliged to live. They shared the dining room, but there was little table talk.

The new empress did not like society, nor did it like her. She was shy and her smile thin-lipped. She preferred the company of children and the old to those of her own age. Prince Sergei Volkonsky, who met her frequently as the director of the imperial theaters, found that "sociability was not in her nature." Her face blotched red with effort when she held a conversation, and she seemed to have a "natural indisposition toward the race of man." People ignored her, Volkonsky said, so that she was "only a name, a walking picture." In return, she despised St. Petersburg; "it's a rotten town," she wrote, "not an atom Russian." Her husband shared her contempt for his capital, his dislike extending as far as its founder, the restless, westernizing Peter the Great. "He is the ancestor who appeals to me least of all," Nicholas told Eugene Botkin, his personal physician. "He had too much admiration for European culture. He stamped out Russian habits, the good customs, the usages which are the nation's heritage."

The couple preferred Moscow; with its narrow lanes, its wooden slums and bulbous, ornate churches, it was more Russian. They brought it calamity when they were crowned in the city in May 1896. During the five-hour ceremony in

the Cathedral of the Assumption, the tsar's chain of the Order of St. Andrew fell from his shoulders to the floor. The incident was kept secret for fear it would be seen as an ill omen. The following morning a massive open-air feast was held on the Khodynka Field, the training ground for the Moscow garrison. Free beer and coronation mugs attracted a crowd of half a million, so dense that a patroling Cossack found his horse lifted into the air when he rode into it. A rumor swept the field that the beer was about to run out. As the crowd surged forward people were knocked into deep trenches and gun pits. Those behind trampled forward over them and they disappeared. The crowd gave off a "terrible, long, drawn-out wail," and men and women broke away from its edges "in utter terror."

The official death toll was 1,389; the actual figure was probably higher. Nicholas, deeply shocked, was advised by his uncles that he should attend a gala evening at Moscow's smart Hunt Club as planned. Her eyes red with tears, Alexandra opened the ball by dancing a quadrille with Nicholas. The couple visited the injured in the hospital and gave the family of each victim a thousand rubles, but the folk memory of Khodynka remained, and with it the superstition that Nicholas and his bride would lead Russia to tragedy.

Alexandra's devotion to autocracy was soon noted. True, she had willing material to work with. Nicholas was an inbred reactionary, a lover of old icons, old customs, old ways of spelling. Grammarians argued over whether to scrap the traditional but purely decorative hard sign written at the end of Russian words. "Personally," Nicholas told Dr. Botkin in all earnest, "I shall never trust nor give a responsible position to a man who omits the hard sign." But it was Alexandra who took the blame for it.

Declarations of loyalty were made to the tsar by members of local councils. One, for Tver, expressed the hope that the "rights of individuals will be protected permanently and energetically." Nicholas, taking this as a challenge to absolutism, rebuked the Tver delegates for their "senseless dreams of participation" in government. He added that he would uphold the autocracy "as firmly and unflinchingly as . . . my unforgettable dead father." These remarks, which aroused irritation more than fear, opened him to ridicule at the start of his reign. "A little officer came out; in his cap he had a bit of paper," a delegate wrote sarcastically. "He began mumbling something, now and then looking at that bit of paper, and then he suddenly shouted out: 'senseless dreams'; here we understood we were being scolded for something."

The incident was damaging to Alexandra, whose hand was seen behind it. "What earthly reason was there suddenly to hurl a threat at the head of the entire nation?" Constantine Pobedonostsev, Nicholas's old tutor in absolutism, exploded. He was asked who could have advised the tsar to do such a thing. "Have you not guessed?" he snapped. "Of course, it is the young empress." How

could she, when she knew nothing of Russia? She thought she knew everything, Pobedonostsev replied, and she was obsessed with the idea that her husband did not assert himself enough. "She is more autocratic that Peter the Great," he added, "and perhaps as cruel as Ivan the Terrible. Hers is a small mind that believes it harbors great intelligence."

Alexandra was smitten by her new religion. "She completely succumbed to what I call Orthodox Paganism, that is to worship of the form without understanding the spirit," Sergei Witte wrote, ascribing this to the beauty of court services and to her "dull, egotistical character" and narrow view of the world. At every service across Russia prayers were chanted for Alexandra and her husband; Orthodoxy was a symbol of their mastery. " 'If you do not bow down before me, you are my enemy, against whom I will use my autocratic powers because what I wish represents the truth,' " Witte explained her attitude. "Given her psychology, given the fact that she was surrounded by lackeys and intriguers, it is easy to see why she should fall into such illusions."

Alexandra's failure to produce a male heir made her vulnerable to faith healers and mystics. By 1901 she had four children, bonny, healthy, lively, but all girls—Olga, Tatiana, Marie, and Anastasia. The question of the succession became urgent when Nicholas fell ill with typhoid fever. A century past, shortly before he was strangled in a palace plot, the unstable and half-mad Tsar Paul had expressed his hatred of women in general—and his mother, Catherine the Great, in particular—by replacing primogeniture with Salic law. Under this no woman could succeed to the Russian throne unless all legitimate male descendants were dead. To Alexandra's utter despair, constitutional experts advised her that her eldest daughter, Olga, had no claim to the throne. If Nicholas died he would be succeeded by his brother Michael. The imperial couple instructed Pobedonostsev to prepare the draft of a decree to allow for succession in the female line; the tutor found a legal minefield and made little progress.

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Dr. Philippe, the Montenegrin sisters' French import, claimed to be able to divine the sex of an unborn child. He made other claims, too: that he was a medical man, that he could cure the sick, that he was close to God. Like Rasputin he was a peasant's son and proud of it, and a dabbler in right-wing politics. His real name was Nazier-Vachot, and he had started work at age thirteen in a Lyons butcher's shop. He set himself up as a faith healer when he was in his early twenties. His consulting rooms in the city were soon filled with disturbed patients, whom he treated with a mixture of conventional drugs, prayer, and the laying on of hands. He made enough money to anger qualified medical men, and he was twice prosecuted in France for practicing without a license.

His followers included the Russian military attaché in Paris, Count V. V. Murayev-Amurskii, who thought that the "doctor" had come down from

heaven and would reascend there. In 1900 the count introduced him to the Montenegrins, who were wintering in Cannes. He was a "mild little man with a gentle manner and persuasive eyes," which could change from chestnut to a "splendid blue." He appeared clairvoyant; like Rasputin he drew close to people and would "tell you in a few words what was troubling you, and what you did not dare confess to him." He soon cast his mystic spell over the sisters. They invited him to visit them in St. Petersburg.

The following year Militsa arranged for Dr. Philippe to be presented to Nicholas and Alexandra in the château of Compiègne when they were on a state visit to France. He captivated the couple—mystic powers, womb sexing, hints of the divine—and returned to Russia with them. Militsa lived in the Znamenka Palace, very close to the imperial summer palace at Peterhof. Nicholas and Alexandra visited the Znamenka almost every other evening. Here, according to General Spiridovich, the head of the tsar's personal police, they practiced spiritualism with the pseudo-doctor. The Montenegrins promoted him shamelessly, persuading the empress to read the lives of the saints while they chattered on about the similarities to Dr. Philippe. They told the empress that all his acts were blessed by the saintly Ioann of Kronstadt. It was untrue—Ioann complained that he had never said a word to Philippe when they met briefly at Militsa's palace, for the good reason that he had no French and the Frenchman had no Russian—but the empress believed it. The séances continued.

Talk of them raced through the salons of Petersburg. The French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, was told that Philippe raised the ghost of the dead Alexander III to advise his son on how to govern Russia. Others said that the Frenchman controlled the weather, ensuring smooth seas while the imperial yacht was cruising. Witte was sure that Philippe held "nocturnal séances with Their Majesties"; he remarked that the behavior of the "neurasthenic empress" deeply disturbed her mother-in-law.

It was indeed bizarre. The empress was anxious to reward Dr. Philippe for his services. He wanted official recognition of his "medical" status. Militsa asked the Okhrana's man in Paris, General Rachovsky, to persuade the French government to grant him a medical diploma. Rachovsky protested that this was impossible and prepared a report on Philippe's activities in France. It described him as a clever confidence trickster who exercised power over people with weak personalities. Rachovsky was promptly sacked by the interior minister, Vyacheslav Plehve, who added the vindictive rider that the victim would receive no pension unless he lived continuously out of harm's way in Brussels. Witte castigated Plehve for getting rid of the linchpin of Russia's counterterrorist effort in western Europe. The interior minister shrugged and said that the tsar had personally ordered it.

In France, Baron Alphonse Rothschild complained to Witte that he feared for his huge Russian investments. A country whose court had been penetrated

by a charlatan was no place to put one's money, the financier said. Nearer home Prince Elston Yusupov, the richest man in Russia, was walking by the sea in the Crimea when Militsa drove past with a stranger in her carriage. Yusupov bowed, but the Montenegrin made no response. He asked her later why she had cut him. "You couldn't have seen me," she explained, "for I was with Dr. Philippe, and when he wears a hat he is invisible and so are those with him."

Buoyed by faith in his powers, and aware of Alexandra's despairing need for an heir, Dr. Philippe overreached himself in 1902. He convinced her she was bearing a son. She stopped wearing a corset. She grew fatter. An official announcement was made that she was pregnant and would attend no receptions until after the birth. In her ninth month, the capital waited to count the cannon shots that would announce the birth from the Fortress of Peter and Paul. Three hundred rounds would mean a boy, a hundred, a fifth daughter. None came. Alexandra took to her bed. A medical team led by her personal obstetrician, Professor Ott, waited for the first labor pains. When Ott was at last allowed to examine her, he found the pregnancy was a phantom.

Society sniggered; Witte was not so sure it was a laughing matter. If a charlatan could convince the empress that she was pregnant—and she was no girl but the mother of four—then Witte thought that she would believe anything. Once she believed something, her "spineless but good" husband was soon convinced of it, too—and he was a man with unlimited power over the well-being of 140 million subjects. Philippe was indeed an omen. If the empress could fall for one holy man, then by temperament and character it was likely that she would do so again. Rasputin was an accident waiting to happen.

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Philippe had to go, but he took a handsome payoff. The tsar gave him a Serpollet automobile, the title inspector of port sanitary services, and a diploma from the St. Petersburg academy of military medicine. Spiritualist sessions continued, with Countess Nina Sarnekau as medium. The fixer Simanovich claimed he was carousing in the countess's apartment with influential friends—gentlemen-in-waiting, a provincial governor, the head of the Red Cross, a famous Rumanian violinist—when a palace automobile arrived to take her to the tsar. The countess was drunk but could not decline the invitation to conduct an imperial séance; she left to peals of laughter from her guests, who asked what she would do if the ghosts she raised had also been drinking.

The search for the boy child went on. Archimandrite Feofan, Rasputin's admirer, urged the couple to canonize a pious hermit-monk, Serafim. His bones had been buried sixty years before next to a well in Saratov whose waters were believed to cure the sick, the blind, the deaf, and infertile women. Senior churchmen and the synod were opposed to the beatification. Serafim's body was found to have decomposed, failing the test of miraculous preservation nec-

essary for sainthood. The tsar was warned that Serafim had made an unfortunate prophecy. The monk had foretold that he would be canonized, in the presence of the tsar and his family, but that blood would overwhelm the country shortly after and that millions of Russians would be scattered to the four corners of the earth. Nicholas insisted that the canonization go ahead. When the bishop of Tambov protested, he was dismissed from his see and relocated in Siberia.

An expedition thick with court hangers-on and placemen was mounted to Saratov, a Volga River port, in June 1903. Peasants cured by immersion in the well were paraded for Alexandra to meet. The sighted told her that they were once blind; the nimble that they had been lame. A single ominous note was sounded. A "holy fool" and clairvoyant named Pasha began hitting one of the dolls she always carried with her, shrieking "Serge." Grand Duke Serge had become the hated governor of Moscow after his marriage to Alexandra's sister Ella. Terrorists had not yet kept their vow to kill him, however, and the incident passed almost unnoticed. A gala banquet was held on the eve of the ceremony. Guests noticed that Alexandra was in an excitable state, her breath labored, eyes fixed, red spots on her cheeks. At midnight she left the table and was taken to Serafim's grave by three priests. She prayed at the graveside and then bathed herself in the waters of the holy well.

By the time she knew she was pregnant again, the following February, Russia had drifted into war with Japan. The Chinese empire was a rotting carcass on whose northern province of Manchuria both countries were feeding. The Russians seized the big warm-water harbor and fortress at Port Arthur. Their expansion was given further drive by the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad in 1901. It had taken troops eighteen months to toil their way by rough road and river from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Pacific. That was now cut to thirteen days. A group of adventurers at court promoted a scheme for a timber concession on the Yalu River, with their eyes on Korea. The Japanese felt they were being forced into war.

Russia drifted. The foreign ministry, a visitor said, was "indescribable"; everyone in it was asleep. The German ambassador said that he had never seen such laziness. "All officials arrive at eleven or twelve o'clock and disappear at four never to be seen again," he reported. "During office hours they do nothing but smoke and promenade in the corridors." Witte felt that war would be a great disaster; Nicholas dismissed him. "Now I shall rule," the tsar noted—pathetically—in his diary that evening, as though, by sacking him, he had acquired Witte's brilliant mantle. Plehve thought that a "little victorious war" would buy off the threat of revolution at home.

Nicholas, though cautious, had a weakness for war and glory. He had enjoyed his time as a Guards officer. "I am happier than I can say to have joined the army," he wrote to his mother when he was nineteen. He liked mess

nights, drinking, and parades. His brother-in-law, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, thought the life appealed to his "passive nature"—"one executed orders and did not have to worry over the vast problems handled by one's superiors." In 1904 the tsar held the honorary rank of colonel. "His father was a proud tsar and an equable and unaffected nobleman," Witte said icily. "Nicholas II is not a proud tsar, but a very proud and affected Guards colonel."

Nicholas had visited Japan on a world tour when he was a youth. He was so incurious that he found the trip "senseless. Palaces and generals are the same the world over, and that's all I am allowed to see. I could just as well have stayed home." A single incident stood out in his mind. He was being driven through the town of Otsu when an onlooker slashed at his face with a sword. A second blow was parried by his cousin, Prince George of Greece, with his walking cane, but Nicholas carried the scar and a grudge against the Japanese for life. He called them "macaques," monkeys, in official reports. He believed them "an unpleasant, contemptible, and powerless people" whom the Russian colossus would destroy at a stroke.

On a snowy, wet night in January 1904, he and Alexandra sat in the imperial box at the Mariinsky Theater to watch a performance of the opera *Rusalka.* The Japanese ambassador had broken off negotiations and had left St. Petersburg with his staff two days before. Japanese spies in Port Arthur reported that the Russians were not expecting an attack—"they do not maneuver, they do not carry out any gunnery exercises"—and that piles of torpedoes had been left in the open to rust. "War is war, and peace is peace," the tsar told a general plaintively, "but this business of not knowing either way is agonizing." The Japanese decided the issue for him as he watched the opera. Vice Adm. Togo Heihachiro was steaming for Port Arthur with a force of eleven destroyers. Nicholas had been assured by his admirals that the "monkeys" were incapable of handling modern warships; they were "like children playing with toy ships in a bath."

Togo was on a turkey shoot. The seven battleships moored in Port Arthur had their lights burning. None of their great guns was manned or loaded. The shore batteries were so heavily greased against winter cold that they could not fire. The Russian commander, Gen. Yevgenny Alekseev, owed his promotion to having passed himself off as a member of the imperial family wanted by French police for starting a brawl in Marseilles. He had intelligence reports that the Japanese were on the move; he ignored them. No torpedo nets were in place to protect the fleet. Togo's destroyers fired their torpedoes at will into the Russian hulls and turned back to sea. Alekseev was reading a book in his study when he heard the explosions. He told an orderly that he did not wish to be disturbed. News of the attack first reached St. Petersburg from a commercial agent in the port.

The war started well enough politically. Generals and tramps marched side by side down the Nevsky singing "God save the tsar," and when Nicholas drove past Witte's house, he gave him a triumphant and self-satisfied look. The ex-minister thought that war would turn to revolution soon enough, and revolution to anarchy. "How sad for Russia!" he wrote. "How sad for the emperor, that poor, unfortunate man. . . . He is a good man, and is by no means stupid, but he has no will."

It was a military disaster. A Russian minesweeper, sunk by one of her own mines, was lost together with the only log of the minefields she had laid. In March, on a rare foray, the flagship *Petropavlovsk* was blown up by a Russian mine. The remnants of the fleet stayed in Port Arthur. Nicholas was exposed to humiliation. He was besotted by his own autocratic power, a leading senator thought, which "he exercises sporadically, without prior deliberation, and without general reference to the general course of affairs." All was done piecemeal or by chance, on momentary impulse, "through the intrigues of one person or another. . . . There is no policy based on principles, well reasoned and firmly directed, in any field."

A pettiness ran with the tsar's charm. The director of his private office, Prince Nicholas Obolensky, had a regular morning appointment with him and often stayed on for lunch. When he fell from favor, Nicholas changed the meetings to 2:00 P.M. to save himself the embarrassment of not inviting the prince to dine. It annoyed him that his German cousin Willy was a head taller than he. Postcards showing the difference in their height were confiscated. He was fit: he liked sports, shooting, sailing, and tennis; he could still take sets off the Russian tennis champion when he was well into his forties. But he was frightened of his huge Romanov uncles. Grand Duke Alexis filled his admiral's uniform with 250 pounds of flesh. Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, "Nicky the Long," stood six feet four inches in his cavalry boots. Serge, governor of Moscow, and Vladimir were less intimidating physically but equally demanding and authoritarian. His young cousin Sandro said that Nicholas 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."

Most of all he was frightened of his wife, now confirmed to be pregnant. Their letters to each other were similar in their endearments—"darling boysy," "sweetest wifey"—but his were placatory and submissive, and hers demanding. When Nicholas ignored his recommendations, Witte several times asked who advised him. "The person whom I trust without reservation," Nicholas replied. When Witte asked him who that might be, he wrote, the tsar "told me that it was his wife." He was tetchy and sometimes drank heavily. His irritations ran to words. When an aide spoke of the intelligentsia, he snapped that the

academy of sciences should erase it from the language: "How I dislike that word!" A reference to public opinion in a report had him asking angrily: "How does public opinion concern me?" It was in his nature, Witte thought, to "dislike persons who were firm in their opinions, their words, and their actions." His inferiority complex—the unloved son, the dwarf nephew, the poor speaker—left him uncomfortable with "men who are mentally and morally superior to him." He was at ease only with those he felt more poorly endowed than himself—or, like Rasputin, "people who, knowing this weakness, act as if they were more poorly endowed."

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By July, Japanese troops had placed Port Arthur under siege. Nevertheless, on July 10, 1904, the guns of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg boomed three hundred times in celebration. "For us a great, unforgettable day on which God's goodness was so clearly visited upon us," Nicholas wrote in his diary. "At 1:15 this afternoon, Alix gave birth to a son." The tsar was certain that the recent beatification lay behind the happy event. "I have indisputable evidence of the holiness and miraculous power of Saint Serafim," he told the synod procurator. "No one can ever shake my faith in that power." A portrait of the saint hung in the tsar's study, and tens of thousands of icons with his features were sent to troops at the Japanese front. "They send us Serafim in place of ammunition," the soldiers complained.

Five days after the birth, Plehve was riding in his carriage guarded by police agents on bicycles. There was trouble everywhere. Troops en route to Manchuria refused to obey orders and ravaged railroad stations while their officers hid from them. A lawyer in Saratov, the new saint's hometown, said that anger at the regime "bursts forth roaring and whistling through every crack and gap." From exile the young revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote of peasants ravaged "by syphilis and all sorts of epidemics. . . . In thoughtful silence, our village is dying from disease." Plehve opened the traditional safety valve—pogroms against the Jews, who were raped, blinded with stakes, murdered, and robbed—but neither that nor his bicycle escort was enough. Witte reckoned that "thousands of people were willing to give up their lives for the privilege of killing a major official." One of them tossed a bomb into Plehve's carriage. He used nitroglycerin, and only a few bloody traces of the interior minister were found.

The infant was christened Alexis. His father said he had chosen the name to break the chain of Alexanders and Nicholases. The superstitious thought the name an ill omen. Peter the Great had murdered his son and heir Alexis. A story was minted on the birth. The tsar, it ran, held himself responsible for the run of daughters. To ensure a son he urged his wife to give herself to another

man. Her choice fell on Gen. Alexander Orlov, commander of her regiment of Uhlan lancers. A widower living high on his late wife's fortune, he was a "jaunty, gallant line officer," handsome, a prince with a taste for strong drink and spiritualism. She had once danced a waltz with him, in breach of imperial etiquette; he was a descendant of Catherine the Great's lover Grigory Orlov. It was enough for tongues to start wagging with malice.

The imperial couple, "quite mad with joy," ignored the talk. The baby had dimpled, chubby cheeks, with fair curls and gray-blue eyes set off by "the fresh pink color of a healthy child." Nicholas insisted that Alexander Mosolov, head of the court chancellery, come to see the tsarevich in the nursery. The baby was kicking lustily in the bath, and Nicholas plucked him out and rested him in his arms. "Don't you think he's a beauty?" the tsar asked, smiling. Alexandra was relaxed and fulfilled, "proud and happy in the beauty of her child."

When the baby was six weeks old, he began to hemorrhage from the navel. It took two days for the bleeding to stop. After three months he started to crawl. He tumbled, and telltale bruises developed on his arms and legs. He cried as the blood formed swellings under the skin. He had hemophilia.

Only close relatives and the empress's few intimate friends were told. No outsider knew. Alexandra was ill and suffering; she was thirty-two, and the definitive moment in her life had turned, bleeding, against her. "She spends most of her time in bed," Nicholas wrote to his mother, "lives in seclusion, doesn't care to come to meals, and looks out of her window for hours together." Pregnancies and sciatica had worn her out. She suffered vertigo and anxiety states and canceled public appointments. To the court she appeared her old "cold, haughty, and indifferent self. From this false impression she never fully recovered." When Dr. Philippe had left the court, he presented Alexandra with a bell. He told her to ring it to ward off advisers who did not share her views. He also told her: "Someday Your Majesty will have another friend like me who will speak to you of God." The Montenegrins had one such ready in the wings.

CHAPTER 7

A Man of God from Tobolsk

Rasputin was still in Pokrovskoye when Nicholas saluted the Baltic fleet from the deck of the royal yacht *Standart* as it steamed from the Gulf of Finland for the Pacific. Its mission was to lift the siege of Port Arthur. Nicholas expected it to "reverse the whole course of the war" by sinking the blockading Japanese—he was assured by Father Serafim, a die-hard monk who had assisted at his namesake's beatification, that "only kikes and intellectuals could think otherwise"—but the birth of the heir had not changed his fortunes. Nicholas had been born on the name day of Job the Sufferer, and he accepted ill luck with dull fatalism.

A catastrophe was in the making. Rarely—never?—has a naval expedition been so botched. The commander, aging Vice Adm. Zinovy Rozhdestvensky, called his number two "the sack of shit." The equally obese commander of cruisers was known as "the vast space." Three ships collided almost at once, and the funeral party for a dead petty officer was unable to fire a last salute because the men did not know how to load their rifles. Paranoia sailed with them. "Tonight it will be dangerous," the engineer in chief wrote to his wife while still in the Baltic. "We are passing through a narrow strait and are afraid of striking Japanese mines." Six days out the Russians mistook British herring smacks in the North Sea for Japanese torpedo boats. Their gunnery was so poor that they missed most of the trawlers but put six shells into one of their own cruisers. The nearest Japanese warship was more than ten thousand miles away.

Suez was closed to them, so they steamed around Africa. Rozhdestvensky was obsessed with running short of fuel and piled coal high on decks and

around gun turrets. Ventilators and portholes were sealed against coal dust, and men dropped with heat exhaustion in the tropic seas. No gun drills could be practiced without dislodging the coal piles. While he was off the coast of Nigeria, Japanese infantry seized the high ground around Port Arthur and sank the remnants of the Pacific fleet that Rozhdestvensky was sailing to relieve. He reached Madagascar on December 27, 1904, to discover that the Port Arthur garrison had surrendered the week before.

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Reports of the strikes and riots that were coattailing the military defeats reached Pokrovskoye at the start of 1905. Rasputin was disturbed by them; he began to feel that God "required some mission of him." His wife believed that he had seen another vision of the Virgin of Kazan—he said nothing of it himself—in which she commanded him to go to the capital. His children bid him tearful farewells, and he set out to return to St. Petersburg.

Workers at the big Putilov arms plants in the city struck for an eight-hour day and higher wages. Within a week twenty-five thousand were refusing to work. The city was nervous. On January 6 the tsar took part in the traditional Epiphany blessing of the waters of the Neva from a wooden pavilion set up on the frozen river in front of the Winter Palace. The ceremony dated back to before the Romanovs, when tsars went down to the Moscow River below the ramparts of the Kremlin for the blessing. The guns of the Fortress of Peter and Paul fired a salute. A live shrapnel round was accidentally mixed in with the blanks. "Broken glass shattered from the window above our heads," an onlooker in the palace wrote. "Someone shouted: 'They are firing live ammunition.' . . . Small holes could be seen in the upper portions of the windows." A policeman was wounded. Many thought it was a murder attempt on the tsar; he refused to attend the service for the next five years. It put police and army officers on edge.

Three days later, with icy blasts from the east lifting snow from the streets that whirled in the winter sun, Witte rose with the late dawn and looked out his window. A crowd, or rather, he thought, a procession—workers in padded jackets, students with scarves tied over their ears, women and children in their Sunday best—was marching down the avenue carrying church banners, icons, and Russian flags. No red was to be seen, not a red handkerchief; the procession was restrained. Its organizer, Georgii Gapon, was a young, bright-eyed priest who worked with the poor in the slums of the harbor district. He was also an Okhrana agent; before he was blown to pieces, Plehve had ensured that the workers' movements were infiltrated by the secret police. Gapon wished to present a petition to the tsar, pleading with him to deliver them from the "capitalist exploiters, bureaucratic crooks, and plunderers of the Russian people." He was sure the tsar would accept it. The marchers were on their best behavior;

there were no weapons, not so much as a penknife, and they sang hymns as they walked to the Winter Palace. But their "Little Father" was not in the capital; Nicholas was with Alexandra and the children at Tsarskoye Selo.

"Save us, O Lord, your people!" they sang. "How glorious is our Lord in Zion!" As Witte went out onto his balcony to listen, he heard shots. They whizzed by close enough to kill a porter in a nearby school. Then came a series of salvos. In ten minutes the marchers were running back, some of them carrying dead and women with children among them. Cordons of troops blocked the great avenues leading to the Winter Palace. They had been issued with live ammunition and an extra vodka ration the night before, and were told that workers were plotting to destroy the palace and the dynasty. They warned the marchers to turn back and opened fire when they did not. The worst killings took place in the square in front of the palace. An old man clutching a portrait of the tsar and a child with a lantern were the first to be shot. The company of guardsmen stationed there fired indiscriminately into the marchers.

The light failed, and the sun was consumed in a foggy red circle. In midafternoon a rainbow glistened, and then the wind came up and it snowed in early darkness. At least 150 were killed, and three times that number were wounded. In the evening, obscured in a long cloak, his priestly beard cut crudely in tufts for disguise, Father Gapon fled to Maxim Gorky's apartment. "Give me something to drink," he asked the writer. "Wine. Everyone's dead." He was blue with cold and hysteria. "Peaceful means have failed," he shouted. "Now we must go over to other means." He invoked "my pastor's curse" on the soldiers and on "the traitor tsar." Gorky telegraphed William Randolph Hearst's *New York Morning Journal:* "The Russian Revolution has begun."

Ten days later Nicholas consented to see a few specially chosen workers in a margarine, or ersatz delegation. "I believe in the honest feelings of the working people and in their unshakable loyalty to me," he told them. "Therefore, I forgive them." The workers were less forgiving of him. They spat at members of the delegation and cursed the fifty thousand rubles the tsar donated to the families of victims as "blood money." Gapon had fled the city but left an open letter for Maxim Gorky to read out. "There is no tsar!" it thundered. "Between him and the people lies the blood of our comrades. Long live the beginning of the struggle for freedom!" In the clubs, gloomy nobles and landowners passed on stories: of the tsar's advisers being taken to him concealed in coffins, so frightened were they of assassins, of coming massacres. The slaughter on "Bloody Sunday" ripped the bonds between the Romanovs and the ruled. With a gory bow it ushered in what the dowager empress called the "year of nightmares."

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Three weeks after the killings a revolutionary took his revenge on a Romanov in Moscow. Grand Duke Serge, whose name the half-wit in Saratov had cried as

she beat her doll, was a rich prize. The bomb was made of nitroglycerin, and it blasted him into slicks of flesh that stuck to the Kremlin gate as he drove through it in his carriage. The assassin, a Social Revolutionary named Kaliayev, made no attempt to escape. Alexandra's sister Ella visited him in prison and offered to plead for his life, on condition that he express sorrow for killing her husband. Kaliayev refused; he said his death would speed the fall of the autocracy. Ella, "saintly and beautiful," withdrew from society into the solace of prayer. She built an abbey in Moscow and became its abbess. Nicholas and Alexandra dared not attend Serge's funeral.

Violence in the cities gathered pace, and there were outbreaks of cattle maiming and barn burning in the provinces. The rich needed reassurance. Rasputin provided it; he was a man of the people, a symbol that the real Russia had not turned on them, a tsar-loving and God-fearing peasant who was also a phenomenon, unique, exciting. He took minds off dark events. The value this gave him was picked up by the sensitive antenna of George Petrovich Sazonov, a political adventurer and journalist of dubious loyalties. A student dabbler in revolution, close to assassination squads, Sazonov had founded *Rossiya*, a leftist newspaper, tapping industrialists for money to ensure good press for themselves. He now veered from left-wing to the extreme right, where the financial pickings were higher. He invited Rasputin to stay in his apartment off the Nevsky and put word out to the capital's religious dilettantes that he had a holy man for their amusement.

Rasputin was soon asked to the salon of a well-known hostess, Varvara Ivanovna Iskul. She invited a writer famous for his works on religious sects, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, to watch him in action. Rasputin arrived late, at eight in the evening. He walked straight into the drawing room, though he had never been in the house before, marching along the carpet with a "free, light step." He went up to his hostess and, without any preliminaries, "assaulted" her on her famous collection of paintings and antiques, which crammed the room. "Why is it, Mother, that you hang up so much on your walls, as if it was a museum?" he asked. "Perhaps five starving villages could be fed on this wall alone. Just look how they live while the muzhiks starve." When Varvara Ivanovna introduced him to her women guests, he shot direct personal questions at them. "Is she married?" he asked. "Where's the husband? Why did she come alone?" He turned to his hostess: "If you were together, I'd see how you are, how you live." He talked without a trace of embarrassment, joking and chattering.

The holy man's eyes most drew Bonch-Bruevich's attention. He looked at people directly, with concentration. His pupils "sparkled with phosphorescent light. He sort of groped listeners with his eyes." At times his speech slowed to a drawl. Staring at someone directly in the eye, he told a confused story, as if his mind was far away. Then he suddenly snapped to—"What's the matter with

me?"—and hurriedly changed the subject. His stare made a particular impression on all present, especially the women. It flustered them; "they got nervous and then looked at Rasputin timidly, as though wishing to talk to him and to hear him talk." He picked on a single woman, then turned abruptly and talked to someone else. After fifteen or twenty minutes he resumed his little game. He cut himself short in mid-conversation and went back to the unmarried woman he had first stared at. "It's no good, Mother, no good, well," he mumbled. "How can one live like that? You're such a . . . It's no good to be offended . . . you've got to love someone. . . . Well." Then he skipped to another topic and walked about the room quickly, bending and squatting a little, rubbing his hands together.

All this excited the guests. They whispered and said that he had guessed something, that he had said the truth, that he saw a lot. The atmosphere became nervously heightened. "It was the one you can feel in monasteries," Bonch-Bruevich said, "around Elders, 'prophets,' and so forth." Rasputin met the Montenegrin sisters again. Militsa invited him to her palace on the English Quay overlooking the Neva. She introduced him to Anastasia's paramour, the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich. The tall soldier was devoted to a small lapdog, elderly and panting with exhaustion. Rasputin whispered to the dog, stroking it and praying. Its breathing eased; it licked the Siberian and trotted to its master. The grand duke was impressed.

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The Baltic fleet decayed in Madagascar. The men got drunk and diseased on runs ashore to the bars and brothels of the Hellville harbor section. A mutiny broke out on the prison ship that accompanied the warships. The ships filled with the reek of animals brought aboard by the men. Instead of ammunition and wireless sets, supply ships from Russia brought thousands of winter uniforms and delivered mail to the battleship *Alexander III* that was addressed to the Alexander III Electrotechnical Institute in St. Petersburg. When it finally steamed for Singapore in March 1905, the fleet could make only eight knots because of the buildup of barnacles and sea grass on the ships' hulls. It was April before they reached Singapore, where a launch brought news that the Russian ground forces in Manchuria had been defeated at Mukden. Steaming on for Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, two destroyers rammed each other.

On May 11, as the fleet neared the Tsushima Strait separating Japan from Korea, Admiral Foelkerzam—the number two, the "sack of shit"—died. Rozhdestvensky did not bother to enlighten Adm. Nikolai Nebogatov, Foelkerzam's nominated successor, and the dead man's flag continued to fly from the battleship *Osliaba*. Admiral Togo's fleet was spotted at dawn on May 14, 1905. Battle was joined in the early afternoon. "At this time our formation,

properly speaking, was nothing but a heap," Nebogatov wrote. Afraid of colliding with each other, the Russians were outmaneuvered. "I glanced around," a commander on the battleship *Suvorov* wrote. "Devastation! Flames on the bridge, burning debris on the deck, piles of bodies. Signaling, range-finding, and shot-spotting stations swept away and destroyed. And astern, the *Alexander III* and *Borodino* also wreathed in smoke and flame." Four battleships were sunk before nightfall. The sealed coffin of Foelkerzam was found floating among the debris that marked the end of the *Osliaba.* Nebogatov headed north for Vladivostok with the survivors, harried by Japanese torpedo boats. Tsushima was the greatest sea battle since Trafalgar. All twelve Russian battleships were lost, eight sunk and four captured, together with seven out of twelve cruisers and six out of nine destroyers. Five thousand Russians were drowned. The Japanese lost three torpedo boats and 117 men.

Rasputin was an antidote to the war, and salons competed to have him. "The unbalanced society ladies could talk and think of nothing else," General Spiridovich wrote. "They taught him how to dress, to groom himself, to wash—and much more besides." They embroidered silk blouses for him, bought him fine cloth trousers and red leather boots. He learned to pomade his beard but ruined its subtle scent by using cheap, pungent soap on his body.

On June 14 the captain of the battleship *Potemkin,* a martinet and harsh disciplinarian, ordered his crew to eat maggot-infested meat for their midday meal. The men refused, arrested him and the other officers, and seized the ship as it lay in the harbor at Odessa. They hoisted the Red flag while revolutionaries fought with gangs of ultra-rightists in the streets ashore. The sailors tried to help them by turning the battleship's big guns on the city. Their range finding was so poor that they abandoned the attempt and steamed out into the Black Sea. Ten days later they moored in the Rumanian port of Constantza and gave themselves up. Most sought asylum and emigrated to Brazil, Canada, and the United States.

On July 10 news arrived from France for Nicholas and Alexandra that Dr. Philippe had died. They were twenty miles from the capital in the summer palace at Peterhof, whose marble terraces overlooked the sea and a great cascade of waterfalls and fountains in which a gilded Samson tore apart the jaws of a lion. The statue commemorated Peter the Great's victory over the Swedes, happier times for the Romanovs than the string of defeats against Japan. The couple were isolated and fearful. Peasant violence was spreading. On the railroads passengers saw maimed horses and cattle with ripped stomachs hobbling by the track, "mooing or bellowing from pain." At night the steppe was lit by burning ricks and barns.

The constant threat of assassination was unnerving to a girl brought up in secure England and the small-town safety of Darmstadt. Nicholas thought he

would share the fate of the Serbian king Alexander, last of the house of Obrenovich. Alexander had been murdered with his wife two years before, their bodies hurled into the street. The killing "made a particular impression on the tsar," Witte found, "and filled his soul with fear of his own fate." At the end Nicholas and his wife showed bravery enough. For now the common sense that kept them immured in rural palaces at Peterhof and Tsarskoye Selo—scores of their subjects, well-bred girls and youths, intelligent and pitiless, furnished with bombs, safe houses, and false identity papers, wished them dead—was taken for cowardice. "From their fortresses," Witte wrote, "they send telegrams of condolence to the wives of men who have fallen at the hands of foul revolutionary assassins, praise the fallen for their courage, and declare 'my life does not matter to me as long as Russia is happy.' "

They were suspicious of all outsiders, all politicians. "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," Alexandra railed. "He tries so hard, works with such perseverance, but the lack of what I call 'real' men is great. . . . The bad are always close at hand, the others through false humility remain in the background. . . . I rack my brains to find a man and cannot; it is a despairing feeling." When Prince Sviatopolk-Mirsky, the interior minister, tried to warn her that all Russia was against the existing order, she flushed with anger. "Yes," she said, "the intelligentsia is against the tsar, but the people support him." Mirsky warned her that the people were an elemental force: "Today they could slaughter the intelligentsia in the name of the tsar, but tomorrow they could destroy his palaces." Nicholas was forced to sue for peace with the Japanese "monkeys."

As an added humiliation he had had to recall Sergei Witte—huge, ungainly, bold, and coarse, a reminder of his fearsome uncles—and send him to negotiate with the Japanese at the Wentworth Hotel in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The irascible Witte thought little of Theodore Roosevelt, his "naive" American host; for his part Roosevelt despised the "pitiable" Russian despot. "The tsar is a preposterous little creature," he said. "He has been unable to make war and now he is unable to make peace." Nevertheless, the Russian representative was a superb negotiator. Russia lost only the Liaotung Peninsula with Port Arthur and the southern half of Sakhalin Island; she remained a great Pacific power. Witte regained his reputation; the tsar was branded as the first European ruler to be defeated by Asians.

Nicholas consoled himself at spiritualist sessions with the Montenegrin sisters. Militsa's Znamenka Palace was ten minutes from the Peterhof summer palace, while Anastasia was a thirty-minute walk away at the Villa Sergeievka. The royal couple saw the sisters almost every day at Peterhof, and every other day they went to the Znamenka Palace for a long soiree. Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, now living with Anastasia and thought of as her fiancé, often

joined them. "In Peterhof," the historian A. A. Polovtsev wrote, "they take no account of the situation and what is going on. They constantly vacillate, now doing one thing, then another, undecided, unconfident, holding mystic séances with those two Montenegrins, whose presence is so unfortunate for Russia."

Like his ancestor Alexander I, whose library of spiritualist books he had inherited, Nicholas had a penchant for mysticism. Alexandra shared it. During the summer she gave a book called *The Friends of God* to one of her maids of honor. It was a reprint of a fourteenth-century German work, influenced by the Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart, whose theme was that God on occasion gives divine grace to pious and humble men whom he sends to help the sovereigns he protects. These "friends of God" give the sovereigns moral help and advice on how to rule their people. Rasputin was another visitor to the Znamenka Palace over the summer. He had yet to meet the sovereigns, but the day when, as the dead Dr. Philippe had said, they would find "another friend like me" was not far off.

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The couple spent September aboard the imperial yacht *Standart* cruising off the Finnish coast. The 420-foot steam yacht, capable of making twenty-two knots, black hulled with varnished masts and a great bowsprit picked out in gold leaf, carried a brass band and a balalaika orchestra to amuse the family. Security was maintained even at sea; the crew had Okhrana agents among them, and a platoon of the Garde Equipage kept watch for seaborne assassins. Witte returned a hero from New Hampshire. Nicholas received him aboard the yacht and created him a count, but the honor did not conceal the hostility between them. Nicholas wrote sarcastically to his mother that Witte "went quite stiff with emotion and then tried three times to kiss my hand!" The politician felt that the title was awarded "in spite of his and especially Her Majesty's personal dislike for me, and also in spite of all the base intrigues conducted against me by a host of bureaucrats and courtiers whose vileness was equaled only by their stupidity."

This coldness—the sovereigns' contempt for men of ability, their shared conviction that the tsar's mission came from God and that his actions were a matter for God and his conscience alone—was nearly fatal. As they came ashore from their cruise at the beginning of October, their empire started to disintegrate. A railroad strike began in Moscow on October 7. It spread almost as fast as the broad-gauge trains could travel. The wave reached Kursk and Kiev on the ninth, St. Petersburg and Kharkov the next day. "Peter is now cut off from the rest of Russia," Sergei Mintslov, a rare book dealer, noted in his diary on October 12. "Panic is beginning to spread throughout the city. . . . Sausage shops, bakeries, and grocers' shops are all besieged." The price of meat increased by a

third during the day. The next morning the St. Petersburg Soviet, a workers' council, was convened. Its leading figure was a wiry and passionate man named Lev Davidovich Bronstein, known as Leon Trotsky.

The Montenegrin séances continued. "The worse things are, the greater the sorrow," Witte wrote. "The greater the sorrow, the more the soul must seek surcease in divination. And there will always be soothsayers, especially for tsars—who say: 'Be patient, you will be victorious and all will be at your feet, all will recognize that only that which comes from you represents the truth and salvation.' " In the last three weeks of October, Anastasia visited the palace on all but two days. Militsa dined at the imperial palace seven times and made many telephone calls to the tsar and empress.

By October 14 the strike had passed over the Urals and the Caucasus into Georgia, Central Asia, and Siberia. Workers with pistols—Brownings and Mausers smuggled in from Belgium—went onto the Moscow streets. Crowds beneath red banners sang the "Marseillaise" and screamed: "Down with autocracy." In the capital almost everyone had stopped working: cabdrivers, telegraph operators, maids and cooks in great houses, doctors, professors, even stockbrokers and the corps de ballet at the Marie Theater. Shop windows were boarded against looters. A destroyer was kept with steam up ready to evacuate the imperial family to Denmark. Murdered policemen, the tsar complained, Cossacks and soldiers, riots, disorders, mutinies—"It makes me sick to read the news!"

"I am sure that the only man who can help you now and be useful is Witte," the dowager empress wrote to her son. "He is certainly a man of genius, *energetic,* and clear-sighted." Nicholas disliked Witte for those very qualities—so different from his own—and for his dangerous liberalism. But fear, and the unraveling events, obliged the tsar to deal with him. "One had the same feeling as before a thunderstorm in summer," Nicholas wrote later to his mother. "Through all those horrible days I constantly met with Witte. We very often met in the early morning to part only in the evening when night fell." Witte had to travel out to Peterhof by special steamboat. Nothing moved on the railroads, and the roads were unsafe. "Snow mixed with rain . . . a rocky journey," he wrote, for the weather had turned bad. "En route, we talked of what a shameful situation we were in, when loyal subjects virtually had to swim to reach their emperor."

The tsar wished to put down the rebellion by force. He gave dictatorial powers to Gen. Dmitri Trepov. The former Moscow police chief had simple views, Witte said: "If people riot, you beat them. . . . For the likes of Trepov there are no complex questions, for such questions are the inventions of intellectuals, kikes, and Freemasons." Trepov issued a famous order to his troops: "Don't use blanks and don't skimp on bullets." The order was fly-posted throughout St. Petersburg, but Trepov warned the tsar that clearing the demonstrators and strikers from the streets would cost thousands of casualties. The other way out,

Nicholas reluctantly admitted, was "to give the people their civil rights, freedom of speech and press, and also to have all laws confirmed by a state Duma—that, of course, would be a constitution. Witte defends this energetically." He drafted a manifesto for a constitutional government. "Man always strives for freedom, civilized man to freedom and law—to freedom, regulated by law and the security of his rights," he said. "The ominous signs of a terrible and stormy explosion each day make themselves felt more strongly."

Army reinforcements moved into the capital on October 15. They set up machine guns in the university and law schools. No newspapers were published. The power stations ran intermittently, the streetlamps flaming with light for a few minutes before turning pitch black again. A huge searchlight shone down the Nevsky. The "revolution" was expected in a few days. Witte prepared a draft manifesto, scribbling amendments to it aboard the steamboat that shuttled him to Peterhof and back. He discovered that Nicholas was holding two sets of meetings, with himself and with Ivan Loganovich Goremykin, an aging bureaucrat with "a sleepy face and Piccadilly whiskers" and a taste for French novels. Goremykin was working on an alternative manifesto; since he thought that the tsar's ministers were no more than his servants, it could hardly coexist with Witte's. It was typical of Nicholas to go behind his back, Witte thought, adding that since the tsar was no Metternich or Talleyrand, his taste for the byzantine led merely to the bloody and shameful. Witte prayed God that "He deliver me from this morass of cowardice, blindness, treachery, and stupidity."

The Montenegrin sisters were in constant touch with the palace, and with Rasputin. On October 17 the tsar called in Anastasia's fiancé, Nicholas Nikolayevich. He proposed making him military dictator. The grand duke took a revolver out of his pocket and said he would shoot himself if the tsar refused to sign Witte's version of the manifesto. The tsar crossed himself and signed. The manifesto made Russia a hybrid, half autocracy, half free. It promised freedom of conscience, speech, assembly, and association. No law could be enforced without the consent of an elected state Duma, a parliament. The tsar retained control of military and foreign affairs, and could appoint and dismiss ministers at will. Alexandra was silent with anger at the loss of power. "The empress sat stiff as a ramrod," Witte recalled, "her face lobster red, and did not utter a single word."

It was not enough for the left. The tsar had granted everything and given nothing, Trotsky said; the manifesto was no more than "the Cossack whip wrapped in the parchment of the constitution." For the right it went too far. "Fear has driven them out of their minds in St. Petersburg!" bellowed Dmitri Pikhno, editor of *Kievlianin*, the only newspaper in Russia to continue publishing during the strikes. "God alone knows what they're doing! They're actually making revolutionaries themselves!" He and others like him organized Black

Hundred gangs, which pogromed Jews under the banner of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality." Membership in the ultra-right, anti-Semitic Union of the Russian People snowballed to more than a million.

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On October 31, Militsa and her husband, and Anastasia and Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, dined with the imperial couple and left very late. The next day, November 1, 1905, Nicholas and Alexandra called on Militsa at the Znamenka Palace. Rasputin was there. The tsar made a note in his diary that evening: "We have made the acquaintance of a man of God named Grigory from the government of Tobolsk."

Two days after meeting the rulers—he did not see them again until the following summer—Rasputin acquired his first disciple. Olga Lokhtina, a rich landowner married to a government engineer, had once been a beauty, sad eyed and brilliant, a hostess known for her bitter wit. In her early thirties she was overcome with depression. She became a recluse in her apartment on Grechesky Prospect in St. Petersburg's fashionable Peski district and took to her bed for five years with a nervous stomach disorder. Doctors put it down to neurasthenia, the same handy catchall for nervous women that they applied to the empress. Lokhtina was weak, eating little and crying often.

Rasputin spoke to her gently at her bedside. She was a religious woman, and he assured her that God was with her and would never abandon her. As he soothed her, she later told the investigator, she felt a great warmth and her spiritual crisis lifted, like mist burning off a river under a strengthening sun. She quit her bed and ventured outdoors. She thought her recovery a miracle, like Lazarus arisen, and her healer divine. She fell to her knees in front of him, calling him "Living Christ" and "Lord Sabbath." She began dressing entirely in white, pinning her dress with ribbons that had biblical quotations painted on them. She wore a strange white turban as a headdress and tied a bandeau around her forehead with the word "Alleluia" written on it.

The starets returned to winter in Pokrovskoye, inviting Lokhtina to visit him in the spring. His children were growing, and he enjoyed them. He was a good father. The family sat around the stove in the long evenings, and he took the children on his knee. Maria remembered him telling of "great rivers, . . . Tartar towns with their bright sunshine and narrow streets, . . . markets overflowing with great juicy fruits, . . . wandering pilgrims whose lot he had shared." He lowered his voice to a whisper and spoke of his visions—"a woman of splendid beauty, always with the features of the Holy Virgin, speaking softly to him"—before making the sign of the cross over them. He often prayed in the dug-out chapel, which he filled with icons from his St. Petersburg admirers. The children found the services wearisome but loved to be outside with him in the clear cold of the Siberian winter.

He was proud of little Dmitri's skills with horses. As they galloped across the snows in a troika together, his son learning to feel the reins, Moscow burned. A general strike brought the city to a standstill on December 7, 1905. Panicking Muscovites started a run on banks, withdrawing two million rubles in gold. Barricades were flung up in poor districts and across main avenues on December 9. Maxim Gorky was there, to note that all took part in the "cheerful labor" on the barricades, from "the respectable gentleman wearing an expensive overcoat to the cook-general and the janitor." Contempt for the tsar—still "Bloody Nicholas"—ran across the class divide. Gunmen shot at troops with "bulldogs," Browning pistols. The city's governor-general set up a command post in the belfry of the Stransoi Convent and drew up artillery to destroy the barricades while a machine gunner atop the belfry fired at the defenders, who were slowly forced back into the slum lanes of the city's Presnia section.

The Semyonovsky Guards, a crack regiment commanded by Col. G. A. Min, rushed from St. Petersburg by express train, surrounding Presnia on the night of December 16. The guardsmen were told to destroy every building from which they came under fire from snipers concealed in attics with Mauser and Winchester rifles. Min ordered them to be merciless: "There will be no arrests." A thousand civilians, including eighty-six children, were killed before Presnia fell; a hundred troops were killed. "If such a government cannot be overthrown otherwise than by dynamite," Mark Twain wrote in the United States, "then thank God for dynamite."

The infantry remained loyal and crushed the risings in the cities. Revolutionary leaders were arrested; Leon Trotsky was returned to prison, complaining that the unarmed heroism of the crowd could not face the "armed idiocy of the barracks." Black Hundred gangs, incited by churchmen and ultra-rightists, swept through ghettos with knives and clubs. The Russian empire had the largest Jewish population in the world, more than five million, and pogroms speeded a quarter of them into emigration, largely to the United States. In the great Kiev pogrom of 1905, the banker Alexander Gunzburg shouted at the Orthodox mob: "Have you no fear of Christ?" He was beaten, he wrote, with blows "so powerful that my head was driven into my shoulders and my front teeth split." He escaped to the house of the British consul next door. "The streetlamps are out," the artist Marc Chagall recollected of his Russian childhood. "I feel panicky, especially in front of the butcher's windows. There you can see calves that are still alive lying beside the butchers' hatchets and knives. 'Jew or not?' they asked. My pockets are empty, my fingers sensitive, my legs weak, and they are out for blood. My death would be futile. I so wanted to live." He denied his religion, and the men told him gruffly: "All right! Get along!"

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thoroughbred horses with gasoline and lit them so that they galloped burning through the night. "It is a fight in the dark, in the mud, with weapons which do not reach," the British ambassador wrote. On one side was the autocrat, "a little man with a snub nose, descendant of an alien and scarcely royal race," and on the other—"nothing at all—but just simply destruction." Witte struggled to cope with the bloodshed, and with the tsar. Nicholas was sickened at the concessions he had made, not from his free will, his cousin Grand Duke Constantine Constantinovich noted, but "torn from him by force."

At Alexandra's urging the tsar wanted them reversed. He was made bolder by the success of reaction and the free use of the gibbet and firing squad by a ruthless interior minister, Peter Durnovo, who thought it the mission of the Russian tsar to be "terrible but gracious, terrible first and foremost and gracious afterward." The rail strike collapsed, unpaid volunteers helped break the post and telegraph stoppage, industrialists felt brave enough to sack and lock out their workers. Cossacks and ex-soldiers were hired to protect country estates. Liberals, who had protested the use of whips on demonstrators in the summer, were rattled enough now to demand that all radicals be shot out of hand. Nicholas noted in a letter to his mother on December 1 that more and more voices were calling for firm action, "which is a very good sign indeed." Witte obtained the largest loan ever floated—almost three billion francs from France at 6 percent—to make the government financially independent of the elected Duma Nicholas so despised.

It was not enough to save the premier. The tsar listened eagerly to Witte's detractors. The Black Hundred leader Dr. A. I. Dubrovin, an ugly figure whose loathings foamed from gutter newspapers subsidized by the secret police, warned that the premier "is acting under the influence of the kikes." Nicholas chipped away on his own account. "As for Witte," he wrote on January 12, 1906, "since the happenings in Moscow he has radically changed his views; now he wants to hang and shoot everybody. I have never seen such a chameleon of a man." It was untrue. Witte had no desire to hang the Russian peasant, whom he thought a "slave," subject to the whims of officials, land captains, village elders, clerks, gentlemen, whose very body "is dependent upon them, for he is subject to flogging." Progress was paralyzed in the countryside. "When things are bad for the sheep," Witte warned, "they are bad for the shepherd."

The shepherd was unimpressed. The day before the Duma was first due to sit, Nicholas asked for Witte's resignation. "I am going abroad at once to take a cure," Witte said. "I do not want to hear about anything and shall merely imagine what is happening over here. All Russia is one vast madhouse." The tsar treated the most able minister in his empire with sly spite. "*As long as I live*, I will never trust that man again with the smallest thing," he wrote. "I had quite

ards of the premiership, assassins, and the whims of the tsar. He moved with his family into the Winter Palace, where security was better; and, though the omens were not good—the bombing of his dacha had earned him "great moral stature . . . he was unanimously acclaimed master of the situation"—the tsar's jealousy of first-rate men had yet to get the better of him. Neither security nor Nicholas's approbation—"I cannot tell you how much I have come to like and respect this man!"—would last.

During July the sovereigns attended ten soirees, and dined twice, with Militsa at the Znamenka Palace. Anastasia and Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich were present on each occasion. So, on July 18, was Rasputin. This second meeting with the imperial couple was noticed by Spiridovich's palace security. They ran a routine check on him. They found a "peasant of modest allure" and noted that he sometimes attended evening service in the small chapel that lay between Peterhof and the Villa Sergeievka; the empress also liked to pray there and had made donations to it. Rasputin was given a security code name, Blue Shirt, in deference to the light blue blouse he wore with his peasant breeches. It was standard secret police practice to use physical descriptors for people who interested them—they had recently given an obscure oil field agitator known as Joseph Stalin the code name Ryaboi, "Pockmarked"—but they concluded that Blue Shirt posed no threat to the physical security of the sovereigns. The mental state of the rulers—their isolation, the table rapping—was of no official concern to the security services.

A meeting in front of a third party, even one as well connected as Militsa, was not enough for Rasputin. On October 12, Prince Putiatyn, the court marshal, handed the tsar a letter from Iaroslav Medved, a monk and Militsa's former confessor. It was written on Rasputin's behalf and requested Nicholas to grant him an audience so that he could present the imperial family with an icon. Nicholas asked the prince to arrange the visit.

Rasputin came to the palace alone early the following evening. He brought with him an icon of St. Simeon of Verkhoturye, painted on a wooden panel twelve inches high. Nicholas gave his visitor tea and introduced him to the children. Rasputin blessed each of them and gave them small icons and pieces of holy bread. He was remarkably assured. He greeted the children, including the heir, with the traditional Russian triple kiss, cheek to cheek. Nicholas noted in his diary that night: "At 6:15, Grigory came. He brought an icon of St. Simeon of Verkhoturye, saw the children, and chatted with us until 7:15."

After Rasputin had gone, Nicholas asked Putiatyn what he thought of their visitor. Putiatyn replied that the starets seemed mentally disturbed. Nicholas was visibly upset and angry. He turned away and stroked his beard and mustache. Together with drumming on the windowpane and chain-smoking, this was a sign of the ill temper his exquisite manners normally concealed.

The critical meeting—the acceptance into the bosom of the family, the first sight of the heir—had occurred. The appearance of Rasputin, the politician Mikhail Rodzianko declared, and the start of his influence "mark the beginning of the decay of Russian society and the loss of prestige of the throne and the person of the tsar himself." That was with hindsight. For the moment the Montenegrin sisters kept their protégé in the front of the imperial mind.

There were other things to discuss. The Petersburg prefect, F. V. von der Launitz, was shot dead by a gunman at the opening ceremony of the dermatological department of the Institute of Experimental Medicine, where the recent Nobel Prize winner Ivan Pavlov taught. Because he could not be identified, the assassin's severed head was displayed in a jar of alcohol in the capital in the vain hope that someone would recognize it. The "kike-eating" new governor-general of Moscow, Horschelmann, narrowly avoided another murder squad. Gen. V. P. Pavlov, the chief military procurator, who had set up field courts-martial across Russia, was less lucky. He had dealt with cases pitilessly and had received many death threats. He stopped taking walks in public; instead, he took the air in the walled garden of his residence. An unknown gunman climbed the wall, shot him dead, and fled. It was not easy to be a loyal subject of the tsar.

Slowly, Stolypin's dual-track policy, of reform and repression, land handouts and hangings, won back stability. The tide of killings in the countryside, and the political assassinations in the cities, ebbed. The table talk in the palace was of other things—miracles, holy men, visions. "Militsa and Stana dined with us," Nicholas wrote on December 9, 1906. "All evening they talked of Grigory to us."

The subject of their conversation, as the sisters knew, had recently passed through the city of Volyn on his way back to winter in Siberia. Rasputin stayed there with a very religious lady—Spiridovich referred to her only as Madame O—at the suggestion of Feofan, who had instructed her in the faith. Madame O, a handsome blonde, met Rasputin at the railroad station. He astonished her by kissing her full on the lips in greeting. Once in the house he looked at her pretty maids "with the leer of a famished wolf." He insisted on a tour, including her bedroom. He sat on the bed and complained about its hardness. She said that she wanted an uncomfortable mattress to mortify her flesh for the sake of her soul. Rasputin laughed. "That's a waste of time," he said.

He asked her—knowingly and insistently—if there was anything she wished to confess. She refused, saying that he was no priest and so could not bless her. "Listen, I know how to fuck really well," he said suddenly. She stormed out of the room. He followed her and suggested, seemingly contrite, that she could become his "spiritual daughter." He asked her to go to Pokrovskoye with him. "Why?" she said. "There are no holy places there that I

know of." He scowled and tried a different tack. He told her of the Montenegrins and their husbands, the grand dukes and princesses he knew by their pet names—Stana, Militsa, Petroushka, Nikolashka. She told him that he should show more respect for them. "Why?" he asked. "What good would that do me?"

To flatter her he sent a telegram to Militsa in St. Petersburg; he said that he had found "my ideal lady." Madame O was unimpressed. For a starets her guest had remarkably little interest in holiness. He drank too much, his table manners were disgusting, and he was too lazy to visit the local Potchaiev shrine. He had, she said, the air "of a man who is on to a good thing." She was glad to see him move on to Pokrovskoye for the winter.

CHAPTER 8

The Heir

Militsa wished to be the first to know when Rasputin returned to the capital; she telephoned Sazonov's apartment for reports. The holy man left Siberia early, in mid-March, and she at once invited him to her palace on the English Quay. She had someone important to introduce to him, a young woman, one of Alexandra's maids of honor.

Anna Taneeva was the daughter of the director of the tsar's personal chancellery. "A typical, stupid St. Petersburg lady," Witte remarked, "who also happened to be ugly and shapeless, as commonplace as a biscuit in dough, a young woman who happened to be in love with the empress, at whom she would gaze with ardent, honeymoon eyes, and sigh." The portrait was cruel: "pink-cheeked, full, and all dressed in fluffy fur," Anna had charm and loyalty. If she was oversweet, and her sentimentality cloying, her detractors still allowed her kindliness. What struck everyone most forcefully was her stupidity. It had a heroic quality. She repeated whatever was said to her as though it were a response; conversation with her was said to be like "talking to a gramophone."

Anna had developed what she called a "special religious mood" in 1902, when she was seventeen and suffering a near-fatal bout of typhoid fever. She had heard that people who believed in the power of the prayers of Ioann of Kronstadt would be cured of their sickness, and she asked her parents to call for the priest. "In a state of semi-consciousness, I felt that Father Ioann had arrived and entered my bedroom," she later testified. "He said a Te Deum and laid his stole on my breast. When the service was over, he took a glass of water and blessed it, and poured it over me, to the horror of the doctor and nurse who

mopped me dry. I fell asleep at once. The next day, my fever had dropped, my faculties returned, and I began to get better."

Anna's father reported the miracle to the empress. Alexandra visited her sickbed and brought her flowers. Anna was named a maid of honor the following year. She was ill again in the summer, while living at Peterhof with her parents, and the empress brought her a bottle of holy water from the well of St. Serafim. Shortly after Bloody Sunday, she was called to Tsarskoye Selo for a tour of duty. Alexandra gave her a memento—a gray stone medallion in the shape of a heart surrounded by brilliants—and invited her to join the family for the fall cruise to Finland aboard the *Standart*. Their friendship waxed in the intimacy of shipboard life. They played duets on the piano and sang; Alexandra told Anna of her childhood, of Windsor Castle and Queen Victoria, and of how coldly the court had treated her on her arrival in Russia. As they disembarked Nicholas said, "Now you'll be on all our trips." He was glad of a companion who could lift his wife's melancholy. "I thank God for having sent me a friend," Alexandra said.

Anna was present at the palace at least twice a week in 1906, and she joined the family again for a long cruise among the Finnish skerries. "During this voyage the empress complained to me that she had no friends outside her family, and that she felt miserable and a stranger," Anna testified. "Her words somehow brought me close to her, and I started to regard her as my mother." Back on dry land security men noted that Anna was continuously with the empress and that the two "take singing lessons together, read together, and have long meetings."

The fact that Anna was unmarried "irritated the tsarina a little," Spiridovich thought. For five years after Bloody Sunday, Nicholas and Alexandra were not seen in public in their capital. The rulers had become ghostly figures, and there was loose chatter of lesbianism. Alexandra suggested that Anna marry General Orlov, the widower whom some gossips thought was the father of the tsarevich. The general was busy putting down revolts in the Baltic provinces, with notable brutality, and Anna thought him too old for her. But she reluctantly agreed to marry a young naval lieutenant, Alexander Vyrubov.

It was not a love match. Vyrubov's ship had been sunk under him by the Japanese at Tsushima, and he was prey to violent tempers, vodka, and cards. Militsa realized that Anna had accepted his proposal only at Alexandra's insistence, and that the prospect of marriage frightened her. Eager to exploit the young woman's intimacy with the empress, the Montenegrin took her up. They had a mutual interest in mysticism. Militsa lent Anna books in Russian and French—Anna recalled two titles, *Eldership* and *Legends of the Holy Fathers*—that she later testified "proved the existence of men who become prophets thanks to a holy life." It was a fair assumption that she would be ready

meat for Rasputin, whom the empress had already described to her. Militsa asked her to come to the English Quay to meet the starets on March 17, six weeks before she was due to marry.

Militsa received her alone in the drawing room. She talked to her for an hour, reminding her that some people were gifted "from above" with the power of prophecy. Anna was sick with anticipation at meeting a living elder; the princess droned on about his virtues; the room was hot, its stuffy grandeur clashing with the icy Neva beyond the windows. Militsa startled Anna by telling her not to be surprised if she kissed Rasputin. "Ask him for whatever you wish," she said. "He will pray for you, he can ask God for anything."

The visitor was announced by a footman. A peasant in a plain Siberian jacket breezed jauntily into the room and gave the princess three hearty kisses on the cheek. He was thin, his face pale, with scarecrow beard and hair. Anna thought him "elderly"—though he was thirty-eight—and was struck by his "piercing, deep-set eyes," which seemed to find their focus deep in her mind and soul.

They paced the room, Rasputin firing personal questions in his staccato fashion. "He asked me about my occupation, where I live, and so on," Anna testified. "And I, anxious about the forthcoming marriage, for I knew my bridegroom very little, asked him whether I should get married." Rasputin looked sharply at her. "He answered that he advised me to do so," she said, "but that the marriage would be an unhappy one." The conversation lasted about twenty minutes, after which she left.

Anna married her lieutenant at Tsarskoye Selo on April 30, 1907. Nicholas and Alexandra attended the wedding, a signal honor that was not appreciated by the chief naval representative, the navy minister Adm. A. A. Birilev. "The empress wept freely, like a merchant's wife marrying off a daughter," he snapped to his friend Witte. "It would have been better if she had waited to shed her tears privately." The bride kissed the hand of the tsar as well as that of the empress. Birilev did not subscribe to the lesbian scenario. He was convinced of a ménage à trois between the two women and General Orlov; "the devil knows what sort of filth was going on," he said. His theory gained wider circulation when Orlov was posted to Egypt—supposedly to spare the cuckold tsar further humiliation—and died en route. "The empress and Anna, so I was told by eyewitnesses, went to the general's grave, left flowers, and wept," Witte claimed, further evidence to him of the "mysterious ties" that bound them.

The ceremony was sad, the bride distracted, the groom's broken nerve evident beneath his officer's brashness. The wedding night was a disaster. The imperial train was lent to the couple to take them to St. Petersburg, and Vyrubov began drinking steadily. When they reached the bridal suite, Anna recalled, the vodka "gave him the courage to be crude. Without any consideration of my

feelings or the sanctity of the moment, he practically raped me." He was so drunk, however, that "his mental capacities were far ahead of his physical ones." Trembling with shock and mortification, she refused any further advances. "I only wanted him to go away and leave me alone," she said. "I never wanted to see him again."

The marriage was proved not to have been consummated, and the Orlov ménage à trois to have been fiction, when Anna was examined by doctors in the months after Rasputin's murder and found to be still a virgin. She acquired a new name, Vyrubova, under which she would become notorious, and a fresh hold over the empress. Alexandra felt responsible for the scars—physical as well as mental, for the lieutenant beat his wife—that she had inflicted on her friend by encouraging the marriage. Vyrubov was swiftly given a sea posting. In August, cruising the Finnish islands again on the imperial yacht, the battered bride poured out her misery to the empress—"I will not go back to him"—and remarked on the accuracy of Rasputin's prophecy.

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As she spoke Rasputin was still struggling to keep up a semblance of inner holiness. He prayed alone while staying at Sazonov's apartment in the capital, and continued to do so while visiting the journalist's summer cottage in Kharkov province in August. "When Rasputin used to spend the night or came to the dacha, the servants said that he didn't sleep at night but prayed," Sazonov said. "When we lived in the dacha, children once saw him in the forest deep in his prayers. The children's story interested our neighbor, a general's wife, who wouldn't hear a good word about him. She went with the kids to the woods and, in fact, although an hour had passed since he'd gone to the forest, he was still praying."

Temptation surrounded him, however. Sazonov was ingratiating himself with the influential Jew-baiters of the Union of the Russian People and their wives. The holy peasant was an ideal lure for rich reactionaries and bored aristocrats. Witte, who knew him well, said that Sazonov "came to act toward Rasputin like the curator of a museum with an outlandish creature on exhibit." A flock of curious high society ladies came to the apartment to look him over. Some were willing to practice "purification by sin" with him. Society women were beginning to show off their independence; they were seen dining out in restaurants and visiting theaters unescorted.

Rasputin's success with cultured young women, so Spiridovich thought, was aided by the fashionable novelists who were exciting their readers with stories of the reconciliation of spirit and the flesh. One of the sensations of 1907, Lidia Zinoveva-Annibal's novel *Thirty-three Abominations*, began with the heroine's lesbian lover describing how she "kissed my eyes and lips and breasts and

caressed my body." Homosexuality was in vogue; another book, *Wings*, had racy passages on sex between an older man and a youth. So was incest. The hero of the novel *Sanin* spent much of the book trying to seduce his sister. "If I like, I'll give myself to the devil!" she declared as her brother gazed lustfully at her naked body through a window. Its author believed in sexual pleasure as an end in itself, for "concepts of debauchery and purity are merely as withered leaves that cover fresh grass." Sex clubs opened with explicit names, the Burnt-Out Candle, the League of Free Love. At Ivanov's Tower, an apartment without walls, without clocks, the decadent mystic Vyacheslav Ivanov went to bed at 8:00 A.M. and breakfasted at 7:30 P.M., devoting himself to reviving the cult of Dionysius.

It was not all fun—three characters in *Sanin* killed themselves—but literary fatalism and pleasure seeking flowed into the smart set's affectation of *tryntrava*, the inconsequence of consequence. What difference did anything make? Did it matter if Sazonov's strange creature was a fraud? What if he was repulsive, a lowlife? It added thrill and danger. He was rough trade.

"I? Not in the least," a lady told the French ambassador when he asked if she found the starets charming. "He disgusts me physically, with his dirty hands, his coal-black nails. . . . Ugh! Yet I admit he amused me. He has high spirits and a remarkable imagination. He is even very eloquent at times . . . he has a deep sense of mystery. He can be familiar, scoffing, violent, joyful, absurd, and poetical. And with all that, no affectations. On the contrary, an incredible lack of manners, a staggering cynicism."

When one of Sazonov's ladies was not on hand, to be taken in her own apartment or at Lokhtina's, which he used often for assignations, Rasputin had no qualms about picking up women on the street. St. Petersburg had a policeman for every 150 citizens, a tradesman for each 75, and a whore for every 30. Two thirds of its men, and some of its ladies, used them. White slavers in Odessa brought girls from across the empire to brothels in the capital that reformers thought were no more than "prison houses for sexual slaves." The horrified author of *Children of the Streets* was offered "perverted fulfillment of sexual requirements" by two girls under twelve at five rubles per evening. A few prostitutes of noted beauty and technique made seven hundred rubles a month; most made around forty rubles, three times a mill girl's pay. Rasputin used them, according to his funds, until his death.

He was careful, however, to maintain his aura of spirituality with his religious backers. He did not like going to church, the security men noted; "he went to services only if he had to, and with ill grace." He despised most clergymen—" 'dogs' was the word he used commonly for the most distinguished priests"—but he was subtle and insinuating with those he knew to be important. He went frequently to the Theological Academy. He was at pains to keep

up his contacts with its rector, Sergei, blond and energetic, a rising star, and with Veniamin, a brilliant monk-lecturer and mystic, as well as his original supporters, Feofan and Hermogen. All had influence with the empress.

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Alexandra was exhausted from five pregnancies and the constant worry over her son. His birth, which "should have been the happiest event in the lives of Nicky and Alicky," the tsar's sister Olga wrote, "became their heaviest cross." Alexis was a lively little boy. Pierre Gilliard, the Swiss tutor who was teaching the four girls French, would spot him being taken for sledge rides in the park, careering along the passages, and bursting in on his lessons. Then, "his visits would suddenly cease, and he would be seen no more for a long time," Gilliard wrote. The palace became chill, and the girls were melancholic. When the tutor asked them what had happened, they replied evasively: "Alexis Nikolayevich is not well." Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich said that the tsar, his cousin, aged ten years overnight when doctors diagnosed the disease. Life "lost all purpose" for the parents, and visiting them was like entering "a house in which there had been a death."

Alexandra kept the hemophilia secret—"Don't say anything," she told her sister, "people do not need to know"—and nursed her son through his bouts of bleeding, caressing his hand and forehead as he sobbed with pain, his eyes ringed with black as seeping blood swelled into dark bruises on the surface of his skin. Nobody told Gilliard what disease the boy suffered; he deduced it from what he saw. One day the tsarevich slipped from a chair while playing in the classroom, banging his right knee as he fell. By the next day he could not walk. The swelling caused by the hemorrhage spread down the leg; the skin distended and hardened as the blood filled it tight as a drum. Gilliard found Alexandra at the boy's bedside after a bad night. The inflammation was still spreading. "Groaning piteously," Alexis had laid his head in his mother's arms; his "small, deathly white face" was unrecognizable from the romping, handsome boy, with golden hair and his mother's gray-blue eyes, of the days before. At times he stopped groaning and whispered, "Mummy." Alexandra kissed him gently—his hair, his brow and eyes—as though her lips might "relieve him of his pain and restore some of the life which was leaving him." As it struck him that the boy was a hemophiliac, Gilliard saw the empress's double agony—her son's awful suffering made worse by her own hereditary transmission of it. "Now," he wrote, "I realized the secret tragedy of her life."

The Russian people felt no such sympathy. They knew nothing of the drama; they did not see the empress. Apart from the annual cruise to Finland and a spring or fall vacation in the Crimea, Alexandra was closeted almost permanently at Tsarskoye Selo. Two palaces were set in a walled park behind high

iron fences. The Catherine Palace was vast and ornate, a blue and gilt rival to Versailles, chandeliered, with exquisite parquet floors and rugs, brocaded silver and turquoise curtains, overlooking terraces, ponds, and statues. Alexandra and Nicholas had chosen to live in the nearby Alexander Palace, a more modest two-story country house with classical facades washed in ocher. The pillared center held state apartments and the rarely used ballroom. The family lived in one wing, court officials in the other. A regiment of Cossack escorts rode around the park and its avenues at intervals of fifty yards by day and night. In the palace itself men of His Majesty's Regiment were stationed in corridors, on staircases, in the kitchens and cellars. Spiridovich's police agents guarded entrances and exits, searching visitors, tradesmen, and staff, cross-referring to photographic files of known terrorists and dissidents.

The dominant color in the rooms the empress used was mauve. The carpets, the drapes, the cushions, the photograph frames in her boudoir were mauve; so were the flowers—lilacs, violets, and orchids—sent daily from the French Riviera, and the cover on the white upright piano. She bought fifty new dresses each season from Paquin and Worth in Paris but rarely wore them, preferring tight-bodiced, full-skirted dresses in cream and mauve, fussily trimmed in lace. She smelled of Rose Blanche perfume and French cigarettes. Nicholas added to her brilliant stock of jewelry each year with new Fabergé creations. For everyday use she stuck to freshwater pearls; on state occasions she so covered herself with diamonds—at her throat, on her breast, her hands, her ears, in her tiara—that the tsar's snide aunt Marie said that she had "*un goût du parvenue.*" The bedroom where she shared a double bed with the tsar was carpeted in mauve. A door led to a small private chapel lit by oil lamps. Another passed to her bathroom, where, true to her Victorian upbringing, the lavatory and the bath were concealed under cloths.

The empress had few visitors other than Vyrubova to lift her spirits; her life centered on her family, and the preservation of her son and the autocracy he would inherit. High society was spiteful to her. When she tried to set up sewing circles to make clothes for the poor, she was ridiculed for behaving like the wife of an English vicar. She gave permission for a charity bazaar to be held in the Hermitage; other charity ladies were jealous, and shopkeepers complained of unfair competition. She was too Victorian, too British, an Englishman wrote; he thought her unpopularity stemmed from "her want of a 'theatrical' sense. The theatrical instinct is so deep in Russian nature that one feels the Russians act their lives rather than live them. This was entirely foreign to the empress's thought." Courtiers and socialites found her earnest and stilted; she thought them false. When it was suggested that she meet new faces, she replied, "Why? So as to hear more lies?"

The vigorous Russia that was emerging beyond the airless world of the court was ignored. The sovereigns insisted that they valued "nothing so much as simplicity and sincerity" in people, Gleb Botkin, the son of their personal physician, observed; at the same time, "without being conscious of it, they actually appraised people almost solely according to the amount of attention these people gave to quite outward and often nonsensical etiquette." Their son had acquired this taste for protocol by the time he was four. Botkin's mother met him at the entrance to the palace, bowed, and said: "How do you do, Your Imperial Highness?" The boy frowned with anger and turned his head away, already aware that none had the right to address him before he had spoken to them.

Alexandra's day was measured and dull. She breakfasted late on bacon and eggs with well-brewed tea. She was seldom up and about before noon, spending her mornings reading or writing letters in bed. She walked with her Scottish terrier, a notorious ankle nipper, before lunch. She was indifferent to food and wine; frugal, she sold unwanted dresses to a secondhand market, first changing mother-of-pearl buttons to glass. She dealt with correspondence in the afternoon before riding in the park in a black landau or the tsar's Delaunay-Belleville automobile. After formal dinner she often listened to music—Wagner was a favorite—or played the piano with Vyrubova. Tea with the tsar at 11:00 P.M. ended the day; then they made love, their relationship still urgent and physical, or she read herself to sleep.

Any public function—a reception, a visit to a theater, a gala—was an ordeal that she avoided whenever possible. The St. Petersburg season lasted from Christmas until Lent. Lapps from Finland camped on the ice in the middle of the Neva and offered rides in reindeer sledges. A woman crocodile tamer thrilled the crowds at the winter circus by putting her head in the reptile's jaws. Hedges of roses, and baskets of daffodils and lilacs, scented the air at the bals blancs for unmarried girls. Outside, heavily padded coachmen chatted in courtyards lit by open fires, the heads of their shaggy horses haloed in the steam of their breath, waiting for girls in fur-trimmed overshoes and fur cloaks, their arms full of flowers and ribbons, to be escorted to their carriages by men in gold and white uniforms and chaperons in pearl gray satin. The dowager empress was often seen in her carriage, a small figure in a black robe protected from assassins by no more than a tall, bearded Cossack riding on the running board.

Of Nicholas and Alexandra, there was nothing. The ballrooms of the Winter Palace were unused, the wheels of the imperial coaches unturned. For the first time in living memory, the tsar failed to bless the waters of the Neva at Epiphany. He was blamed for the severe cholera epidemics that broke out in the summer; the river was heavy with germs, the superstitious said, because the

tsar had not purified it. Society had no focal point without the tsar and empress; the glitter was dulled and the unexplained absence blamed on Alexandra's hauteur and hysteria.

She thought her ailments—pains in the back, the chest, the legs, exhaustion—were real and physical. "If people speak to you about my 'nerves,' " she wrote to a friend in Germany, "please strongly contradict it. They are as strong as ever, it's the 'over-tired' heart and nerves of the body and nerves of the heart besides, but the other nerves are very sound. Very bad heartaches, have not what one calls walked for three years, the heart goes wild, fearfully out of breath and such pains." Others were not so sure. Her maid, Madelaine Zanotti, thought she was suffering from hysteria: "When she found herself among congenial people she was always quite well, and never complained about her heart," Zanotti noticed. "But the moment anything displeased her . . . she immediately began complaining. Believing that her heart was affected, she used to spend the greater part of each day lying on her sofa."

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Rasputin's first success at the palace flowed from his ability to calm the empress. He also had a natural way with her children. He enjoyed the young, and they, in turn, were enthralled by his stories and the games he played with them. He never patronized them; years later the niece of one of the tsar's doctors recollected him teaching her to "pray with the most wonderful words" and explaining quietly why she should never tear up flowers, because it was cruel to take life by force.

He paid further informal visits to the palace through 1907. He called the tsar Batiushka, "Little Father," and Alexandra Matushka, "Little Mother," the affectionate names used by loyal peasants for their rulers, embracing them with the Russian triple kiss. At court they were submerged by "aristocrats and gentlemen who trick them," so it was natural for them to be captivated by this "true Russian" and to show him off to their children.

The tsar's sister Olga recollected that her brother asked her one evening in the late summer, "Will you come to meet a Russian peasant?" She followed him to the bright, chintzy nursery on the first floor. The children "were completely at ease with him," she wrote. "I still remember little Alexis, deciding he was a rabbit, jumping up and down the room. And then, quite suddenly, Rasputin caught the child's hand and led him into his bedroom." Candles glowed in front of icons on the wall of the modest room, and the tsarevich stood still and silent beside the starets, joining him in prayer.

Afterward Olga took tea with Rasputin and her sister-in-law. His persistent, direct questions set her teeth on edge—"Was I happy? Did I love my husband? Why had I no children? He had no right to ask such questions." Despite Raspu-

tin's insight, for her marriage was close to divorce, she was shocked; the more so for Alexandra merely seemed "uncomfortable" with his impertinence and did not intervene. Olga was glad to leave the palace, and she thought the peasant so pushy that she thanked God he did not follow her to the railroad station and leap aboard her private carriage. Olga felt that both her brother and his wife "were hoping that I would come to like Rasputin." She did not, but she recognized that "a gentleness and warmth radiated from him" when he was with the children. She found it "all most impressive."

A visit by Rasputin during the fall coincided with one of the tsarevich's hemorrhages. He went to the boy's bedside; shortly after the recovery began. "All one knows is that after Grigory examined the child and prayed, the hemorrhage stopped," Spiridovich reported. The starets told the parents, "Be calm, your son will live, and when he is twenty, his illness will disappear without trace." This prophecy was passed on to the security chief by the court doctor, who was told it directly by the tsar. A slightly different version was told by the director of the Imperial Theaters, V. A. Teliakovsky. He was asked by the painter Korovine, "Who is this Rasputin?" "Well," the director replied, "he's a strange fellow. He was taken to the tsarevich, who was ill in bed with a hemorrhage. His veins aren't strong; it's a hereditary illness. When Rasputin went to him, the child burst out laughing. . . . Rasputin did the same. He touched the patient's leg with his hand, and almost at once the bleeding stopped flowing. 'There's a good little boy,' Rasputin said. 'You'll get better. But only the Lord knows what will happen tomorrow.' Now, of course, the family think he's a saint."

The tsarevich's doctors were unable to explain this and Alexis's subsequent recoveries. Some specialists, however, were aware that loss of blood and exhaustion could in themselves so reduce the blood pressure that a hemorrhage would stop. This would occur spontaneously as the crisis appeared to reach its height, and recovery would be noticeable at once. It was not miraculous that Alexis lived; despite medical ignorance of the condition at the time, hemophiliacs could live well into adulthood, surviving repeated hemorrhages. Rasputin's arrival may simply have coincided with the natural onset of self-healing.

Stress increases bleeding, and it is likely that this also played a part. Rasputin had a natural affinity for people undergoing stress. His self-confidence was easily sensed; he had insight and charisma; his presence was calming. There are several accounts of him dealing with hysteria, and with migraines and other severe headaches in adults. These were sometimes accompanied by Rasputin turning pale, sweating, trembling, falling into exhaustion, and other dramatic symptoms of faith healing.

The phenomenon—prayer, intense physical and mental exhaustion, followed by the patient's recovery—is inexplicable, but it was repeated on enough occasions, in his Siberian youth, in Kiev and Tsaritsyn, several times in St. Petersburg,

and in front of enough independent or even hostile witnesses, such as the tsar's sister Olga and the head of the chancellery, Alexander Mosolov, for it undoubtedly to have taken place. The physical toll on Rasputin was apparent, too, in his later dealings with the tsarevich's hemorrhages. On this first occasion with the boy, however, he was quiet and natural. The sick boy's affection for Rasputin, the instinctive comfort of prayer, and his sense that his mother's anxiety eased in Rasputin's presence would have relaxed him and thus reduced the bleeding.

Alexandra had a simpler explanation. Rasputin had sought help from God, and God had responded. "The imperial family firmly believed that they owed much of Alexis's improving health to the prayers of Rasputin," wrote Anna Vyrubova, who was herself to be brought out of a coma by the starets in a well-documented case. "Alexis himself believed it."

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The holy man continued his unholy revels, carrying out his seductions in Lokhtina's convenient apartment. Spiridovich recorded his affair with Elena—the security chief was too discreet to use her family name, but it may have been Timofeyeva—a twenty-six-year-old with "wonderful gray eyes," a gentle creature who broke off her engagement when she became besotted with the starets. At first she tried to resist him, but Rasputin's other admirers did all they could to deliver her to him. "This was the system if someone did not give herself to the starets; it was necessary that she was forced to do what he pleased," Spiridovich observed. The victim was taken away from her home ground to meet him in company, then abruptly abandoned to him. "It was probably in Lokhtina's apartment that he deflowered her," Spiridovich wrote. "The life of the young girl was broken. Submitting to him like a slave, she followed him everywhere as if under a spell." When Rasputin showed her off to the idiot Mitya, the dwarf cackled, "Good morning, Abbess!" She turned to religion when Rasputin left her and she repented. "She took the veil, entered a convent, and died," Spiridovich concluded.

Throughout the fall, Rasputin played with his rich admirers. He lay in bed between mothers and daughters, taunting the flesh to fortify the spirit. He was interested only in the pretty. "Get off, you old crazy, get away, you old carcass," he yelled at an elderly admirer eager to be purified by sin. Others he took to bathhouses for "fervors." These were not to be confused with visits to the Nevsky bathhouses with prostitutes. "They might end in the same fashion, but the goal was different," Spiridovich commented. "If Grigory wanted to see a nude woman, he didn't have to go to a public place. There was no lack of private apartments in the capital where he could find what he wanted."

He varied his methods depending on who he was with, knowing exactly how far he could go. "He attracted some to his bed, and with others he was an

angel of virtue"; with the Montenegrins, and above all with Nicholas and Alexandra, he showed "extreme decency and chastity."

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Rasputin was flush with funds from admirers when he returned to winter in Pokrovskoye. He gave five thousand rubles to improve the church and oversaw the building of a new house for himself, the finest in the village, built of double planks on two floors with high and well-lit rooms looking toward the river. Six double windows overlooked the road, three on each floor, with handsome carved surrounds. The rooms were screened from curious passersby with muslin drapes, which gave the house a solid bourgeois air, as though its owner were a prosperous and respectable local miller. He fenced in the space in front of the house where the sidewalk would have been if rural Siberia had run to such niceties. It gave some privacy. The roof was of corrugated iron, and the eaves had the pretty detail of cross-planing. Metal chimneys replaced the roof-holes that served his neighbors. It was well decorated inside, with rugs, china plates and fruit bowls, icons, a desk, and a dining table. There were two guest bedrooms where Rasputin could play test your flesh with visitors.

He was careful that no women were in evidence when Feofan visited him for two weeks in the spring of 1908. He showed off the house proudly to the churchman, taking him to his old cabin and praying with him in the chapel beneath the barn. Feofan had reinforced his high opinion of the starets when he left Pokrovskoye for Saratov to pray in front of the shrine to St. Serafim. Rasputin accompanied him only as far as Nizhni Novgorod. He had good reason not to go on to Saratov, where the bathhouse seductions of four years before were well remembered. The mother superior at the Saratov Convent boiled with rage when Feofan spoke of Rasputin's holiness. She hurled her fork to the floor and shouted, "That's what should be done with your Rasputin!" Feofan ignored the outburst and made a favorable report to the tsar and empress on his return.

CHAPTER 9

The Go-between

Rasputin was in fine fettle when he returned to the capital in the early summer of 1908, "full of self-confidence, well-dressed in peasant style and shod in high varnished boots." He had no qualms about name-dropping. He bragged of his intimacy with the Montenegrins and their husbands when sober, and with the tsar and empress when drunk. This, and the approving noises from senior clergymen, gave him a high profile. "He begins to think he is predestined to play a special role with the tsar," Spiridovich found, "and that he will save Russia." He was now claiming to have seen Peter and Paul as well as the Virgin in his Siberian visions.

He stayed at Lokhtina's apartment and resumed his round of salons. At the house of Princess Sonia Orbeliani, he fell in again with Aron Simanovich, whom he had first met in Kiev. Simanovich had nearly been killed during the great Kiev pogrom. His shops had been looted, and his business manager and several relatives were murdered. His own life was spared because he was a fixer—he called it "an 'our' man"—for the local police chief, who smuggled him out of the city. As he left, he said, "My family and I saw the corpses of murdered Jews near the synagogue; they had been killed during the service." In St. Petersburg he was promoting gambling clubs and trading in jewels. Gambling, he found, made people "less fastidious when choosing acquaintances and less punctilious of the means of satisfying their passion"; by that he meant that they would mix with Jews and take bribes. Nevertheless, officials subjected him to "all sorts of humiliation and abasement," and he was well aware of the value of friends at court.

Simanovich's first high-level contacts had been made through two gambler brothers, the princes Wittgenstein, who served in the tsar's personal retinue. Both had recently died, one in a duel over a courtesan, the other, married to a Gypsy beauty, when he choked on a chicken bone. As a substitute Simanovich was using Princess Orbeliani. Vivacious, brave, blond, and petite, the princess had charmed the court when she arrived from Georgia a decade before. She had now developed an incurable spinal disease. This aroused the compassion of the empress—who took her for carriage outings and visited her when she was bedridden, arranging for special supports to be made for her back, as leg irons and weighted pulleys were made for the other beloved cripple in her life, her son—and hence the interest of Simanovich. He met Alexandra through the princess, and sold her diamonds at cut rates. Afterward she would check the price with the court jeweler, Fabergé, and, Simanovich wrote, "if he was surprised how cheap it was, the empress was very content."

He was aware of Rasputin's growing list of contacts and was delighted with his reception. "He treated me with respect and showed that he was ready to do a favor in his turn," Simanovich wrote. "I noticed that this muzhik could appreciate good relations. Soon we became friends." He realized that Rasputin had "not a clue about the financial side of life" and thought little about money; his loves were "wine, women, music, dances, and long and interesting conversations." Simanovich took "the trouble of his material well-being," supplying Rasputin with cash and credit. He took care not to treat him as a protégé—Rasputin hated to be patronized—but as a friend whom he helped orient in a new world of politics and power. "I became his secretary, mentor, manager, and defender," he wrote. "He would not undertake anything important without me. I was initiated in all his deeds and secrets." Rasputin's "mighty and sensual temperament" created scandals and excesses, which Simanovich smoothed out by "reprimanding him like a naughty schoolboy." Rasputin responded to this help; "soon I became indispensable to him."

It pleased Simanovich that Rasputin already knew the unhappy Anna Vyrubova; her closeness to Alexandra made her a rich prize. She had set up in a house in Tsarskoye Selo, on the corner of Church and Nobility streets. It was a pretty wooden cottage on a small lot, with a large, enclosed porch, a dining room, a drawing room with an upright piano on which she played duets with the empress, and three bedrooms on the first floor. The windows at the back gave onto the gardens of the local high school and a statue of its most famous student, the poet Pushkin. The front of "Anna's little cottage"—it was always called that—was overlooked by the many windows of the imposing palace police building. A flow of police agents strolled on the sidewalk. Being in it was "like living in a glass house," but it was only five minutes' walk to the Alexander Palace, and a direct telephone line ran from it to the palace switchboard.

Simanovich arranged for Vyrubova to meet Rasputin again at the cottage. "I was very glad to see him and said that I wanted to talk about my unhappy life," she testified. "He gave me his address: Grechesky Prospect, at the Lokhtins'." She was deeply impressed that he had predicted the failure of her marriage. A single impression was enough to make up her "limited, childish mind, for she classified people as 'good' or 'bad'—which simply meant 'friends' or 'enemies.' " She had no hesitation in classifying Rasputin as both good and holy.

Vyrubova was vulnerable to him. Her belief in the power of prayer had remained since her recovery from typhoid. Ioann of Kronstadt, who had performed that miracle, had recently died, and she was seeking another man of God. Her marriage had been "a year of dreadful trials and humiliations," she said; it had left her nervous and suggestible. She was powerfully attracted to Rasputin physically—her color heightened when she was with him, her eyes brightened and she often trembled—but her wedding night had traumatized her, and she seemed unaware of this. Rasputin kissed and caressed her in public. It flattered her, but he went no further, for she was too valuable for him to risk an indiscretion. In any event he lusted for conventionally pretty and fresh women, not the over-larded. He made no sexual advances to her, and she was often heard to say that he was "not like that." He exercised his power over her as a starets, and a "complete enslavement of her will" was rapidly established. They met frequently from the summer of 1908, at the cottage, at her father's town house on Inzhenernaya Street, and at Lokhtina's.

The relationship grew with her accelerating influence at the palace. Infatuated with both starets and empress, Vyrubova was an ideal go-between. If she missed a day with Alexandra—she often called at the palace twice a day—she pouted with hurt, and the empress joshed her, "our big baby," "our little daughter." The friendship alarmed politicians. "Not only the courtiers, but also their wives and daughters, try to get into her good graces," Witte wrote. "Also, she helps some officials gain access to the emperor." Palace staff shared the anxiety. The tutor Pierre Gilliard thought that Vyrubova had "the mind of a child . . . her judgment had not matured," and that her "unqualified adoration" for the empress was dangerous in its intensity.

She talked up the Siberian to good effect. "Their Majesties were among those who believed in the power of these wanderers," she later testified. "Like his ancestor Alexander I, the tsar always had a penchant for mysticism. Alexandra shared the same disposition." Now they shared a new friend; she said that "Their Majesties were convinced that nowadays, as in the time of Apostles, there were people—not necessarily priests—who had the grace of God and whose prayers the Lord listened to."

Only three of Rasputin's visits to the palace were recorded in the *Kammerfurier*, the official court ledger. He used a side door, entering the imperial apart-

ments through a back corridor. He was observed by the palace security men but not by the chamberlain's staff, who logged official visitors. On his arrival, Vyrubova said, he embraced the family three times in the Russian style and chatted informally with them. He told them of Siberia, the needs and desires of the peasants, his pilgrimages—the stock-in-trade of his conversations with people he wished to impress. Nicholas and Alexandra always spoke of the heir's health and the cares and worries of the day. Their marriage was under strain—Simanovich's palace contacts told him that the empress was suffering from "hysterical breakdowns" and sometimes refused to speak to her husband, who himself "drank a lot, looking very bad and sleepy"—and the visits acted as therapy. When Rasputin took his leave, after talking with them for an hour or so, Vyrubova said that he blessed them and always left them "gay, their spirits full of joyous hopes. They believed in the strength of his prayers. . . . Nobody could ever extinguish the faith they had in him."

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In Siberia, Praskovya Rasputin fell ill with a stomach tumor. A telegram was sent to her husband, and he arranged for a carriage to take her from Pokrovskoye to catch the Trans-Siberian Railroad at Tyumen. He was still on good terms with the Montenegrin sisters. Militsa's husband, Grand Duke Peter, arranged for Praskovie to be operated on in St. Petersburg and paid the surgeon's bill and hospital expenses. She was invited to Anastasia's palace while she was convalescing. Anastasia, now married to Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich, sat her down in an armchair and washed her hands, fussing over her. The grand duchess remained standing while the peasant woman sat. "When my mother protested," Maria Rasputin recalled, "the grand duchess told her that it was not dignified for her to sit in the presence of the wife of Grigory Efimovich." When she had recovered Rasputin took her for a droshky ride down the Nevsky to the Winter Palace and across the Neva to the Peter and Paul Fortress. The sight-seeing trip exhausted her, and she disliked the city. "I don't want to live here," she told him and happily returned to Pokrovskoye. Maria said that the operation was a hysterectomy and that her parents' sexual relations ended after it.

Rasputin was fond of his wife, and she of him, despite his infidelities. She gave him license; Simanovich said that she paid little attention to her husband's amours and "used to say in such cases: 'He can do what he likes. He has enough for all.' " Usually stubborn, hot-tempered, quick to detect a slight and pick a fight, he was "very complaisant with his wife. They lived in hearty friendship and never argued." He was a loyal family man; though he often fought with his father, he insisted that he also visit the capital. The old man was frightened by the complicated journey and the monstrous new machines—

steamboats, railroad trains—that swept him to Moscow and on to St. Petersburg. His first gesture, staring slack-jawed at the streetcars, motors, and crowds, was to make the sign of the cross in terror. He returned to Siberia within a week.

Kindliness never deserted Rasputin, and, for the moment, he kept his spiritual credentials intact when the mood took him. Prince Dzhevakov, a deputy procurator of the church synod, an intelligent man with a perceptive and sober interest in religion, arranged to meet him in Lokhtina's apartment to sound out his beliefs and methods. The prince was troubled when he glanced around the drawing room. His hostess was wearing her ribboned turban and squatting in a corner. She looked demented. Several other women were gazing at Rasputin with mute adoration. The holy man was suspicious and on edge. "Why have you come?" he asked the prince. "To look at me, or to learn how to live in this world and to save your soul?" At the word *soul*, Lokhtina began crying in a thin, piercing voice: "He's a saint! He's a saint!" "Shut up, imbecile," Rasputin snapped. Then, to the prince's surprise, he turned to him, settled himself, and began to talk of salvation, the discourse confident and lively.

"To save his soul, a man must lead a pious life," he began. "That's what the priests and bishops pontificate from their pulpits. And it's true. Yes, but how do you do it? They tell you: 'Take the *Lives of the Saints*, read it and read it again, and you'll know.' So I did. I read how each saint achieved salvation in his own fashion. But, you know, they abandoned the world, they found their salvation in deserts and monasteries. The *Lives* described the existence of ascetics from a moment when they'd already become saints. I told myself—there's something wrong with that. . . . Don't tell me about their lives after they've become saints. Tell me how they got there. That's the only way I can learn something from them.

"Remember—among them are great sinners, brigands, scoundrels. And suddenly they pop up among the just! How did they do it? At what point did they leave the path of evil for the path of heaven? How did they—mired in spiritual filth—recognize that God exists and come to him? That's what I must be shown. And another thing. Every time you look at the life of a saint, it's a monk. What about ordinary people? They want to save their souls, too. They need help, too. A hand must be held out to them, too."

At this Lokhtina shrieked back into life. "Help us! Give a hand to us!" she sobbed, shaking as she held out her hands to the starets. "You can do anything. You know everything. Christ! You are Christ!"

"Shut up, imbecile," Rasputin roared. "Or else . . ."

"I will be silent. I will be silent," she promised.

Regaining his temper and concentration, Rasputin turned back to the prince. "Laymen must be helped to salvation," he said. "Say a minister of the

tsar, or a general, or a princess worries for the soul and wants salvation. . . . So, they're told to take refuge in a desert or a monastery! What about their responsibilities? Their families? Their children? Their duties? No, these people cannot abandon the world. Something else must be done—but they're never told what. Go to church, keep the commandments, read the Bible, lead a pious life, and you'll be saved—that's all they're told. And that's what they do. They go to church, they read the Bible. That doesn't stop their sins from growing every day. It doesn't stop evil from stealing up on them and turning them into savage beasts. You have to show this man who has lost his human form, who has the morals of a wild animal, how he can escape from the pit. How he can breathe pure air. This path exists. But he must be shown it." Rasputin leaned forward to the prince. "And I can show it to you."

The nervous tension in the room mounted toward a paroxysm; Rasputin's listeners sweated, and Prince Dzhevakov felt them straining for wisdom, for a guidance that priests could not give them but that shone from the bearded man with gleaming eyes. Lokhtina relapsed into hysteria, and Rasputin cursed her into silence.

"God is salvation," he continued. "You can see God when everything else is black around you. Evil, sin—all that hides God from you. The room you're in, the work you do, the people around you—they all hide God. You have to do something to see God. . . . But what?" His eyes slipped into a distant focus. "After mass, after prayer, leave the city—on a Sunday or a holiday—go into the deep countryside." He lowered his voice, and his soft Siberian accent stroked his listeners. "Walk, walk until you no longer see the black smoke of the Petersburg chimneys behind you, and the limpid air of the horizon lies on you. . . . Stop and reflect. How small you seem, how insignificant and helpless. And, in your mind's eye, the capital will change into an ant heap where men rush about like busy insects. What happens to your pride, your self-love, your feeling of power? . . . You feel miserable, useless, abandoned. And then—then, raise your eyes to heaven, and you will see God. In your heart, you sense that you have one father, our Lord God, and that it is to God alone that you must give your soul—that it is to him alone that you wish to give it. Only he can protect you and help you.

"A great tenderness will seize you. This is the first step toward God. Later, you will venture further, but for now return to the world. Go about your business while preserving, like the very apple of your eye, what you have brought back with you. Because you have brought back God in your spirit. This emotion that overwhelmed you when you met him . . . preserve it jealously . . . it will be the sieve through which you can sift all the acts of your life. Thus you will transform your worldly deeds into divine deeds. You will save your soul, not through penitence but by working for the glory of God. If you live for your own glory, for the glory of your passions, you will not be saved."

Rasputin returned to his childhood, to the reading in the Pokrovskoye church that had so deeply affected him, and that was so convenient to his message, for it proved the existence of men of God. "This is what the Savior meant when he said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you.' " He paused, a moving, well-calculated silence, and raised his voice for the final blessing. "Find God and live with him and in him. Not just on saints' days and Sundays. . . . Tear yourselves away from your workaday lives. Instead of socializing or going to the theater, go into the deep countryside, toward God!"

The prince was overwhelmed. Rasputin's words, he wrote, "struck me with irresistible force." Piety, for which he had long searched without success, seemed to light the room as physically as the sun burning off a salty Petersburg fog. Dzhevakov had heard many brilliant preachers. Fifteen years later he had forgotten them all. He recalled Rasputin word for word.

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At the same time the starets pressed on with his debauches. He behaved with "such impossible caddishness" that Simanovich, a hardened operator with few scruples of his own, was shocked at the deliberate way Rasputin set out to outrage society. He never cursed when he spoke to peasants or to his daughters, but he scolded and jeered at noblemen with particular vigor, calling them "dogs" and saying that they had not a drop of Russian blood in their veins. This was dangerous ground, for three centuries of Romanov marriages with German and Danish princesses had left the tsar with one part of Russian blood to more than one hundred foreign; the tsarevich, suffering with his mother's blood, had less than one part to two hundred.

It mattered little to Rasputin; he lusted for "exciting sensations," Simanovich said, and insulting his social superiors was one of them. He swore at countesses and famous actresses "in the most obscene manner and with words that would have made a stable lad blush. His impudence at times was indescribable." He talked openly to women he found attractive of farmyard sex, stallions and mares, bulls and cows; "Ah, my fine mare!" he called them. "The presence of their husbands and fathers did not baffle him in any way," Simanovich reported. "His conduct would have revolted the most inveterate prostitute." To his great relief, however, Simanovich found that "it almost never happened that anyone expressed indignation. Everyone was afraid of him."

They feared Rasputin's tongue, his reputation, his energy; they fawned on him. He rarely used a knife and fork at the table, helping himself with dry and bony fingers; "big pieces he tore like an animal." He did not eat meat but grabbed at fish, potatoes, and vegetables, which often stuck in his beard. Ladies kissed his hands, soiled with food, and "did not shun his dirty fingernails." He passed chunks of fish and bread around the table in his hands to his women admirers, and they "tried to assure him that they regarded it as bliss."

Simanovich himself found this merely "disgusting," but he was glad to see that the socialites quickly became used to it with "unparalleled acceptance."

The starets could, however, go too far. Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich was shocked when the starets extended his habit of insulting churchmen to include saints. But he was virtuous, eager, and polite on his visits to the Alexander Palace; no trace of lust remained. Before he set out for the palace, Spiridovich discovered, Rasputin behaved "as if he were going to communion." He prayed, took a bath, put on a clean shirt and fresh clothes, and "appeared nervous to the highest degree."

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The tsarevich was in good health for most of 1908, protected from falls by his minder, a giant sailor called Nagorny, who swept him up into his arms if he became too boisterous, though Rasputin helped him through nosebleeds. He told Simanovich that he prayed with the boy and helped him to relax until the bleeding passed. Once, he said he took a piece of oak bark from his pocket, mashed it up in boiling water, and spread it over the boy's face as a poultice so that only the eyes and mouth were uncovered. It was a Siberian peasant remedy for cuts; Rasputin claimed it was effective. He treated Simanovich for migraines at this time. He stood behind him, took his head in his hands, whispered unintelligible phrases, and then squeezed his head with the word *Go.* The result, the patient said, was "stunning."

When the boy's life was not directly endangered, Rasputin's welcome at the palace was more as a family friend than as a healer. The tsar took to him. Nicholas believed that courtiers and politicians deceived him. "For me, there are honest people only to the age of three," he told Rasputin. "As soon as they reach that age, their parents should be glad that they cannot talk enough to lie. They are all liars." This suspicion bred inconstancy and weakness; Simanovich thought it "the tragedy of his life." As a child Nicholas had had an English tutor, Charles Heathe, from whom he learned a very English sense of self-control and reserve; he hated scenes. He was only fully at ease with others while an army officer in his early twenties; he had enjoyed the easygoing familiarity of the officers' mess, with its rituals of drinking and hunting. An aide-de-camp thought that he had only a "single real friend," General Orlov, whom he had served with in the Guards Hussars. Even that friendship was debased by the scandalmongers, who had nodded and winked over Orlov's supposed affair with the empress.

The tsar knew that he was not respected; "craftiness," his former premier Witte wrote of him, "unspoken lies, the inability to say yes or no and to live up to what one has said, to be possessed of an optimism born of fear, that is, optimism used to shore up one's nerve." He lived in dread of his uncles and his

mother, and of the "old court" she maintained as dowager empress. Terrorists kept him away from his own capital; they also prevented him from traveling freely abroad. As the "butcher of Bloody Sunday," he was so despised in Italy that a planned state visit to Rome had to be called off when Italian newspapers called for the "despot" to be met with demonstrations. He finally went in 1909 but met the Italian king in his seaside summer residence at Racconigi, which could be reached by water.

The tsar was conscientious and hardworking enough, but the business of ruling did not intrigue him; it was merely his duty, a family chore. It was becoming increasingly irksome as political parties chipped away at autocracy and the chairman of the Council of Ministers tried to consolidate himself as a Western-style prime minister. Even after property owners dominated the Duma electorate when the franchise was changed by decree on June 16, 1907, he found the Duma's lower house odiously radical.

Nicholas was solitary, cocooned with his wife and children in those dull, mauve apartments. Rasputin amused him; he told him stories of distant parts of his empire he had never seen. The Siberian's self-confidence was catching; he showed his good nature, hid the fangs of his temper. They enjoyed their chats; Nicholas laughed at the earthy Siberian dicta that peppered his new friend's lively talk. These were, or so the tsar thought, purely private conversations of an intimacy he could not show to officials and appointees; he felt safe with Rasputin, not knowing that the peasant was already trading ruthlessly on his imperial connections. Rasputin brought out in Nicholas those private qualities—generosity, forgiveness of indiscretions, loyalty—that suspicion sapped from his professional life. Rasputin had no airs and graces; he seemed honest and simple, a representative of those scores of millions of peasants with whom Nicholas shared no common blood or interests, whom he seldom met, but who he believed loved him. The tsar wished to meet a man of the people, his security chief said, "his people of whom he is ignorant. Rasputin is that." And thus he trusted him.

The idea that peasants were a reservoir of Russian virtues—brave, patient, unvenal—was common to both sides of the political divide. Leo Tolstoy had condemned his own great novels as worthless; he believed that art lay in rural simplicity, gave his fortune to his wife, and was living as a peasant under her roof. The tsar's sister Olga was deeply impressed when she went into the huts on her husband's estates. She found hardship and beggary, and also "kindness, magnanimity, and an unbreakable faith in God. As I saw it, those peasants were rich for all their poverty, and I had the feeling of being a genuine human being when I was among them." Leftists and terrorists felt the same romantic pull. Social Revolutionary students went out in thousands to the villages, searching for an ideal society where all things were shared, confident that in

turn they would radicalize the peasants. In practice, they found hostility—men who sold them to the police for a few rubles, who mocked them as *belorucha*, "whitehands," and stripped them naked to see if they had tails or were covered in hair like Antichrists.

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There was mounting evidence that the tsar's trust in the peasant was misplaced. Okhrana agents reported that Rasputin was visiting bathhouses with "lowlife girls." The police were well aware of his high connections. He was seen "almost running from the platform" at St. Petersburg railroad stations to a waiting automobile that drove him to Militsa's palace. Stolypin was concerned enough to order security chiefs to prepare a file that would enable him to serve an expulsion order to remove Rasputin from the capital for immoral conduct.

Some church leaders were equally alarmed. Bishop Antony Khrapovitzki of Volhynie, a member of the synod, was angry at the attention and favors given to the peasant. He had heard of the debauches in Kazan, and he reminded his fellow bishops that a debauchee could not be a saint. "Grigory is a sly and skillful flatterer, a khlyst, a sot, a lecher, and a layabout," he warned the synod, "and nothing more." He forwarded letters denouncing the starets from Kazan to Sergei, the rector of the St. Petersburg Theological Academy. Bishop Antony was active in a campaign to grant autonomy to theological academies. Rasputin, who never forgot or forgave a hostile act, wrote a note to the tsar condemning the scheme. It was duly killed off. Although Sergei ignored the Kazan letters, Rasputin was made nervous by his presence in the capital. Sergei was named archbishop of Finland and left for Vyborg; he was replaced by Feofan at the tsar's personal instruction. It was the first time that a direct link was made between Rasputin and a senior church appointment.

Toward the end of the year, Rasputin visited Finland with his friend the academy lecturer Veniamin. The Vyborg monks did not find Rasputin a saint, as Veniamin introduced him; they thought him crude and drunken. "What! What!" cried Veniamin. "You don't know Grigory, you don't understand him. I see him walking like a saint, an archangel come to earth." The precaution of removing Sergei had been wise; Rasputin's growing intimacy with the tsar was still vulnerable to scandal. Nicholas did not think of him as a saint. "He is just a good, religious, simpleminded Russian," he told a senior security officer. "When in trouble or assailed with doubts, I like to have a talk with him and invariably feel at peace with myself afterward."

Rasputin's relations with the empress and Vyrubova were more secure. They referred to him as "our Friend," using the capital letter in the sense of a guide and protector sent from God. On the late summer cruise aboard the *Standart*, the empress had gotten to like one of her husband's aides-de-camp,

Sablin. "Her conversations led up to the fact that she was acquainted with Rasputin," Sablin testified later. "She said that there were some people whose prayers had special power due to the pious life they led. Finally, she mentioned that there was such a man in Russia, that is Rasputin, and offered that I should meet him." As to Vyrubova, Rasputin was reporting to Simanovich that she "is devoted to me to the grave" and that "my minutest wish is a law for her."

By the late fall of 1908, the links among the trio were common knowledge in society. A general's wife, Madame A. K. Bogdanova, was writing in her diary that Alexandra and Vyrubova had a "lively amorous correspondence." Most nights when the tsar returned to his study to work at 9:00 P.M., the pair retired from the dining room to the mauve boudoir to discuss the starets. Bogdanova also knew that the empress was meeting Rasputin at Vyrubova's cottage. Her informant, one of the tsar's valets, had been told by Vyrubova's maid that her mistress had a photograph of herself with the muzhik, which she kept in her Bible. "It appears that Vyrubova is friends with some sort of peasant, and a monk to boot," she wrote on November 5. "The peasant has the stare of a wild animal, a repulsive, insolent appearance . . . the peasant is there when the empress calls."

CHAPTER 10

Testing the Flesh

Rasputin recontacted Khionia Berlandskaya, still suffering guilt over her husband's suicide, and persuaded her to return with him to Pokrovskoye that winter. He made love to her on the Trans-Siberian to Tyumen, moving into her sleeping compartment as soon as the train pulled out of Moscow. "He told me that he loved me as a man," she wrote later. "He instructed me to prepare myself as a woman and began to do what a husband alone is permitted to do. . . . He forced me, caressed me and kissed me, and lay with me. He then did all he wanted, to the end." The following morning, he explained that his mission in life was to relieve original sin. He "tested" her again as darkness fell on the slow-moving train, becoming aroused and, she said, "obliging me to acknowledge his excitement." She was miserable and suffering—"Heavens, how can God help to write all this down!"—and she thought that she must be "dirty, impure, and given over to passion . . . for he clearly felt it necessary to subject me to perpetual testing."

Few of his women were as breathtakingly naive as this. Some—actresses, courtesans, bored aristocrats, the mistresses of important men—were quite as cynical as Rasputin and gave themselves to him out of lust and curiosity. Casual sex—and Rasputin's was casual, often a matter of five minutes and a grunted "now, matushka, that's better"—was making inroads with the capital's fast set. If it remained more or less scandalous, and several Romanov grand dukes were living in France and Germany because their liaisons had become known, that added the fillip of danger. Other women slept with him in a matter-of-fact way, hoping to gain advancement for themselves or their fami-

lies. Nevertheless, Rasputin was aware that to destroy the reputation of a respectable woman like Berlandskaya was to subject her to ostracism and contempt. He had no remorse.

Praskovya Rasputin was chilly when the lovers arrived in Pokrovskoye. She shouted at Berlandskaya, served her small portions at meals, and refused to give her a guest room. Rasputin slept with her on a mattress on the floor; Praskovya removed it and gave her a thin mat. Rasputin found it too uncomfortable to pass a whole night on; he fucked her swiftly when the mood took him. "Ah, this is a heavy stone," he told her of the "sin" he was lifting from her. "I've never known one so heavy." Another disciple joined them, and he made her wash him in the bathhouse in the courtyard. "He was quite naked," Berlandskaya wrote, "and he ordered her in front of everyone and in their sight to wash the parts of his body that are covered up more than others."

When he returned to St. Petersburg early in 1909, Rasputin was short of funds. He rode second class, much to his irritation, while Berlandskaya traveled in third. He ate well but gave her only his scraps.

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The young widow later made bitter public accusations against Rasputin, but for the moment he was safe. He made a second important contact at the palace when Vyrubova introduced him to Lili von Dehn. She was the wife of an aide-de-camp, Capt. Charles von Dehn, whom the empress had met on the annual cruise aboard the *Standart* and to whom she had become close. Lili von Dehn's son Titi was running a high fever, and doctors feared that he was sickening with diphtheria, then a potentially fatal disease. Vyrubova advised her to see Rasputin and telephoned him to arrange a meeting.

She met him at Sazonov's. He seemed a "typical peasant from the frozen North," in high boots, loose shirt, and a muzhik's long, black coat. Then she noticed his eyes, "shining and steel-like," in a thin, pale face framed in light chestnut hair. Many people described him as tall; she noticed that he was not, "but he gave the impression of being so." His stare unsettled her—"I felt at once attracted, repelled, disquieted, and reassured"—but she asked him to come and pray at her child's bedside.

He arrived with a "quaint creature" dressed like a nun—Lokhtina—who refused to enter the boy's bedroom and sat praying on the stairs. Rasputin knelt and prayed, then bent over the bed. "Don't wake him," she asked, afraid that the strange peasant would frighten the child. "Silence. I must," he insisted, putting his fingers on the boy's nose. Titi woke at once but looked at the starets without a trace of fear, telling him that his head ached. "Never mind," Rasputin said. He turned to the mother: "Tomorrow your son will be well. Let me

know if he is not." Titi slipped back to sleep. The next morning his temperature was normal. His doctor was "astonished."

The illnesses that Rasputin relieved for adults—Lokhtina's hysteria, the empress's "neurasthenia"—were psychosomatic. He had undoubted talent. "Taking the head of the sick person in his hands, as if praying, he could suggest what he liked," Spiridovich said. "The patient became calm, and the cure was attributed to the prayers of the starets, which were obviously pleasing to God. It was thus that he operated with Lokhtina and others." Although he was most successful with the suggestible and religious, particularly women, he was also effective with the cynical Simanovich. He used his powers sparingly; he made no claim to be a professional healer, as Dr. Philippe had done. He acted only on request and as a favor to people he knew or as a means to seduction; he seldom boasted of his cures, at least when sober, and was always careful to attribute them to God.

With children the possibility that he was a thaumaturge, a miracle worker, was discussed by doctors. They could think of no other explanation in cases like that of Titi von Dehn. As the tsarevich grew he became more vulnerable to his hemophilia. Shortly after the Dehn case, he fell in the park at Tsarskoye Selo and hit his leg. His aunt Olga saw him lying in his palace room "in such pain, dark patches under his eyes, and his little body all distorted, and the leg terribly swollen." The doctors seemed more frightened than the family and kept whispering among themselves; they were "just useless." As it got late Olga was persuaded to go to her room. Alexandra had a telephone call placed to Rasputin in St. Petersburg.

He reached the palace at about midnight, when Olga was asleep. The next morning Alexandra called for her to go to Alexis's room. "I just could not believe my eyes," Olga wrote. "The little boy was not just alive—but well." He was sitting up in bed, his eyes bright, the fever and the swelling in the leg "quite gone." Alexandra told her that Rasputin had stood at the foot of the bed and prayed. He had not touched the boy. Some claimed that his prayers had coincided with the child's natural recovery. Olga disliked Rasputin, but she was convinced there was more to it than that. The doctors insisted that no attack of such severity could be cured in a few hours. "Secondly," she continued, "the coincidence might have answered if it happened, say, once or twice, but I could not even count how many times it happened!"

Lili von Dehn joined Rasputin's circle. She met him frequently with Vyrubova and saw him when he came to the palace, at this time "on average once a month." Alexandra treated him "with veneration." She called him Grigory when she was with him and Father Grigory when she was not. "I believe in him," she told Dehn repeatedly. For his part, he became angry if he thought people were blocking his access to the palace, and he often said that "Mama is stingy," complaining that the empress gave him little money.

Having seen him save her son, Dehn had no truck with the rumors of Rasputin's seductions. Quite the contrary; she claimed that he saved women from themselves. "I know for a fact," she testified later, "that many women of my world who had affairs and many demi-mondaines were not dragged further into the mire by Rasputin, for—incredible as it may appear—his influence in such cases was often for the best." As an instance of his morality, she recalled how she met him while out walking in St. Petersburg with one of her husband's brother officers. The starets was outraged. "Are you following the example of frivolous society women?" he bellowed. "Why are you not walking with your husband?" To women who sought his advice, he said: "If you mean to do wrong, first come and tell me." If he meant "come and do the wrong with me first," it passed Dehn by. Rasputin's admirers met evidence of misdeeds with heroic suspension of disbelief.

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Vyrubova traveled to Pokrovskoye at the empress's expense with three other ladies, their maids, and a palace nurse, Maria Ivanovna Vichnyakova, to satisfy Alexandra's curiosity. Subsequent police reports recorded by Spiridovich described the visit, in May 1909, as sordid and ill-tempered. Vyrubova's own account—she used a different date—was of a rural idyll full of prayer and sanctity.

She said that Rasputin met them at Tyumen station in a peasant cart drawn by two farm horses. The house was "almost biblical in its bare simplicity." The guests slept on straw mattresses laid out on the bare wooden floors of the upstairs bedrooms; there were icons on the walls and faintly burning tapers in front of them. She made no mention of the rich furniture mentioned by other witnesses. They ate plain meals downstairs with four peasant friends of their host; "sitting around the table," she said of these guests, "they sang prayers and psalms with rustic faith and fervor."

Every day Vyrubova and the other ladies went down to the river to watch Rasputin drawing in his nets. He had become fisherman as well as farmer. They often had dinner by the river, cooking the fish "over little campfires on the shore," sharing their raisins, bread, nuts, and pastries. They visited Verkhoturye together, saw the relics of St. Simeon, and talked with the starets Makari in his forest retreat. "This aged and pious monk," Vyrubova reported to the empress, "held Rasputin in higher respect than the village clergy."

In the police account Rasputin traveled with the ladies Vyrubova, Madame Orlova, the mother of the dead general, Rasputin's conquest Elena Timofeyeva, and a lady Spiridovich referred to as Madame S, possibly Anna Dmitrievna Shipova, a maid of honor in the court of the princess of Oldenburg. People who knew Rasputin well denied it—in seven hundred pages of memoirs, the former premier Sergei Witte made no mention of their meetings, and a future premier

would see him only in secret in the Peter and Paul Fortress—while those who did not, seeking to gain advantage, claimed that they did. Some who came across him, like Madame S, were protected by the use of an initial.

The anonymity Spiridovich afforded her is explained by events on the first night outbound from Moscow on the Trans-Siberian. Rasputin and Elena took the two top couchettes of a sleeping compartment, with Madame S on the berth beneath. During the night Rasputin fucked Elena noisily. When he had finished he climbed into Madame S's berth. She grabbed his beard and pulled it as hard as she could before seeking sanctuary for the rest of the night in the corridor. At Tyumen station they were met by two telegas, which drove them off at spine-jolting speed. When the elderly Madame Orlova complained, Rasputin hissed: "Why am I lumbered with you?" They arrived in Pokrovskoye, sore and upset, at 2:00 A.M. Rasputin put Madame S in a separate bedroom. In the morning he ordered her to wash in the river. She did so, weeping with humiliation. A peasant woman who had come to get water tried to comfort her. When she learned that she was staying with Rasputin, the woman shrugged expressively, picked up her bucket, and trudged off to the village.

At lunch Vyrubova asked Rasputin to bless each course. There was little talk after the scandal on the train. After the meal they went for a walk. They met Father Pyotr, the village priest, but Rasputin refused to introduce the women to his old enemy. "No need!" he said angrily. He bought each of them a head scarf in the store. They said psalms when they returned to the house—the two accounts have that much in common—with Rasputin swinging his arms like a conductor. After dinner, at six, Praskovya Rasputin washed her husband in the bathhouse in the courtyard while Elena and Vyrubova looked on. Vyrubova suddenly reddened and cried: "Come here! Come here! The Holy Spirit has descended on Grigory Efimovich!"

As the ladies came out of the house, a dog began to bark. Praskovya Rasputin pushed them back indoors, warning, "Look! Priests are coming!" It was a false alarm. The village priest walked past without looking in. Rasputin came out of the bathhouse, lobster pink, drying his face on a towel. "Ah, you're young," he reproached Madame S, "much too young to be so chaste." She accused him of being a khlyst. Vyrubova calmed him.

He took them by cart to a neighboring village the next morning to meet two peasants he introduced as "my brothers in Christ." They insisted on taking the ladies by the waist to walk with them. When they returned to the house, Vyrubova said that she wanted to send a telegram to the empress. "We are bathed in beatitude," it read. The others objected; the visit had become an ordeal. Rasputin told her to send it, and she did so. In the evening Rasputin had a wire from Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich asking him to return to St. Petersburg for the consecration of a new chapel. Rasputin said they would leave the next morning.

The "brothers in Christ" drove them to Tyumen in telegas. Madame S threatened to tell the empress that Rasputin had made love to Elena on the outward journey. Vyrubova retorted that all his deeds had a "divine character." Rasputin made them sing psalms in the carriage; a Siberian industrialist on the train warned the ladies that these were khlyst songs. A soldier asked Madame S if it was true that one of the empress's maids of honor was traveling with Rasputin. She felt ashamed. At Vyatka, Rasputin tried to kiss her; she slapped him, and he became angry. He said that he had spoken well of her to the empress—"and this is how you treat me. What am I to say about you to her now?"

As they neared St. Petersburg, however, Rasputin's behavior improved and he resumed his role as starets. When he embraced the ladies as the train drew in, it was to mollify them. Vyrubova left without a word. Madame S's husband was on the platform. Rasputin sneered to him that his wife had "done nothing but argue with me the whole time." True to her threat, Madame S wrote a letter to the empress, thanking her for the opportunity of visiting Pokrovskoye but adding that Rasputin merited "neither the favor nor the confidence of Their Majesties." She said that Madame Orlova could vouch for his misconduct.

Orlova was summoned to an audience at the palace, Spiridovich said, but she maintained that nothing untoward had taken place. The problem was Madame S, a "prude who sees depravity where there is none," whose lies were calculated to disgrace Vyrubova and worm her way into the empress's favor. An embellished version of the episode was soon making the rounds. "Vyrubova went to Tyumen to the screwball's place and spent several days there," Madame Bogdanova noted in her diary. "Several ladies' maids were outraged by the screwball. One of them is pregnant, and it seems that Annushka [Vyrubova] is going to bring up the baby."

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Rasputin's next scandal was religious. He took up the cause of Iliodor, the young monk he had met with Hermogen on his first visit to St. Petersburg. Convinced that the church was rotten, the tsar betrayed, and Christianity dying, Iliodor had moved to Tsaritsyn on the Volga to raise a popular movement to protect Russia against the Jews, Freemasons, anarchists, and church leaders he thought hell-bent on destroying it. He arrived in the city with three rubles and seventy kopecks in his pocket and was given a small chapel on wasteland in an outlying slum district.

He was a Don Cossack by birth, and his sermons were a battle cry against "drunkenness, filth, selfishness, and sordid rapaciousness of all kinds." Bargemen, porters, timber carriers, the scum of the Volga, wept for their sins and "gloried in his bold mouth." He saved alcoholics by holding long services that kept them out of the vodka shops until they closed. He took prostitutes out of

the riverside brothels to hear him preach, and shamed their customers by reading out their names. Robert Wilton, the London *Times* correspondent, was intrigued enough to visit Iliodor, finding a congregation of thousands, "a sort of Russian Salvation Army. . . . Desperadoes and a similar class of women flocked to him." With "wax-like fingers and a face transparent from long vigils," Wilton wrote, dressed in white vestments, the monk stood above the dirty crowds like an angel as he harangued them; he "caught the people's hearts, and held them."

Fifty thousand gold rubles were raised by public subscription to build a monastery for Iliodor while the poorest of his flock toiled on the site without wages. It was a dramatic building, like the film set of a medieval fortress, with battlements and wooden towers. It matched the monk's crusading calls for violent counterrevolution against politicians and in favor of the tsar. He denounced the prime minister, Stolypin, for selling his soul to the Jews. He kept a photograph of the "Antichrist" Leo Tolstoy, and the faithful spat on it as they passed. He had made a model of a huge dragon, which he said represented revolution, decapitating it with a sword when his sermons reached their climax. Alarmed officials reported that he was spreading sedition. "I am accused of treason," he thundered in reply from the pulpit. "The government demands that I cease preaching the divine truth. I declare holy war on the synod and the government. . . . I am ready to die a thousand deaths. I ask you, brothers and sisters, to do the same!" He had tunnels built in the clay beneath the monastery; when the provincial governor sent troops with a message for him to hold his tongue, he disappeared. Wilton thought that "the monk's madness has a world of method in it."

After a rabble-rousing performance in the summer of 1910, in which Iliodor openly called on his followers to arm themselves, Stolypin and the synod persuaded the tsar to sign an order expelling him from his Tsaritsyn power base. He was ordered to enter a monastery in Minsk. At this he traveled to St. Petersburg to see whether Rasputin could use his influence to have the order revoked. The two holy men resumed their friendship; Rasputin assured Iliodor he would help. He introduced him to Vyrubova. She knelt before him and kissed his hand. "Well, you saw it with your own eyes!" Rasputin bragged to Iliodor as they left. "What do you think of that!" They arranged to meet the empress at Vyrubova's cottage. She asked Iliodor not to indulge in "demagoguery" but recommended that Rasputin appeal to the tsar.

He did so. In the account Rasputin gave to Iliodor, Nicholas argued that he could do nothing, since he had already given his consent to the order. "You are the tsar," Rasputin replied. "Act like one. You have given your word, and you can take it back. When you threw Iliodor to the dogs to be eaten, 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." Rasputin was always at his

most boastful with Iliodor, himself not a reliable witness. It is highly unlikely that Rasputin was so cavalier with a man as sensitive of his position as Nicholas. Nevertheless, to Stolypin's fury, and the growth of Rasputin's reputation, the tsar indeed revoked the order.

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Nicholas attended celebrations at Poltava to mark the two hundredth anniversary of the victory of his ancestor Peter the Great over the Swedes. He was met with cheers, a sound he had heard rarely since Bloody Sunday, and he assured the French military attaché that they proved both his popularity and the fact that "we are no longer at Petersburg." He said that "the rural population, the owners of land, the nobility, and the army" remained loyal. Those against him, he said, were "composed above all of Jews, students, landless peasants, and some workers." With this comforting but untrue thought, he took his family to spend three months of late summer and fall abroad. They visited the yachting regatta at Cowes on the Isle of Wight, where Nicholas sailed with his look-alike cousin, the future George V of England, and partied with another cousin, German Kaiser Wilhelm. Alexandra visited her brother in Darmstadt and went to the spa at Nauheim to see heart specialists. Rasputin went with Bishop Hermogen to visit Iliodor in Tsaritsyn.

The monk's followers feted Rasputin as the savior of their prophet and an angel of God. He enjoyed himself. A line of women formed in the monastery to seek his advice. He kissed the pretty ones and turned the others away: "Mother, your love is pleasing, but the spirit of the Lord does not descend on me."

He cured two demented souls at Iliodor's request, according to police reports. A carter's wife, "young, beautiful, and buxom," was prey to voices in her head that made her curse and convulse. Iliodor's attempts to exorcise her demons with prayers, crucifix, and holy water failed. She continued to shriek. Rasputin asked to be left alone by her sickbed. After a few minutes the cries ceased. The wife then came smiling from her bedroom, peaceful and content, while Rasputin followed to say that he had cast out the evil spirit, with a "sly, triumphant smirk on his lips." This cure was followed by the treatment of the niece of a rich merchant, Madame Lebedeva. Rasputin said that he could not exorcise her demons in the bedroom where she lay, and he had her carried to an isolated room. He spent several hours with her, reappearing in the late evening while she slept quietly, as though "surrounded by angels." News of "miracles" swept through Tsaritsyn. When he set off for his winter trip to Pokrovskoye, taking the grateful Iliodor with him, Rasputin rode through cheering crowds in a flower-strewn carriage.

Iliodor reported that Rasputin drank heavily on the steamer trip up the Volga and boasted that the tsar thought him "Christ incarnate." He said the starets claimed that Nicholas "cannot breathe without me" and had knelt be-

fore him. He said that both tsar and empress had kissed his hand. This was a sign of subservience in Russia—a reason why Iliodor was deeply impressed when he saw Vyrubova greet the starets—and rumors that the sovereigns thus debased themselves to Rasputin were persistent enough for the investigating commission to examine them carefully after the murder. No evidence was found. Vyrubova said in her testimony that—although "the emperor and empress called him simply 'Grigory' and he called them 'Papa' and 'Mama' "—neither ever kissed his hands. They kissed cheeks. Although Iliodor's account was written after he had fallen out with Rasputin, it is doubtful that he invented this out of malice; additional accounts show that Rasputin embellished his palace tales when he was in his cups. His other claims on the steamer ring true. He said Alexandra had sworn to him that she would never waver and "always consider him to be her Friend." He showed the monk blouses embroidered for him by the empress and her daughters, and he told how he freely enjoyed himself with society women, fucking them until he "overcame the flesh" and they became "passionless."

When they arrived in Pokrovskoye, Iliodor found the house to have none of Vyrubova's "biblical simplicity." There were leather sofas, glass bookcases and a piano, potted plants and palms. Amid the icons were photographs, of the imperial family, court dignitaries, and ministers, signed with flattering dedications. The study reminded the monk of a cabinet minister's private room, with heavy leather chairs and a big oak table with piles of telegrams on it. Rasputin gave him a guided tour, pointing out which Romanov or society beauty had presented which piece.

He gave a reception for the monk, inviting village worthies, a couple of schoolmarms, the owner of the general store, the commune secretary and his wife. He dressed up in a raspberry satin blouse, blue trousers, and red slippers. They had candies, nuts, and jam doughnuts. Rasputin walked up and down, hands in pockets, self-important, and led them in singing canticles. He had insisted that Father Pyotr be there; the parish priest did not join in the general jollity. The next morning the priest got Iliodor on his own and told him of Rasputin's "debauchery." "Grigory gets young girls, and he lays them, he lays them," the priest said. "Now he has these airheads from Petersburg who come and see him. They bathe with him, they sleep with him. . . . He's nothing but a drunk and a troublemaker. . . . The villagers think he's a thief, an imbecile. He's always trying to suck up to the bishop. He offered money for the church and the villagers didn't want it—they know how he gets his money. . . . He thinks of us priests as less than dirt. He says that divine grace bypasses unworthy priests and falls directly on the simple. Naturally, that means on him. He has the nerve to say that when he beds a woman, he blesses her and delivers her from carnal desire."

Iliodor, intense, obsessed with moral crusade, his own passions turned inward by his vow of chastity, was troubled by sexuality. He discussed it with Rasputin while they sweated in the bathhouse together. "I am safe from desire," the starets told him. "God has given me this gift in recompense for the penances imposed on me. Touching a woman is the same for me as touching a plank of wood." He explained how this state was achieved. "I direct my lust from here"—he indicated his loins—"to my chest, my head, and my brain. Thus I become invulnerable. And if a woman touches me, she is also delivered from desire. That's why women run after me. They want to pleasure themselves, but they're afraid of losing their virginity, or they're afraid of sin. So they ask me to deliver them from the lusts of the flesh, to make them invulnerable as I am." He described his recent visit to Makari in the Verkhoturye woods. While Makari had prayed in his cell, he had lain naked with the women, spread-eagling them against his legs and thighs and curing them of lust. When they returned to Pokrovskoye, he'd had them bathe him, and they had knelt in front of his nude body and kissed it.

It was, as Iliodor well knew, khlyst talk. The monk claimed that Rasputin sent two servant girls to his bedroom in a vain attempt to "make a khlyst" of him. This is unlikely. Rasputin was no procurer for others; none of his acquaintances makes a wholly credible witness, and Iliodor's later hatred made him less reliable than most. The theme of the bathhouse discourse, however—sex, sin, purification—was one Rasputin returned to often. If he boasted, he had reason to; he was welcomed to the imperial palace and in the beds of high-born ladies. He was forty, and already there was none in the gray and servile history of Russian peasantry with whom to compare him.

On December 6 Rasputin sent a telegram to Nicholas in his and Iliodor's names congratulating the tsar on his name day. They received a reply from Vyrubova: "Very touched by your congratulations. We thank you with all our heart. Anna." Iliodor was "stupefied." A few days later the village postman Mikhail delivered a large envelope bearing the imperial arms and seal. Rasputin read it through, stroking his beard with pleasure, and told Iliodor that it was an autograph letter from the empress. Iliodor asked if he often had such correspondence. He showed the monk a bundle wrapped in blue checked cotton that held letters written to him by Alexandra and the young grand duchesses. It was a dangerous indiscretion. Iliodor purloined some of the letters. To a man at war with the government, they might provide useful insurance.

The two holy men left Pokrovskoye for Tsaritsyn on December 15. There was no train from Tyumen until the following morning. Iliodor slept at the monastery, Rasputin spending the night at an admirer's house. They stopped off at Saratov

to spend a day with Bishop Hermogen. Iliodor told him that Rasputin bathed with women. "Why do you do that?" the bishop asked the starets in despair. "You mustn't. It won't do." Rasputin appeared to be contrite, but when he was alone with Iliodor, he told him never to mention baths to the bishop again.

They arrived at Tsaritsyn on December 23. Iliodor suggested that he hear Rasputin's confession in his monastery the next morning. Rasputin appeared worried, and the monk asked him if he wished to unburden himself of his sins. Rasputin scratched his nose with his finger and said, "It's got nothing to do with that." "What then?" Iliodor said. "It's about my enemies," he replied. "What's going to happen if they all get together, if they trouble the tsarina's soul, if they stir up a row?" Iliodor assured him that God was with him and would direct his fate. "All right," Rasputin said. "That's all."

If he sensed that the monk was turning against him, he made no effort to mend his ways in front of him. Visiting a rich merchant's wife, he tried to embrace her sister, a pleasing brunette. She slapped him twice around the face, hard. "Well, she landed a beauty on me, the bitch!" he said to Iliodor, half amused, as he beat a retreat. He was taken to see a "holy fool," a half-wit dressed in tatters called Nastia, in the hope that he could cure her. When she saw him she covered her face and screamed, spitting and throwing the contents of a chamber pot at him.

On December 28 Rasputin sent a telegram to the tsar's children, a verse copied from a canticle. The next day he distributed Christmas gifts. He had bought a thousand handkerchiefs, candies, apples, sugar loafs, cheap rings, and holy medallions. A crowd of several thousand came to the monastery. He told the girls that the presents would indicate what was to become of their lives. They rushed forward; he gave most of them rings, to show that they would marry, but he slipped some of them medallions, meaning that they would enter convents. He promised Iliodor fifty thousand rubles to build a convent next to the monastery.

He left on the evening of December 30. A procession escorted him to the railroad station singing "Save Us, Lord." They sang the national anthem as the train drew in. Iliodor blessed the locomotive, and Rasputin blessed the crowd. He asked the local officials who were present to make sure that enthusiastic word of his triumph was passed to the capital. After he had gone Iliodor heard the confession of a twenty-eight-year-old novice, Xenia, a naive woman, "chaste and pious, no beauty but pleasing." She was working for a local tradeswoman to show penitence, and Rasputin had seen her bringing supplies of holy bread to the monastery. She told the monk how she had lost her virtue.

"Father, it happened over Christmas," she said. "While I was getting ready for bed, Rasputin came and told my mistress: 'My good woman, send Xenia to the monastery. I have great need of her.' Of course, I went, even though it

seemed strange to need me so late. He didn't beat about the bush. . . . He told me right off to undress. I obeyed. He lay on the bed and said, 'Fine, my little darling, come and lie with me.' I thought, Father, that he was a saintly man whom God had given the grace to purify our sinners' bodies and to heal them.

"He embraced me in such a way that only a tiny place of my body was not covered by him. He kissed me full on the mouth. I cried out to him—'Grigory Efimovich, what are you doing to me, a poor girl?' 'It's nothing, nothing,' he said. 'Stay lying there and be quiet.' I asked him what he was doing with me, and did Father Iliodor know? 'Certainly, he knows,' he said. I asked if Bishop Hermogen knew. 'Of course he knows. He knows everything. Don't worry.' And then I asked, 'Our father the tsar and our mother the tsarina, do they know?' 'Yes, yes! They know better than anyone.' Father, I didn't know what to do, listening to him. . . . He tormented me for four long hours."

By the time Iliodor wrote this account, he was actively seeking to have Rasputin murdered. His story is, however, consistent with others, indicating that the inner struggle between faith and the flesh of Rasputin's early years was almost over. The following year showed that sensuality, and desire for power, had won; spirituality became his greasepaint, the stage prop of a great actor.

CHAPTER 11

Friends and Enemies

Halley's comet reappeared in 1910, and the talk was of imminent apocalypse. Leo Tolstoy died in a railroad siding. The individualist painter Mikhail Vrubel expired of dementia and exhaustion in an asylum, believing that God would give him emerald eyes if he could remain standing for seventeen days. In Moscow, at the fashionable Yar restaurant, Rasputin's favorite, a young man named Praslov approached a beautiful woman sitting at a table with a party of older men in evening dress. She laughed when he asked why she was out so late and in such company. He pulled a revolver from his dinner jacket and shot her repeatedly. Several of those subpoenaed as witnesses committed suicide rather than give evidence; Praslov, who was the woman's ex-husband, was acquitted. In St. Petersburg the titled parents of two young students refused to give them the money for a champagne supper; they forced their way into the apartment of a well-known actress, knifed her to death, and stole her jewelry to pay for their meal. "I've decided to get away," Alexander Blok's mistress told him. "The only thing left to do here is to lie down and die." The poet did not join her, for he enjoyed the "smell of burning, blood, and iron in the air."

The economy was booming with Stolypin's reforms. He sold off state-owned land, including the vast Siberian crown lands to which peasants from European Russia flooded in the boxcars of the Trans-Siberian. He was creating from the most energetic peasants a sturdy yeoman class as a counterweight to radicals, taking, he said, "a gamble not on the drunken and feeble but on the sober and the strong." Russia had the world's highest growth rate, fueled by

foreign capital. Moscow industrialists upended their top hats on bar counters and filled them with champagne corks. Distant revolutionaries fell into gloom. In the southern oil fields a Bolshevik agitator called Joseph Stalin, arrested in March for hand-setting strike calls on a flatbed press in the slums of Batum, felt the tide was flowing against revolution.

But Nicholas was tiring of his prime minister—Stolypin was too masterly, too much admired—and Russia was tired of the tsar, and his wife. "In the house of the Romanovs, a mysterious curse descends from generation to generation," Dmitri Merezhkovsky wrote. "Murders and adultery, blood and mud . . . the block, the rope, and poison—these are the true emblems of the Russian autocracy. God's unction on the brows of the tsars has become the brand of Cain."

In Andrei Bely's fashionable novel *The Silver Dove,* the poet hero deserts his beautiful and sensitive fiancée for a pockmarked peasant woman. She was the "great whore. . . . The movement of her breasts, her thick legs with their white calves and the dirty soles of her feet, her big belly, and her sloping, rapacious forehead—all frankly bore the imprint of lust." She thrust herself on the poet, "pawing him and pressing her plump breasts against him—a grinning beast." But she was not his; she belonged to Mitya Kudeiarov, a carpenter and khlyst pilot, whose ark performed dark deeds in the forests. "The Russian earth knows the secret," Bely wrote. "So does the Russian forest. . . . If you are Russian, there is in your soul a red secret—to live in the fields, to die in the fields. . . . There is that in Russia which destroys books and smashes buildings and puts life itself to the fire." Kudeiarov had a double face that "always looks like half a face; one side of it winking craftily at you, while the other is always spying on something, always afraid of something."

Lust, two faces—Rasputin. A provincial girl who searched out the "strange new saint" found the Janus in him; her account appeared in René Fülöp-Miller's 1928 biography, *Rasputin: The Holy Devil.* At first Rasputin reminded her of the peasant preachers she knew at home, his gaze gentle and monastic, his "worthy, simple face" haloed by his light brown hair. Then she saw another man—"mysterious, crafty, and corrupting"—peering out from eyes that still radiated kindness. He sat opposite her and edged closer. The pale blue eyes darkened and bored into her. As he thrust forward his "great wrinkled face, distorted with desire," she was overcome with lassitude. His eyes, deep in their sockets, "furtively roved over her helpless body. . . . His voice had fallen to a passionate whisper, and he murmured strange, voluptuous words in her ear."

She was on the point of surrendering to him when she dimly remembered that she had come to ask him about God; perhaps Xenia would have been saved if she had thought of God instead of Iliodor and the sovereigns. As she struggled consciously against him, her heaviness lifted. He sensed the resistance im-

mediately; "his half-shut eyes opened again, he stood up, bent over her, lightly stroked her girlishly parted hair, and pressed a passionless, gentle, fatherly kiss on her forehead." His face smoothed, and he blessed her, almost humbly; only in the depths of his little eyes could she see "the other man, the sensual beast," lurking.

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Rasputin was at Vyrubova's cottage several times a week. Alexandra remained ill and nervous despite her visits to doctors in Germany; Vyrubova was with her at the palace every day, and Rasputin called frequently. Until now he had stayed partly in the shadows, as Mikhail Rodzianko put it, "doggedly preparing solid ground for himself." As he felt his power grow, "this wild fanatic throws aside all restraint. His erotic adventures become more impudent and disgusting, the number of his victims and his worshipers grows." The fear of enemies Rasputin had mentioned to Iliodor was justified; he was fast acquiring them.

Stories of the visits to Pokrovskoye appeared in the press in January 1910. They were noted at the Theological Academy in St. Petersburg, together with a letter from Khionia Berlandskaya detailing Rasputin's behavior toward her. Archimandrite Feofan was alarmed at the mounting evidence of Rasputin's misconduct. Although the newspapers had not mentioned the connection with the palace, Feofan thought it his duty as the tsar's confessor to warn him that the peasant philanderer was a danger to the dynasty. "I made up my mind to take a last measure against Rasputin, to openly expose him and to impart everything," he testified later. Nicholas refused to see him and suggested that he meet Alexandra and Vyrubova. "I spoke about an hour and tried to prove the state of Rasputin's spirit," Feofan testified. "The empress objected to this, she worried, she quoted ecclesiastical books, and it was clear that someone, most probably Rasputin, taught her to talk like this." As they parted she told him that saints always suffered such calumny.

Feofan was an early example of the disgrace that pursued those who spoke out to the empress against the starets. He was first dismissed as confessor to Nicholas; when that failed to silence him, he was transferred from the academy to a distant bishopric in the Crimea. Rasputin flirted with the idea of filling the vacant post at the palace himself. Hermogen had remained loyal to him despite Feofan's protests. "He is a servant of God," the bishop warned Prince Dzhevakov when the latter told him that the synod had doubts of Rasputin's sincerity. "It is a sin to judge him and think critically of him." It was necessary for a confessor to be a priest, and Rasputin discussed his ordination with Hermogen. "They'll make me a priest and I'll become the tsar's confessor and stay at court forever," he boasted. In the event, though he obtained Hermogen's blessing and had himself photographed wearing a priest's soutane with a pectoral cross

on his chest, he did not have the patience to learn the liturgy necessary for ordination, and the scheme lapsed.

Rasputin fell out with the Montenegrins and their husbands over having extended his habit of insulting churchmen to saints. He was "so disgustingly rude" about Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich's favorite, St. Sergei of Radonege, that the grand duke swore, "I'll never see the devil again!" It was the beginning of a long feud; Rasputin was fortunate that Alexandra's own relations with the grand duke were cooling. He survived, too, a scandal in the palace itself. Maria Vichnyakova, the palace nurse who had been on the Pokrovskoye trip, told the children's governess that during the visit Rasputin had stolen into her room and seduced her and that she had seen him "lying in his underclothes" with Madame Mandshtet on the Trans-Siberian. The governess, Sophia Ivanovna Tyutcheva, advised the girl to go to Alexandra and repeat her allegations. The empress, Tyutcheva later testified, "declared that she didn't believe this hearsay, that she saw in it the activity of dark forces wishing to annihilate Rasputin." She accused the nurse of lying, forbade her to speak to the tsar, and sent her on an indefinite leave of absence to the Caucasus.

Alexandra's anger now fell on Tyutcheva for having encouraged the nurse to complain. A palace messenger ordered the governess to go to the tsar's study at 6:30 the same evening. "Sophia Ivanovna, you can guess why I called for you," he said. "What's going on in the nursery?" She told Nicholas what had happened, adding that she was shocked at the way Rasputin went unchaperoned into the bedrooms of the young grand duchesses and the heir, and at his "gross familiarity" toward them. "Do you not believe in the holiness of Grigory Efimovich?" Nicholas asked her. She replied that she did not. "And what will you say if I tell you that all these hard years I've survived only thanks to his prayers?" he asked. "You survived thanks to the prayers of all Russia, Your Majesty," she replied. It was a diplomatic answer, and it did not satisfy Nicholas. "The emperor started to say that he was convinced all this was a lie," she testified, "that he didn't believe all these stories about Rasputin, that everything sticks to the pure." She felt she had no option but to resign from the palace staff.

It was a serious matter. The governess was the daughter of Fyodor Tyutchev, a metaphysical romantic whose tragic love poems many Russians knew by heart. She had credibility. When she moved to Moscow and told of Rasputin's influence and lechery, she was believed. In her Caucasus exile the nurse Vichnyakova confessed her seduction to Metropolitan Antony, the bishop of Volhynie, at a clinic where he was being treated for a nervous disorder. She detailed Rasputin's involvement at court, pleading with the churchman to save the imperial children from the "devil." Antony requested an audience with the tsar and repeated what the nurse had said. Nicholas told him that it concerned his family alone and that the church had no right to pry.

"No, My Emperor," Antony replied. "It is something that concerns all Russia. The heir is not only your son. He is our future ruler, and he belongs to Russia." When the tsar repeated that he would not tolerate any interference in palace matters, Antony said nervously, "Very good, Sire, but permit me to think that a Russian tsar should live in a crystal palace open to the eyes of his subjects." Nicholas bade him leave; his nerves returned and he suffered a breakdown.

Stolypin was concerned enough to order a report to be made from the dossier the security services were keeping on Rasputin. It left little doubt of his lifestyle; it told of "carousals, his love of women, his relations with dubious entrepreneurs and promoters who exploit him." The head of the police department, Gen. P. G. Kurlov, warned the premier not to show the report to Nicholas; "it might seem to the emperor," he said, "a wish to darken the person who enjoyed his favor." Stolypin ignored him and gave the tsar the gist of the report. Nicholas heard him out in silence, and then, "with characteristic obstinate calm, suggested Stolypin proceed to the business of the day." No action was taken. The dowager empress was concerned enough to summon Vladimir Kokovtsov, the finance minister, to her apartments in the Anichkov Palace. "My son is too kind," she said. "He has not given his answer because he is trying to find some other way out of the situation. He seeks advice from no one. He has too much pride and, with the empress, goes through such crises without letting anyone see he is agitated. . . . My son has so little luck with people."

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Rasputin was acquiring new friends along with his enemies. Munya Golovina lived with her wealthy mother, the widow of a state councillor, in a fine apartment on the Winter Canal. The girl had recently lost a man she was in love with and was ill with grief when she met Rasputin. Both she and her mother took to the holy man at once. At the turn of the year Munya asked a family friend if he would like to meet the starets. She described him as "a man of exceptional spiritual power who had been sent into the world to purify and heal our souls, and to guide our thoughts and actions." The friend was Prince Felix Yusupov, heir to the biggest fortune in Russia, who was waiting to go up to Oxford.

The prince thought Munya innocent and guileless—he referred to her as Mademoiselle G in his writings to spare her embarrassment—and he was intrigued by her enthusiasm for Rasputin. She thought him an "apostle come straight from Heaven," Yusupov wrote, a man with no weakness or vice who passed his life in prayer. Yusupov accepted the invitation to take tea with Rasputin in the Golovinas' drawing room. A peasant in baggy trousers and great top boots came into the room with short, quick steps, bade the prince "Good evening, my dear boy," and tried to kiss him. When that failed he calmly put his arms around mother and daughter and gave each of them a hearty kiss.

Yusupov was irritated by the peasant's self-assurance; "there was something about him that disgusted me," he wrote. He was of medium height, muscular and thin, with long arms and a scar on his forehead. Yusupov guessed his age correctly at forty. "He had a low, common face framed by a shaggy beard, coarse features and a long nose, with small, shifty gray eyes sunken under heavy eyebrows," Yusupov wrote. He, too, sensed the Janus in Rasputin. "Although he affected a free and easy demeanor," he went on, "one felt him to be ill at ease and suspicious. He seemed to be constantly watching the person he was talking to."

As they drank tea Rasputin quoted the Old and New testaments at random. The prince studied him closely. "He was not in the least like a holy man," he wrote. "On the contrary he looked like a lascivious, malicious satyr. I was particularly struck by the revolting expression in his eyes, which were very small, set close together, and so deep-set in their sockets that at a distance they were invisible." Even close up it was difficult to see whether they were open or shut; the impression was one of being "pierced by needles rather than merely of being looked at." Yusupov was revolted by the starets's "sweet and insipid smile. . . . There was something base in his unctuous countenance; something wicked, crafty, and sensual."

But Munya Golovina and her mother never took their eyes off him, drinking in his every word. After a while Rasputin rose and pointed at the girl. "What a faithful friend you have in her!" he told Yusupov. "You should listen to her, she will be your spiritual spouse. Yes, she has spoken very well of you, and I too now see that both of you are good and well suited to each other. As for you, my dear boy, you will go far, very far." With that he left. A few days later Yusupov met Munya again. She told him, he wrote, that "Rasputin liked me very much and wanted to see me again." Maria Rasputin, in hindsight, claimed her father had described young Felix as "a frightened boy, frightened by the world . . . by his own desires, which I doubt even he understands . . . frightened by the future and torn between many demons." Rasputin had met his murderer. Shortly after Yusupov left for Oxford.

The Golovinas were classified as Rasputniky, the sneering term used for those admirers who thought him divine. Another such was Sister Akulina, a novice he had heard screaming while he visited a convent in Okhits. He had found her lying in her cell, her face to the wall, "her whole body writhing, a deep masculine voice coming from her lips, moving in convulsions." He entered the cell, knelt beside her, and prayed. "I order you to be silent," he said. Her face took on a "glow of serenity." Her fits never resumed. She had asked to be relieved of her vows and had now followed him to St. Petersburg, "openly and unashamedly in love with her master, always taking a place at his feet, ever ready to serve him, running to fetch a glass of water and a piece of fruit, lovingly stroking his hand or kissing his cheek."

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Others, the entrepreneurs and promoters of Stolypin's report, were under no illusion that Rasputin was holy. They merely found him useful. Financiers began approaching him in 1910. The journalist Sazonov used his houseguest's influence to raise backing for a financial weekly called *Ekonomist.* Its early editorials attacked the finance minister, Vladimir Kokovtsov. Sazonov suggested that this line would change if the finance ministry placed official advertisements at inflated rates. It was soon praising the minister's "brilliant financial acumen." Sazonov next presented a proposal to the ministry for a grain bank, a project he said was backed by Rasputin and would deal in the rotten grain that piled up on the railroads after the harvest. A bank charter was duly obtained. The ministry further obliged Sazonov by changing the charter to authorize the establishment of a regular commercial bank called the English Bank.

Charters were difficult to obtain; Sazonov promptly sold his for a quarter million rubles. Part of the money was used to finance a new newspaper, *Golos Zemli.* Claiming that Rasputin enabled him to enjoy the confidence of the tsar, Sazonov persuaded the director of the finance ministry's Credit Chancellery to summon the board of the English Bank and suggest that they help the newspaper. The bankers agreed to underwrite it and to grant Sazonov a further hundred thousand rubles. It was astonishing that anyone as corrupt as Sazonov should exert "great influence through the instrumentality of Rasputin," Witte wrote, "but it is nonetheless a fact."

An irrigation scheme in the Transcaucasus, coal contracts, and an unsuccessful attempt by a group of distillers to break the state vodka monopoly were other uses to which Rasputin's influence was put. He was not paid; he played no active role and he had no business sense, but his name was already enough to impress financiers and officials, and he was happy for it to be used. He was motivated by flattery and power, not cash. Those who exploited his name, by contrast—Simanovich and a fellow fixer whom he introduced to Rasputin, Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Andronnikov—were entirely ruble driven. The prince was a bizarre figure, a snob, vain, with a sharp tongue, witty when he wished to be, and a promiscuous homosexual. He was the publisher of a small-circulation Black Hundred magazine, *Voice of Russia,* which few people read. He behaved as a statesman, however, pomaded and black suited, always carrying an important-looking yellow leather briefcase. He had no regular income, though he spent "immense means" on a large apartment, on drink, on expensive gifts for his lovers. He made his living from character assassination, and blackmail.

Andronnikov knew everyone, and most of their vices and secrets. These he passed on for more information, or for an introduction, or for money. He had

been plying his trade when Rasputin was still a wanderer. The industrial magnate A. I. Putilov, chairman of the mighty Russian-Asian Bank, recollected how Andronnikov insinuated himself into the finance ministry and then came to him with details of new contracts and tenders, and "all manner of rumors and suppositions." His clients found him an invaluable political conduit, and they feared him. The prince could "always harm a person that was unpleasant to him." He had a habit of tapping his briefcase as though it were full of dark secrets, instead of the pile of old newspapers that an Okhrana search found it to contain. The prince's burning wish, Putilov said, was to "play a strange political role, to have free access to high dignitaries and thus to satisfy and entertain his vanity."

Cadets at military academies were under standing orders never to enter Andronnikov's apartment, a place of "vice and religiosity . . . at the same time a chapel and a saloon where homosexuals of all Petersburg came to meet each other." It was big enough to have two separate sets of rooms. The prince received respectable visitors in a drawing room furnished with overstuffed armchairs, antimacassars, and oil paintings of country scenes. When the conversation turned to money, he led his guests into a book-lined study in which he kept carefully updated files on leading politicians and their weaknesses. The visitors were unaware that "all manner of crooks caroused in other rooms." These were hung with black silk curtains and decorated with icons and lecterns. They smelled of incense, and a crown of thorns hung on a wall. The prince sometimes wore a chasuble to heighten the religious atmosphere. His bedroom was decorated as a chapel, with an altar and a cross. On the name days and birthdays of his friends, he had a monk come in to hold services. "Crowds of people visited the prince, mostly youth," his valet Peter Ivanovich Kilter testified. "Cadets, schoolboys, young officers, all very handsome. . . . Very often they were brought right from the street and impressed by their slovenliness. All this turned the apartment into some kind of dirty haunt."

Particular favorites were Ensign Smirnov, a brother of the famous opera singer, and a Baron Sripper. The baron lived in the apartment illegally—he was not registered in the capital—and was later arrested for fraud. "All these people used to come to the house as if they owned it," the valet said. "They ate, drank, and stayed the night and slept on beds two by two. Andronnikov behaved suspiciously, absenting himself in the bathroom with the young men." Andronnikov hated women, his valet said, and was visited by only one, an elderly relative of the war minister who "delivered him rumors."

His lobbying technique was crude but effective. "As soon as some Ivan Ivanovich Fintiflyushkin," he explained, using the Russian equivalent of John Doe, "is appointed director of a government department, I send him a letter to say that 'at last the sun of truth has risen over Russia. The crazy government

that has led it to ruin has finally understood that the fate of the department in charge of the most important affairs'—in fact it's no more important than a shithouse—'should be entrusted to your noble, educated, and firm hands. A happy era has come, and I, a man ardently loving my motherland, am relieved by this because I believe that an exceptionally successful choice has been made. May God save you. . . . With deepest respect, Andronnikov.' "

At this, the prince continued, Fintiflyushkin would come through on the telephone to thank him for his kind attention. "I warn him to be wise and prudent as he is surrounded by worthless people I won't mention. . . . If he needs support I will render it because of my love for the motherland. Fintiflyushkin is hooked and I have only to show my visiting card to be received and have my problems settled."

The prince boasted that the technique was so successful that he had ministers "bumping their heads" to obey him. Another of his tricks involved his cultivation of the government messengers who carried important correspondence. Orders and medals were distributed in packages each December 6 and January 1. By having the messengers show him the mail, Andronnikov could congratulate the recipients in advance. He sometimes persuaded the messenger to delay delivery—the promotion of the navy minister Grigorovich was an example—so that he could place two telephone calls. The first said that he was striving to arrange the honor, and the second confirmed that it was on its way.

Despite his disapproval of the monks of Mount Athos, Rasputin was tolerant of homosexuals. He had much to learn from the prince on the skills of subverting politicians. The two began to see each other frequently.

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Rasputin had enough funds now to take his own apartment, at 70 Nikolayevskaya ulitsa. Although he was often invited out, he kept open house, and Simanovich and Andronnikov ensured that there was usually a "diverse society" in his dining room. Guests brought food with them—caviar, choice fish, fruit, and white bread. The table—bare of any cloth—always had potatoes, sour cabbage, and black bread on it, and a boiling samovar. Rasputin's pantry was well stocked. He liked to throw hunks of black bread into a tureen with fish soup bubbling in it and take them out hot to give his guests. Salt and bread, traditional peasant offerings, were kept for important visitors. They often took them away; Rasputin's crusts became status symbols.

His study was the only well-furnished room. It served as his "place of intimate rendezvous with society ladies"; his lovemaking, Simanovich said, was carried out with "impossible simplicity" and speed. He took the lady from the dining room into the study, and a few minutes later saw her out before visiting the bathhouse on the other side of the street from the apartment. He brought

his daughters from Pokrovskoye and placed them in a good school. Simanovich noticed that he never swore in front of them. The girls had their own bedroom and never entered a room when guests were there. He had brought the maid Dunia, the participant in the Kubasova pseudo-rape, with him from Siberia. The girls knew that he slept with her, but Maria said she loved her like a mother. "I found the liaison delightful," she said.

Maria was aware of her father's other indiscretions. Rasputin spent an evening of Gypsy dancing with a former Finnish ballerina, Lisa Tansin. The couple got drunk and returned to her villa with other revelers. An orgy ensued in which a naked Rasputin was photographed surrounded by naked women. Returning home in the early hours, unsatiated, Rasputin shared his bed with Dunia. A man later came to the apartment with a package containing the compromising photographs. He said that they would be shown to the tsar unless Rasputin left the capital forever. Dunia advised her lover to counterattack, to be like the woodcutter in the Russian folktale who turned on a wolf slavering to eat him with such a terrible roar that the beast fled.

Rasputin at once took a droshky to Tsarskoye Selo. He told the tsar of the incident at Tansin's villa and showed him the photographs. Nicholas looked at each of them closely, "a frown creasing his usually smooth brow," shaking his head sadly. He said that blackmailers were clearly using Rasputin as a pawn in a filthy game "to weaken my position and destroy the Romanov line." He told the holy man that he had been "foolish, very foolish, but no doubt the temptation was great." No damage had been done, though they might try again.

Rasputin's daughter said she was told this by Dunia. The detail is odd. Why should Rasputin have taken a bumpy, four-hour droshky ride to the tsar when his normal railroad journey took thirty-five minutes? But it was in character for the tsar to be tolerant of lapses. "He often closed his eyes to the escapades of his favorites," Simanovich wrote. "Their behavior even amused him." He recruited Caucasian princes to his personal convoy, though they were "prone to carousing and overindulgence"; he was confident that they would die or kill for him. He often paid their gambling debts; one of them, Prince Dadiani, pawned his epaulets after a drinking bout, certain that Nicholas would retrieve his honor by settling with the men with whom he had been playing cards. Simanovich, who cultivated the officers of the convoy, was playing a noisy game of macao with them in the palace in the early hours when the tsar stormed into the room in his nightgown to complain about the noise. After reprimanding them he gave each of them ten rubles and sat down at the card table to play himself.

It was in character, too, for Rasputin to enjoy having his photograph taken, particularly with women admirers; he did so often. He was an exhibitionist when drunk—he later exposed himself in a well-documented case in Moscow—

and he knew Lisa Tansin. His behavior made him vulnerable to blackmailers, but his character gave him a natural defense. He was brave, and he had little sense of shame.

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The prime minister, however, was less malleable than the tsar. Iliodor was continuing his fiery preaching. Countess Ignateva, whose salon Rasputin often graced, asked General Kurlov to meet Iliodor on a visit to the capital, so that he could "form a correct opinion" of him. The countess arrived at Kurlov's office late at night with a "tall, lean monk with burning wild eyes." The text of one of Iliodor's sermons, noted by an Okhrana agent, was lying on the police chief's desk. It called on his followers to use violence against the authorities. Kurlov asked the monk how he could reconcile it with his monarchist, right-wing views. "I'm not inciting the people to mutiny," Iliodor yelled at him. "I can think what I like of officials who are traitors to the emperor." Kurlov concluded that the monk was a "downright maniac."

The lunatic was unabashed. For good measure on his return to Tsaritsyn he decided to speak up for his friend Rasputin. He gave two long sermons on consecutive Sundays to crowds of more than five thousand, explaining that there was nothing wrong in Rasputin's kissing women or bathing with them, because he was "protected from desire." The sermons were reported in the press. The synod ordered Iliodor to leave Tsaritsyn and enter an obscure monastery at Novosilsky in Tula province. He refused to go. Kurlov's agents intercepted telegrams from Hermogen and Iliodor to Rasputin asking for his help. Rasputin confirmed that he would seek a favorable result.

Iliodor's flagrant disobedience, and Rasputin's meddling, were sapping the prestige of the church. It seemed "in the depths," in decay. "What is happening . . . cannot help but weaken the influence of the church," Witte wrote, "it cannot help but arouse fears for the future of Russia." Stolypin and the synod procurator, Dr. S. M. Lukyanov, ordered a second investigation into the starets. Stolypin again reported his concerns to the tsar. The prime minister detailed how deeply Rasputin was compromised and demanded that he be removed from court, or so Rasputin himself claimed to his friend Sazonov. Stolypin "told the tsar that, to the great incitement of society, Rasputin went to a bathhouse with women," Sazonov later testified that Rasputin said. "The emperor said to this: 'I know, there he also propagates the Scriptures.' . . . He ordered Stolypin to leave and threw the police department report into the fireplace."

In his own version of events, Stolypin said that the tsar had asked him to meet Rasputin so that he could see for himself that the starets was sincere and misunderstood. As soon as he entered his study, Stolypin reported, Rasputin had tried to cow him with a "hypnotic" stare. "He studied me with his whitish

eyes, uttered some mysterious incoherent quotations from the Bible, and gesticulated at me," Stolypin said. "I felt an irresistible disgust rising inside me toward this reptile in front of me. But I knew that he had a great power of hypnosis and somehow he impressed me, in a repulsive way."

Kurlov was also at the meeting. He recalled a thinnish man with a dark red beard and piercing eyes, a "certain kind of cunning Russian peasant," who protested that he was the most harmless and peaceful of people. The premier was unimpressed by the holy man's careful show of innocence. "Getting over my feelings," he said, "I raised my voice and told him outright that I had documentary evidence against him. He was in my hands, I could squash him by bringing him to trial. I ordered him to leave Petersburg without delay, go back to his village, and never appear here again."

Alexandra protested angrily to the tsar when she heard Rasputin's account of the interview; she made no secret of her hostility to Stolypin. Nicholas refused to countermand the order expelling Iliodor from Tsaritsyn despite a flood of telegrams from the monk's followers begging him to do so. Rasputin, judging the ice to be wearing thin, left to winter in Pokrovskoye. It was a timely decision.

The tsar sent a personal envoy to Tsaritsyn to tell Iliodor to submit to the synod. He chose his aide-de-camp Captain Mandryka, an officer in the Fourth Sharpshooters' Regiment attached to the imperial bodyguard. The captain was the godson of the superior of the Balachov Convent in Saratov province and an admirer of Rasputin, a fact that reassured Alexandra that he was the right man to send.

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Mandryka was welcomed in Tsaritsyn; he was offered bread and salt, and a Te Deum was celebrated for him. Iliodor was not there. Alerted by Hermogen, he had fled to Serdobsk. Mandryka followed him there and told him that the tsar insisted he obey the synod. Muttering with anger, Iliodor reluctantly gave his word that he would go to Novosilsky.

On his way back Mandryka visited his godmother's convent. She was away in St. Petersburg, but the nuns greeted him eagerly. They told him proudly that Grigory Rasputin had stayed at the convent and had chatted with them about his intimacy with the tsar and empress. They showed him a telegram that had arrived for his godmother after her departure for the capital: "One of your godsons is sent on a mission to Tsaritsyn for our affair," it read. "Influence him. Grigory." The captain was appalled that news of his trip had been leaked to the starets, almost certainly by Vyrubova on the empress's behalf. He made inquiries with local police and officials. He was told that Rasputin was a khlyst, a debauchee who violated young girls, abused them, and "chased demons."

The captain arrived back at Tsarskoye Selo on the morning of February 10, 1911. He was at once invited to lunch at the palace. It was Mardi Gras, and the family had blinis. After lunch he took coffee with them and gave his report. He told them all he had learned of the starets—the warning telegram, the baths with girls, the khlystlike philosophy. "They even say," he concluded, "that he enjoys the favor of Your Majesty." With that, the nervous captain burst into tears. Nicholas hastened to get him a glass of water; Alexandra sighed deeply. He left.

The next morning—Vyrubova was quick—Mandryka had a telegram from his godmother: "You've made a mess." He saw her three days later. "You've ruined your career," she told him. "Rasputin is a good man. He must be saved." There were signs that, although Alexandra was cold and distant to the captain, Rasputin was in serious trouble. When Mandryka reported back to the palace at the end of the week, Nicholas shook his hand warmly, gave him lunch, and seemed pleased.

CHAPTER 12

Pilgrim

Rasputin lay low in Pokrovskoye until the end of February 1911. No word came from the palace asking him to return. He thought it wise to resume his wanderings until the tsar's irritation passed. The ruler's quick temper, and his sensitivity to slight, made him dangerous for others to cross. The sovereigns were Rasputin's treasure, his prize and power base; for them, from affection and necessity, he would wait. Great numbers of Russian pilgrims visited the Holy Land, and it was natural for Rasputin to join them. He delighted in journeys; he had a restless and curious mind and a love for landscape. He knew, too, that his pilgrimage would be taken as an act of contrition by Nicholas, and of piety by Alexandra.

He kept them abreast of his progress by sending notes and letters to Vyrubova, and postcards to the empress. To ensure that his reformation was appreciated, he dictated notes on his return for a little book. He called it *My Thoughts and Reflections,* with a subtitle, *A Short Description of My Journey to the Holy Places and the Meditations on Religious Matters to Which They Gave Rise.* It was written out by one of his admirers, probably Munya Golovina, and published privately in a limited edition.

Rasputin went first to the lavra of Potchaiev, a complex of recluses' cells. "I saw men of God, and my heart rejoiced at the sight of pilgrims," he wrote. "These are true believers; you feel the fear of God in their souls and their search for divine truth." He was careful to stress the benefits to his soul; in press interviews he was sharp and to the point, but here his style was cloying and larded with biblicisms, like the romantic novelettes his principal target, the empress,

so liked. "I was afraid and trembled, then I became calm and felt myself humble," he wrote of his feelings when he prayed in front of a famous icon. "After each holy place, a new pearl of humility is added to the others."

From Potchaiev he traveled to Odessa and took a pilgrim ship. "Sweet is the night at sea," he wrote. "Sleep comes over you peacefully in the middle of profound thoughts and emotions. . . . O sea of Christ! What marvels are within you. When suddenly you see the shore, you rejoice at the green, at the trees. . . . When high seas toss the boat, the spirit is unquiet. Man loses his consciousness and staggers as though in a fog. . . . The wave is our conscience. However great are the waves of the sea, they always end in calm; but only a good deed can appease the conscience."

He left the ship at Istanbul and was shocked at seeing Turks smoking in the cathedral of St. Sofia. "Oh misery!" he wrote. "God must have been angry with our pride to have given this sanctuary to the infidel. . . . Lord, hear my prayer and return this church to us." He crawled on all fours in the caves and sanctuaries around Ephesus; in Patmos he saw where John the Divine had been imprisoned. In Jerusalem he wept for joy; he found "all just as it used to be," people wearing "the same strange garments as in the Gospels." He put the boot into his old enemies, the homosexual monks of Mount Athos. He noted the many hangers-on in the city, traders in relics and cheap wine, which many drank because it cost a few coppers for a liter. "It is the monks of Athos who offend most, and they therefore ought not to be allowed here."

At the Cave of the Mother of God, lit by torches, Rasputin rejoiced "in Her gladness that the Lord had taken Her body unto Himself." He was careful to denigrate the church establishment that was giving him such trouble—"our bishops are educated but their souls are not simple and the people can only follow simple souls and that is why the temple is empty"—and to include passages on love. "The moment I approached Christ's tomb, I felt it was the tomb of love and I wanted to embrace everyone," he wrote. "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." To his admirers, this was the height of religious poetry.

Rasputin's daughter claimed that he had a vision in the Garden of Gethsemane; he saw a corpse and recognized it as himself, collapsed and was helped to an inn, falling into a feverish sleep, where women he had known—Irina Danilova, Natalya Stepanova, Lisa Tansin—mocked him, burning his flesh with irons, until, when he was near death, the Virgin of Kazan made the sign of the cross over him and gestured that he should regain his body. The starets made no mention of it himself—even if it happened, and it is the least likely of his visions, it was hardly suitable material for the empress to read in *My Thoughts and Reflections*—although he did write that he had fasted, eating

nothing but rusks as he meditated on salvation. He may have fainted from hunger; he wrote that he prostrated himself in Gethsemane, "afraid to walk upon this holy ground where every little pebble is sacred."

He recovered well enough to immerse himself in the waters of the river Jordan. The Dead Sea fascinated him. "God's punishment is upon it," he wrote. "We were filled with horror and awe . . . not a living creature, not an insect may live there, not a fish even, so that you gaze upon it and weep." In Bethlehem he complained that there were no facilities for Russian pilgrims. He disliked the Catholics he met almost as much as the Turks; he knew the tsar would appreciate such simple patriotism. He found a Catholic Easter service a grim affair. In Russia congregations celebrated the moment Christ's tomb was found to be empty. They left the church behind the priest, surrounding it in a sea of light from their candles. When the priest looked back into the church, triumphantly telling them, *Khristos Voskres!* "Christ is Risen!" they responded with a shout of joy, *Voistinu Voskrese!* "Indeed He is Risen!" Rasputin found Catholicism unimpressive by comparison. "With them, even in church, no joy, no animation, you'd think they had lost someone," he said. "When they leave, you see that their spirit is not joyous. . . . How happy we are, we Orthodox!"

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While Rasputin was in Bethlehem, Iliodor defied Stolypin and the synod by leaving the Novosilsky Monastery and returning to Tsaritsyn. The provincial governor, Stremoukhov, surrounded his headquarters with troops. Here the monk was protected by howling women and barefoot peasants who swore to kill anyone who laid a hand on him; they vowed not to eat, drink, or sleep until the banning order was lifted. The tsar undermined both his prime minister and governor. The bishop of Tsaritsyn announced Nicholas's decision on April 3, 1911: "The emperor, taking account of the people's supplications, permitted on April 1 Hieromonk Iliodor to come back to Tsaritsyn from Novosilsky."

Stolypin was furious. He suggested to Stremoukhov that he resign in order to shock Nicholas into reason. The governor agreed, and said he would use the opportunity to talk to the tsar as well about Hermogen's and Rasputin's support for the monk. The next morning the governor was telephoned by a man who gave no name—but who was clearly speaking for Stolypin—advising him against making any mention of the "third man" when he went to see the tsar. Rasputin's reputation had reached the point where the Russian prime minister was advising colleagues that it was best not to mention him.

The affair aroused enough international interest for Robert Wilton of the London *Times* to travel south again. He was intrigued that the "Mad Monk of Tsaritsyn," as he called him, with the support of a "strange Siberian," Rasputin, could humiliate a man of Stolypin's stature. The correspondent arrived to

find a mass of pilgrims waiting to leave Tsaritsyn by chartered steamers. The atmosphere was charged with hysteria, particularly among the eleven hundred women present. They were divided into groups of fifty, each led by a banner carrier, with knapsacks and pilgrim staffs. Iliodor, in a cassock with a red, white, and blue collar, the national colors, led them singing through the streets. The whole city gathered at the landing to bid them farewell, "bells joyously ringing, crowds shouting hurrah and singing church and patriotic hymns . . . pilgrims, governors and their staffs, the city fathers, the clergy in corpore."

Iliodor defined the purpose of the pilgrimage. "The revolutionaries wished to travel up and down the Volga and bombard our cities, but they failed," he shouted. "Our mission is to bombard these cities with the word of God and the shots of divine truth." With that the pilgrims steamed upriver. They docked at each major town. Processions were led by the fifty best-looking girls, selected by Iliodor, and followed by a group of the best singers. Crowds were drawn by the music and the pretty girls, and Iliodor worked them well. Priests and officials were sucked into the near frenzy, and Wilton saw that they "did the 'Mad Monk's' bidding." Venerable bishops were overawed, and governors kissed his hand. The processions entered cathedrals and churches at all hours of the day and night, while archpriests were "dragged from their homes and forced to put on their vestments and celebrate solemn mass." Any failure to pay Iliodor homage brought "torrents of curses and imprecations." He prophesied the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah to one Volga town he thought "stony" in its reception. He told another that Chinese cavalry would capture it and fly the temple dragon over a church that was slow to open its doors to him. In Kazan he proclaimed the archbishop anathema.

By the time they returned to Tsaritsyn, Iliodor struck Wilton as "bordering closely on real madness" and in need of "imperative medical examination." A bodyguard walked with the monk during his open-air services, brandishing a large pistol. A new standard was carried in front of him, an enormous pole with a shining steel ax and lance hanging from it. "Till now we have only threatened our enemies," he preached. "Henceforth we will shoot. It is war to the death. Arise, Orthodox Russian people, and raise the flag of revolt for the defence of our holy faith, of autocracy and of Russian brotherhood. Look out, Jews and Russian fools."

Bloodshed was close. Iliodor's supporters mobbed people who failed to remove their hats or laughed in his presence. They seized a Russian colleague of Wilton and daubed his face with naphtha. They yelled, "Jew, Jewess," at anyone who remained seated when Iliodor passed, or who used opera glasses to get a better look at him. The monk ordered his pilgrims to raise their staffs and wave them like a menacing forest in the air before, "with a snicker," ordering

them down. The only reason the tsar could tolerate Iliodor, Wilton thought, was that he controlled a reactionary "black army" against the "red peril" of the left.

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Rasputin was back in St. Petersburg at the end of June. As he had hoped his pilgrimage restored him to the tsar's good graces—spectacularly so, for Nicholas now sought his political advice and entrusted him with a sensitive mission. It was the first time that the heart of power was opened to him. He visited the palace several times to give the spellbound Alexandra his account of the Holy Land. Vyrubova, who was present, testified later that she did not know to whom Rasputin dictated his *Reflections* but confirmed that "their content quite corresponds to everything that Grigory Efimovich said. He touched on these topics when he talked to the tsar's family, and present during these talks were the grand duchesses and the heir, who, of course, sometimes left to go to bed."

Rasputin also sought to poison his enemies, Stolypin and Lukyanov, the procurator of the synod. He made quick work of the latter; he braggingly referred to the new procurator, B. K. Sabler, as "my man." The prime minister was a grander and more difficult target, but the omens were good. Stolypin's dislike for Rasputin ensured that the empress turned against him. Already humiliated by Iliodor, he was further undermined when a reform to introduce locally elected councils into the western borderlands was blocked by state councillors who claimed that they were acting at the express wish of the tsar. Irritably, he offered his resignation; Nicholas, equally annoyed, asked what would become of a "government responsible to me" if ministers could come and go as they pleased, and refused to accept it. Stolypin felt weary, and ill with grippe; he knew that he had lost the tsar's confidence and told friends he was sure he would soon be murdered by an Okhrana agent. Nicholas now discussed his replacement with Rasputin.

Two alternatives were open: to restore Witte as premier and appoint Alexis Khvostov as interior minister, or to make Khvostov premier with the current finance minister, Vladimir N. Kokovtsov at interior. Khvostov was a young and little-known provincial governor who had caught the tsar's eye on a visit to Nizhni Novgorod. To ask a man thought an "inexperienced, corrupt, and opinionated nonentity" by one of the few who knew him to become premier or indeed interior minister, the most sensitive and difficult post in Russia, was a breathtaking gamble. Nicholas knew that Rasputin had no administrative insight, but he trusted him as a judge of character. He asked him to go to Nizhni Novgorod to "search the soul" of its governor.

Rasputin traveled to the Volga town, 250 miles east of Moscow, with his journalist-blackmailer friend Sazonov. Khvostov, told that a peasant and an ad-

venturer were requesting an audience, refused to see them. They barged into his drawing room, leaving a trail of dust from their boots on his carpet. He told his manservant to eject them. Rasputin said that the tsar would be displeased when he cabled him about his reception; he complained that he had only three rubles in his pocket and that the governor had not even fed him. Khvostov thought he was mad or bluffing but later rang the telegraph office. He was told that a peasant had indeed sent a telegram to Tsarskoye Selo. It read: "The grace of God is in Khvostov, but he is young and there is something lacking in him." He would do for interior minister, if that was the tsar's wish, but not as premier.

The pair next sounded out Witte on whether he would accept reappointment as premier. He was summering in Biarritz when he received a letter from Sazonov at the end of July. It opened by suggesting that Witte might like to make a financial contribution to Sazonov's newspaper; this was the bribe requested for the offer of the premiership that followed. The letter went on to say that the tsar had decided to replace Stolypin before the end of August and closed by stating that Witte would give a new government the authority it needed. "Are the ones who make this proposal mad," Witte pondered, "or do they think I am such a madman that they can make such a proposal to me?" He found it difficult to believe that "Rasputin now had such influence that a man of Sazonov's shadiness" could tout the highest office in Russia.

A fresh opportunity to influence a key church appointment came with the death of the bishop of Tobolsk. The Siberian bishopric included Pokrovskoye; although Rasputin had survived the diocesan investigation into his alleged khlyst connections, it was important for him to see a sympathizer installed in case of a repeat. His choice was Varnava, the father superior of the Novolugvinsky Monastery near Moscow. The two had met first in the house of Anna Shipova, the possible Madame S of the Trans-Siberian scandal, and later at Prince Andronnikov's apartment. Varnava was an exotic creature in his early fifties. He was the son of a market gardener, uneducated but witty, resourceful, and sly. He had a penchant for young novices, which had led him to Andronnikov. He liked to be photographed. One picture later submitted to the investigating commission showed him lying in a coffin placed on a richly brocaded bed; in another he sat with "a pretty, effeminate novice lovingly clinging to him," his lively eyes showing his natural intelligence while his lower face had "the features of a satyr and goat-legged Pan."

Varnava had enough in common with Rasputin for neither man to believe in the other's holiness, but each had uses for the other. Varnava passionately wished to become a bishop. His lack of education and theological training should have made this impossible, but he "understood that there was a man before him who could make anything come true." Rasputin, for his part, saw in Varnava someone "who, having received by his mercy Tobolsk diocese, will

slavishly do there what he wants." The synod at first refused the appointment. Even Sabler was shocked when the tsar insisted on it. "I pointed out to the tsar that Varnava was not prepared for it," he testified later. "He did not know the law, he was illiterate, he might be mocked and undermine the standing of bishops." He sat on the nomination until he received a handwritten note from the tsar: "Remind you of my wish to have Varnava a bishop in Tobolsk in the nearest future." This pressure, and the help of Rasputin's friend the Finnish bishop Sergei, obtained a narrow majority in the synod. The faithful were shocked that the tsar was conniving in Rasputin's corruption of the state religion.

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Rubbing salt into the wounded church, Rasputin paid a visit with Lokhtina to Iliodor in Tsaritsyn. It was not a success. He was greeted with less fervor than before. He tried money. He promised to give three thousand rubles for a new pilgrimage Iliodor was organizing; he wired Alexandra for the money, and Spiridovich said that it arrived four days later. When a public collection failed to meet expectations, Lokhtina bolstered it by paying three hundred rubles for a souvenir icon, and Rasputin persuaded a group of local ladies to present a silver tea service. In gratitude a little girl gave him a bouquet of flowers, saying, "Your soul is as beautiful as these flowers." Yet he noticed, with much hurt pride, that his image had disappeared from the banners carried by the faithful. They still had huge photographs of Hermogen and Iliodor, but he had been cut out. He sent a cable to Vyrubova alerting her to this change.

Rasputin gave an open-air sermon that much affected Iliodor. "It was the first time since I had known him that he appeared truly attractive," the monk wrote. "His tall and lean figure, with his rich peasant coat and a cord at his waist, had a particular grandeur when, in the heat of his discourse, he thrust his body forward and supported himself on slender feet encased in varnished boots. From the height of the raised platform, Rasputin seemed to me like a creature of the air ready to take flight, but toward hell and not heaven. His hair and beard, carefully washed, were blown lightly in the wind; they floated elegantly around his head. . . . His voice was staccato, firm, sonorous. His speech was brief and impregnated with gravity and power." Iliodor remembered one passage: "Yes, my enemies have launched attacks on me," Rasputin said. "They think my end has come. It makes you laugh! It's their end that's here. Not mine. Who are they? Worms crawling in a pot of cabbage. Miserable worms and nothing more. They want to knock me down. Well, there's many a slip twixt cup and lip!"

It was significant that Iliodor should see Rasputin swooping "toward hell" and recall the reference to Rasputin's enemies. He was about to become one. The two men visited the Dubrova Convent together. The mother superior hon-

ored Rasputin and gave him a candle decorated with flowers that she had made herself. Iliodor noted that the starets "succeed[ed] in visiting several nuns' cells," and that he boasted of having had Sabler appointed as synod procurator and said he would make sure that Stolypin was sacked. When Rasputin stopped off in Saratov to see Hermogen, he found a coldness in this old friend too; the bishop warned him that the evidence of his seductions was becoming hard to bear. Hermogen was at least sane. Iliodor's mental state made his growing hatred especially dangerous.

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It was, however, one of Rasputin's "miserable worms" who was the first to be done in. Peter Stolypin was expected in Kiev at the end of August to attend the tsar's inauguration of a statue of his grandfather Alexander II, the murdered tsar-liberator. The prime minister knew his days in power were numbered; he was not invited to join the imperial train for the trip to the Ukraine. Rasputin was in town, staying with a member of the Black Hundreds. He was in the front row of the crowd on Alexander Street, near the Kiev Museum, to watch the imperial parade pass through the city on August 30.

The holy man caught Alexandra's eye as her carriage went by, elaborately escorted by police and cavalrymen. He blessed her, and she smiled and inclined her head to him. Stolypin was in the carriage behind, looking tanned after a summer break, but so unprotected against terrorists that he remarked to his finance minister, Kokovtsov, riding with him, "We are superfluous." Rasputin turned pale when he saw him, so Vyrubova claimed. He trembled and cried, "Death is behind him. Death follows him . . . him, Peter . . . it follows him." That night Rasputin's host heard him tossing sleepless in his room; death was "close by," he muttered, and he was powerless in "its bony hand." Simanovich claimed that Rasputin had already told him and the tsar that the "old man," as he called Stolypin, would be killed if he went to Kiev; he also warned that a Jewish pogrom would follow his death.

A police informer called Dmitri Bogrov, who worked the revolutionary fringes on behalf of his Okhrana paymasters, had recounted details of a plot to assassinate the tsar during his stay in the city. The police squandered their resources on this false scent. Bogrov was given a police identity pass to attend a gala performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Tale of Tsar Saltan* at the Kiev opera house on the evening of September 1, 1911. His task was to spot any terrorist who might slip through the security checks to kill the tsar as he sat in the imperial box with his daughters Olga and Tatiana; the empress, true to her loathing of public events, was absent.

Stolypin sat in the front row of the orchestra stalls. During the second intermission he stood and stretched with his back to the stage. The hall emptied

as the audience filled the lobby bars for soft drinks and candies. A young man in evening dress and an opera cloak walked down the aisle. It was an airless night; the summer was so hot that the Ukraine was a desert of parched grass, but the plainclothesmen paid no attention to the man in the cape. He had a police pass. Bogrov fired two shots into Stolypin's chest with the terrorists' weapon of choice, a Browning pistol.

The shots sounded to the tsar like the thud of something dropping. He ran back into his box to see if an opera glass had fallen on someone's head. He noticed a scuffle below him; men in uniform were dragging someone along the carpeting. "Stolypin was standing," he wrote to his mother. "He slowly turned his face toward us and with his left hand made the sign of the cross in the air. Only then did I notice he was very pale and that his right hand and uniform were bloodstained. He sank into his chair and began to unbutton his tunic. . . . People were trying to lynch the assassin. I am sorry to say the police rescued him from the crowd. . . . The theater filled up again, the national anthem was sung, and I left with the girls at 11. You can imagine with what emotions."

The premier survived for five days in agony. Stolypin had given constancy and calm to a fevered country; under him industrial production had almost doubled. The leader of the obscure Bolshevik party, Vladimir Lenin, exiled in Paris, a city he loathed, sat with his disciples in a miserable café on the avenue d'Orléans, drinking sickly grenadine and soda, half-convinced that the chance for Russian revolution had passed. Even the left was stunned by the shooting. "The person who seemed most unmoved was the emperor," Prince Paul Vassily wrote. "He expressed no sympathy . . . beyond some conventional inquiries and official words of regret."

Nicholas called at the nursing home where the premier lay on September 3, but Madame Stolypin refused to let him see her husband. He was told of the death on the pierhead on his return from a trip on the Dnieper. A memorial service was held in his presence at the nursing home. "The poor widow," Nicholas wrote, "stood as though turned to stone and was unable to weep." She well knew of his hostility to her husband; she may have suspected that he had a hand in the murder. Many did, for the use of police agents to murder those who displeased Black Hundred leaders was well established; if these reactionaries did not act on the tsar's orders, they claimed in their pamphlets to act in his interests. Bogrov was hastily hanged, conveniently removing the principal actor, and four police officers were suspended from duty. An official inquiry called for senior officials to be put on trial. The tsar refused to agree; Alexis having recovered from a fresh hemorrhage—Vyrubova later testified to the investigating commission that "a telegram was sent to Rasputin with a request to pray and he comforted the tsar and tsarina with a telegram to say that the heir will live"—Nicholas was "not of a mind to punish anyone" when God had shown him mercy.

No evidence emerged from the dirty half-world of double agents and provocateurs to link the tsar to the killing; some members of court thought that Nicholas had deliberately taken Stolypin to Kiev so that Rasputin's prediction would come true, a convoluted accusation that Simanovich thought groundless. The empress, however, was well pleased and made no secret of it. Alexandra thought that the premier had brought death down on his own head through his contempt for Rasputin. She told her husband's cousin Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich that "those who have offended God in the person of Our Friend may no longer count on divine protection." The Friend himself, having predicted his enemy's fall, now prepared to welcome his successor.

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The appointment was carried out in casual style on September 9. Vladimir Kokovtsov had effectively taken over the government on the night of the murder, drafting three regiments of Cossacks into Kiev to forestall the Jewish pogrom with which the Black Hundreds celebrated such events. Simanovich wrongly attributed this precaution to the tsar, claiming that Nicholas was persuaded into uncharacteristic protection of his Jewish subjects by a telegram Rasputin sent him: "Joy, peace, calmness. . . . Blood of aliens on the earth of the Russian tsar is as precious as that of one's brothers."

Kokovtsov was waiting at the railroad station to see the imperial couple off to the Crimea, where they were to stay in the Livadia Palace, when a courier drove up hastily and asked him to go at once to the tsar. Nicholas took him into his study. He told him that he had decided to appoint him premier, with the young Khvostov, as Rasputin had confirmed, at the interior ministry. Kokovtsov was appalled. "Your Majesty, you are standing at the edge of a precipice," he said. "The appointment of Khvostov will signify that you have decided to jump off." Alexandra was already wearing her hat and was waiting impatiently for her husband to leave. "In that case," the tsar said, "I ask you to take the post of premier and as for interior minister, I'll think about it." With that he climbed into the automobile.

The Crimea had been a special place for Russians since Prince Potemkin had wrested it from the Tartar khans more than a century before. Its warmth lifted their dark and half-frozen northern souls. Roses bloomed at Christmas; it had copses of juniper bushes, promenades of palm trees, chestnuts, baby willows, stands of acacia, terraces with cascading geraniums, orchards and vineyards. The southeastern coast, protected from northerly winds by mountains, was a Romanov redoubt. Nicholas had replaced the old wooden palace at Livadia, where his father had died, with an Italianate palazzo of white limestone and marble. The family was happy here. The tsar rode, played tennis, and swam with Alexis from the Golden Beach, close to the Swallow's Nest, crags that rose

from the sea in the shape of a medieval castle. Vyrubova imagined a "race of Centaurs come back to earth" as cavalcades of Tartars in red and yellow rode by in this "earthly paradise." The girls flirted innocently with young officers from the Black Sea fleet. Alexandra relaxed in her high-ceilinged room, with its views to the blue sweep of mountains, its pink chintz light and cheerful despite the obsessive presence of a motif of mauve flowers. She was able to go shopping incognito with Vyrubova in Yalta, a forty-five-minute walk from the palace, a freedom unthinkable in the frigid north.

The empress did not unwind enough to forget politics, however. When Kokovtsov visited the palace she invited him to take tea with her on the terrace. "I notice that you keep on making comparisons between yourself and Stolypin," she said. "You seem to do too much honor to his memory and ascribe too much importance to his activities. . . . Believe me, one must not feel sorry for those who are no more. I am sure . . . when one dies that means his role in the world is ended and that he was bound to go since his destiny was fulfilled. . . . Remain yourself. Do not look for support in political parties; they are of so little consequence in Russia. Find support in the confidence of the tsar—the Lord will help you. I am sure that Stolypin died to make room for you and this is all for the good of Russia." Kokovtsov knew very well that this meddling—the superficial dismissal of political parties, the belief in God and autocracy—had a purpose. The empress thought that Stolypin's end was bound up with his dislike of Rasputin, and she was warning the new premier to turn a blind eye to the starets. "Strange as it may seem," Kokovtsov wrote, "the question of Rasputin became the central question of the immediate future; nor did it disappear during my entire term of office."

The family stayed in Livadia until the end of December. Rasputin arrived in Yalta and put up at the Edinburgh Hotel under the name of Nikonov. He was invited to the palace on December 6, St. Nicholas Day in the calendar of saints, the tsar's name day. The holy man paid several visits; he was happy and self-confident when he left, sending a telegram from Moscow on December 13 to say he was on his way back to St. Petersburg. But his confidence was mistaken. Old friends who wished him harm were awaiting him.

V.T. – on his ability and [illegible] of ability to receive [illegible]

CHAPTER 13

Scandal

Iliodor had gotten to St. Petersburg first. Bishop Hermogen was also in the city, attending a session of the synod and staying at the Iaroslavl Monastery. He was given further evidence of Rasputin's transgressions by Captain Rodionov, a Cossack writer and Duma deputy. The three met with Mitya, the half-wit "fool of Christ," to discuss the starets. They exchanged anecdotes and worked themselves into a moral rage. Hissing with jealousy at Rasputin's success, the idiot passed on as fact the salon rumors that Rasputin was fucking the empress. He said that the lecher must be killed, or at the least castrated. Iliodor turned on his former friend. He wanted Rasputin kept in a locked cell as far away as possible—the prison island of Sakhalin was suggested—while his house in Pokrovskoye was publicly burned.

Hermogen was less extreme; he felt that they should force Rasputin to swear that he would never go to the palace again. At first, he explained later to the newspaper *Russkoye Slovo*, he felt that the starets had a "spark of God," an inner sensitivity and sympathy. "I'll tell you frankly—I experienced it myself," he said. "More than once he responded to the sorrows of my heart. He won my heart like this and, at least at the start of his career, the hearts of others." But by 1911 the bishop had realized, "too late," what sort of person Rasputin was. "He suffered from a particular ailment, a particular lust," he said. "I'd call it an 'ailment of satyriasis.' " It was this that he was determined to unmask.

After the receipt of Rasputin's telegram from Moscow, Mitya and Rodionov pressured Hermogen to go further. Reluctantly the bishop agreed to see the justice minister and inform him of their plan to kidnap Rasputin and lock him in

a monastic cell. The minister told him this would be illegal. Rasputin arrived in the capital on December 16. He telephoned Iliodor and suggested he come to Munya Golovina's apartment on the Winter Canal. At their meeting Iliodor asked Rasputin to go on to the Iaroslavl Monastery, where Hermogen was waiting to see him.

Once his victim was in the monastery, Iliodor telephoned Rodionov and Mitya. When they arrived Rasputin sensed trouble and became nervous. He was ill prepared for the meeting; he was outnumbered, in a stone-walled room deep in the monastery. Hermogen was a powerfully built man, six feet tall, and Rodionov, who had been invited as a witness to the bishop's denunciation, was fit and athletic. Mitya suddenly yelled in his spittle-flecked voice: "Ah! Impious one!" He grabbed Rasputin by his penis, the author of his debauchery, and tugged at it, staring wildly and cursing. Iliodor joined in the attack, quoting his victim's own braggings, his voice growing in anger before lapsing into incoherent rage as he accused him of raping the novice Xenia.

The bishop now shouted at him. "You are a liar and impostor," Rodionov reported him as saying. He was waving a large wooden crucifix. "You say you're holy, but you live in sin and mud. It is my fault to have introduced you to the tsar's family. Now I see your true face. . . . By your deeds you soil the name of the empress. With your unworthy hands, you dare to touch her holy person. . . . In the name of the living God, I command you to disappear and no longer trouble the Russian people by your presence at the palace!" Rasputin, "eyes pale," hissed back oaths and threatened "to have done" with the bishop. "So, you filthy debauchee, you refuse to obey the commands of a bishop?" he shouted. "And you threaten me? Know that I, a bishop, curse you!"

The litany of sin, and the vehemence of the curse, left Rasputin cowed and trembling. Both Rodionov and Iliodor asserted this, and Hermogen confirmed it; this was the first and only recorded instance when Rasputin's self-confidence deserted him. The tirades stunned him; they were unexpected, and they came from powerful preachers, for whom denouncing the ungodly was meat and drink. "Is it true?" Hermogen demanded. "It's true," Rasputin quavered. "It's true, it's true." Hermogen punched him in the face and began beating him with the crucifix. Rasputin fought back; his face "lost human expression" as Rodionov drew his Cossack saber and hastened to help the bishop. As he rained blows on the starets, Hermogen roared, "You are smashing our sacred vessels." He pulled him by his hair to a small chapel. He pronounced a death sentence on Rasputin's sources of pleasure and power. The starets was not to touch another woman, and he was never again to go to Tsarskoye Selo or contact the imperial family. Hermogen forced him to kneel and swear it on an icon.

"I tried to reform him," Hermogen recalled to the *Russkoye Slovo* reporter. "I read a prayer of prohibition over him in the chapel. I ordered him to renounce

the actions that so ruinously influenced high society and that reflected on the life of the State. Finally, I told him to return to Pokrovskoye. It seemed to persuade him." Rasputin swore obedience. "Good," he told the bishop. "I'll go to Pokrovskoye. I've got plenty of corn and I'll live comfortably there. And I'll never be with people from society again." With that he fled.

He tried to repair the damage the following day. He went to Iliodor. "Save me!" he begged. "Save me!" Iliodor took him back to the bishop, who refused him pardon, turning his back on him with the words "Never and nowhere!"

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Word of the beating soon got out through the writer Rodionov. The press seized on it to dig up the old allegations that Rasputin was a khlyst. The Moscow newspaper *Golos Moskvy* published a letter to the editor from Mikhail Novosyolov, an assistant professor at the Moscow theological academy and a specialist on illegal cults. It was based on a pamphlet he had written and demanded that the synod, still sitting in St. Petersburg, expose Rasputin as a heretic.

" '*Quo usque tandem!*' " it started.

> These indignant words escape from the lips of all Orthodox men and women against the sly conspirator who betrays our Holy Church, that fornicator of human souls and bodies—Grigory Rasputin, who impudently defends himself under the holy cover of the Church. "*Quo usque?*"—with these words the children of the Russian church are forced to address the synod, seeing its terrible connivance with Grigory Rasputin. How long will the synod, in whose face this criminal comedy is being played, be silent and inactive? Why is it silent, in the face of God's commandment to protect the sheep from the wolves?
>
> Why are the guardians of Israel silent when in letters to me some of them openly call this pseudo-teacher "a pseudo-khlyst, an erotomaniac, a charlatan"? Why is the lewd khlyst allowed to do dark deeds under the guise of light? . . . Where is the ruling hand if it will not throw the impudent seducer beyond the fence that protects the Church?

The reference to the empress's Friend as an "erotomaniac" and a "pseudo-khlyst" created a sensation. Preliminary censorship had been abolished in the post-1905 reforms. Newspapers were now liable to arbitrary fines and to confiscation after publication. Novosyolov's pamphlets were confiscated, and copies of *Golos Moskvy* found in a raid on its printing plant were burned. The paper was heavily fined. The public took it as proof that Rasputin was indeed a khlyst, the lewd pilot of an ark whose members included the empress. The copies that were in circulation "started to sell for fabulous sums of money," the

politician Rodzianko noted, "and all the other newspapers started to publish articles about Rasputin and the illegal confiscation of the pamphlet." For the first time the press began to run letters about Rasputin's women victims and published photographs of him with his admirers. "The more zealous the censor and police were," Rodzianko added, "the more they published and the larger were the fines."

Rasputin was in deep trouble. Instinctively, as with the blackmail attempt, he felt attack to be the best means of defense. Nicholas and Alexandra had returned from the Crimea to Tsarskoye Selo for Christmas. He got word to them through Vyrubova that Hermogen and Iliodor had "ambushed" and tried to murder him. He asked that they be expelled from the capital immediately, before they could do more harm. He also worked on Sabler, his nominee as synod procurator. The pressure was effective. On January 3, 1912, Sabler presented to the tsar a synod recommendation ordering Hermogen to return to his diocese in Saratov. Nicholas signed it.

It was an unprecedented punishment for a member of the synod to be expelled from the capital while it was in session. Hermogen refused to go. He cabled Iliodor with the news; the monk, who had returned to Tsaritsyn, told the press. Hermogen demanded his right to trial by twelve fellow bishops, who alone could banish him from the synod under canon law. He was refused. On January 16 he demanded an audience with the tsar. "I am ready to obey the orders of the sovereign," he explained, "but those of Grischa Rasputin, never!" Nicholas let him know via Sabler that he would not see him. The bishop wrote a letter begging him to "pull out the weeds growing around the throne"; it went unanswered. He cabled the empress; she did reply, to say that he must submit to the orders of an authority, the synod, that was instituted from God.

On January 17 Hermogen was notified that the synod had stripped him of his diocese and had exiled him to the obscure Zhirovretsky Monastery in Vladimir province. Iliodor was exiled to the Florishchev Monastery, but the exclusion order could not be served on him. He had gone to ground. Hermogen bowed to his fate a week later and left the capital. "Denunciation of Rasputin had a fatal effect on my life," he told the *Russkoye Slovo* reporter. "I was forced to retire from my see. More than that, I was removed from St. Petersburg by force, without having any opportunity to explain myself." He was philosophical about his treatment. "Even we, people grown wise with theological experience, could not realize at first what sort of person Rasputin was," he recollected. "Small wonder that weak women who got into his net could not see it either. . . . As for men, he simply bullied them. He said to those who believe in God: 'If you send me away, God will punish you. Something terrible will happen to your house.' " By that Hermogen meant the tsar; he went on to allude to Sabler and the members of the synod: "With others, who clutched at

their position," Hermogen continued, "he said how powerful he was, how much influence he had, and he warned them: 'Watch out, you'll feel bad if you don't obey me.' And they obeyed him."

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Iliodor soon served notice that he would not accept his punishment meekly. From hiding he issued a memorandum to the press. He entitled it "Grischa" and signed and dated it. "Sabler is Rasputin's creature," it read. "Grischa tells how Sabler thanked him on his knees for making him procurator of the holy synod. Bishop Varnava is also Grischa's creature. . . . Here is my advice on Grischa. He is a khlyst and an incorrigible dissolute. He must be kept away from the tsar and punished, like the depraved soul he is, for having pretended to be a saintly man and coming close to the sovereigns. If Grischa is not distanced, if he is not driven from the light, the throne of the tsars will be toppled and Russia will perish. January 25, 1912. Iliodor."

Delighted newspaper editors published it; the increases in circulation paid for the fines. Nicholas was furious. At a dinner in the Winter Palace on January 29, given in honor of the money-grubbing father of the Montenegrin sisters, he told the interior minister to take "the most severe measures" against any paper that mentioned Rasputin. The next morning, the minister—A. A. Makarov, for the objections to Khvostov had been sustained—raised the question at a meeting with Prime Minister Kokovtsov and Sabler. The synod procurator thought it imperative that Rasputin leave for Siberia at once. They asked the court minister, Count Fredericks, to take the matter to the tsar. Fredericks did so. "Today they want Rasputin to go," Nicholas objected, "and tomorrow they'll think of someone else."

Makarov had a routine audience with the tsar on February 1; Nicholas told him they would discuss Rasputin another time. Kokovtsov tried again on February 3. "I told him in detail the damage that was being done to imperial prestige and how important it was to cut it off at its roots," the premier recalled. "The emperor heard me out in silence. He looked out of the window, as he usually does when he is displeased. Suddenly he interrupted me. 'Yes, you're right,' he said. 'It's necessary to lop it off at the roots and I'll take decisive steps to do that. I'll talk to you about it later, but for the moment let's not discuss it further.' "

He did nothing, and the situation got worse. Iliodor contacted journalists and handed them copies of letters from the empress and her daughters to Rasputin that he had stolen from the blue-checked wrapper on his visit to Pokrovskoye. The letter from the empress was undated but seemed to have been written in 1908 or 1909. "My beloved and unforgettable teacher, redeemer and mentor," it began.

> How weary I feel without you. It is only then that my soul is quiet and I relax, when you, teacher, are sitting beside me and I kiss your hands and lean my head on your blessed shoulder. Oh! how light I feel then. I wish only one and the same thing then. To fall asleep forever on your shoulder, in your arms. Oh! what happiness it is even to feel your presence near me. Where are you? Where have you flown? And I feel so miserable, so sick at heart. . . .
>
> But don't you, my beloved mentor, tell Anya [Vyrubova] about my sufferings without you. Anya is kind, she is good, she loves me, but you shouldn't reveal my grief to her. How soon will you be close to me again? Come quickly. I am waiting for you and I am tormenting myself for you. I am asking for your holy blessing and I am kissing your blessed hands. Loving you forever, M.

The *M* stood for Mama.

It read like a passionate love letter, and it was seen as such by those who bought or were given one of the thousands of duplicated copies that were soon in circulation. "Only those who did not know the empress, her moral elevation, the crystal pure nature of her family life," Spiridovich protested, "only profoundly vicious people, fanatics or scandalmakers could find in this letter confirmation of this revolting calumny." But few, very few, knew the empress. It was bad enough that she should write of kissing Rasputin's hands, an act of subservience. Worse were the references to the imperial head nestling on the peasant shoulder, to the imperial body falling asleep in the peasant arms, the mentions of love, torment, and happiness.

Was it all mere literary license? Vyrubova and Lili von Dehn later testified that the empress had never kissed the starets's hands. But why did Alexandra write—and the letter was genuine—that she did? Why did she use lovers' language—"beloved . . . how light I feel . . . I wish only one and the same thing . . . come quickly"—if her affection was purely spiritual? To suggest that it was not, the press stepped up the flow of stories of Rasputin's seductions and cuckoldings.

This letter apart, there was no evidence that Rasputin slept with the empress. The investigating commission did not interrogate her—that was beyond its brief—but, as mentioned earlier, medical examination proved that Vyrubova, also a supposed lover of Rasputin's, remained a virgin. Simanovich, operating in the dark area where indiscretion mingled with blackmail, kept himself abreast of Rasputin's affairs as a matter of professional pride. He had no qualms about passing on the equally scurrilous story that the tsarevich had been fathered by General Orlov, but he mentioned the rumors that the empress was Rasputin's lover only in the context of Rasputin's indifference to them.

Negatives, however, are difficult to prove, and the non-affair was no exception. Alexandra's letters to her husband were published after the revolution;

though they certainly show her to have been deeply in love with him, they were no more emotional than the letter to Rasputin. Married women made love to khlyst pilots without it affecting their marital relations; Rasputin was known to have stayed on friendly terms with at least two husbands whom he was cuckolding. When he was reproached for this, he replied that it was not his fault if high-ranking men made their wives and mistresses run after him in the hope of gaining some benefit. "Most of these women," Simanovich confirmed, "formed a connection with him with the consent of their husbands or relatives."

As to opportunity, although Vyrubova was present when the empress met Rasputin at her cottage, Rasputin frequently made love while his admirers were sitting in the next room. He brought a Siberian woman named Akulina Laptinskaya to St. Petersburg in 1911; she acted as his secretary and occasional housekeeper until his murder, and also gave massages to the empress. "He'd be surrounded by his admirers, with whom he also slept," she testified in 1917. "He'd do his thing with them quite openly and without shame. He'd caress them . . . and when they felt like it he'd simply take them into his study and do his business. . . . I often heard his views, a mixture of religion and debauchery. He'd sit there and give instructions to his female admirers. 'Do you think I degrade you? I don't degrade you. I purify you.' This was his basic idea. He also used the word *grace*, meaning that by sleeping with a man, a woman came into the grace of God."

It was, in fact, Iliodor who unwittingly furnished the most obvious indication that the empress's letter should not be taken at face value. As he fled toward Saratov, hoping to find sanctuary in Hermogen's former see, he drew a Pied Piper's tail of journalists behind him. He kept them well supplied with material and released the stolen letters from the young grand duchesses. They indeed showed how startlingly intimate Rasputin had become with the imperial family—but as friend, confessor, and soul mate, not lover. Olga, now a beautiful sixteen-year-old with chestnut hair and her father's limpid blue eyes, wrote with unaffected charm to Rasputin of her infatuation with a young Guards officer: "Nicholas drives me crazy. Whenever I go to the Sofia cathedral and see him, I'm ready to climb up the wall and my body shakes all over. . . . I love him. . . . I am about to throw myself on him. You advised me to behave more carefully. But how can I do that when I can't control myself? . . . Loving you, Olga."

Tatiana, two years younger, was chatty; she missed playing with "Matryosha," Rasputin's daughter Maria, and she wanted to see the fabled Siberia he had spoken about so often. "My dear and faithful friend," she wrote.

> How long will you stay in Pokrovskoye? How are your kids? How's Matryosha? Whenever we get together at Anya's we always talk about all of

> you. And we so wish to visit Pokrovskoye. . . . Arrange everything as soon as possible, you can do everything. God loves you so. . . . We miss you, miss you. And mama is unwell without you. . . . Oh! if only you knew how difficult it is for us to stand mama's illness. But you know because you know everything. Kissing you heartily and affectionately, my dear friend. . . . Good-bye. Your Tatiana."

Marie, twelve when Iliodor handed her letter to journalists, was girlishly worried about being bad when she wrote it. "Sweet, dear unforgettable friend of mine," she began.

> I miss you so. You won't believe it but almost every night I see you in my dreams. In the morning, when I wake up, I take the gospel which I received from you from under my pillow, and I kiss it. . . . Then I feel it is you that I kiss. I am so wicked but I want to be kind and don't want to offend our sweet, good, kind nurse. She is so kind, so good, we all love her so. Pray, unforgettable friend, so that I should always be kind. I am kissing you. Kissing your pure hands. Yours forever, Marie.

Little Anastasia, ten when Russians gloated over her letter, also saw the starets in her dreams. She wondered if he saw her so. "My sweet friend," she wrote.

> When shall we see you? Anya told me yesterday that you would come soon. It will make me so happy. I like it when you talk to us about God. . . . God seems to be so kind, so good. Pray to Him so that he helps mama to be healthy. I often see you in dreams. Do you see me in dreams? When will you be telling us about God in the nursery? Come soon. I am trying to be a good child like you told me. I shall always be a good child if you are always with us. Good-bye. I kiss you and you bless me. Yesterday I had a grudge against the little one [Alexis] but then I made it up with him. Loving you, your Anastasia.

It was clear that the infatuation with Rasputin was a family affair, based not on the mother's lust but on a perception of his goodness. He had done his work well. He was the girls' friend; Olga asked his advice about a boyfriend, Anastasia admitted she had gotten fed up with her little brother. He was kind and loving; he helped them to pray, to be good, and he calmed their mother's hysteria and made her well. The relationship was full of charm and innocence. The letters damned Rasputin, not the young Romanovs who wrote them. They revealed the extent of Rasputin's duplicity, the skill with which he concealed his lewdness under a mask of generosity and affection; they sketched the family's

utter trust in him—a loyalty as touching as it was misplaced—and explained the "perpetual incredulity" and hostility the parents showed to those who warned them of the other face of Janus.

The public, however, did not see them in this light. Phrases were seized on—"I feel it is you that I kiss" "Do you see me in dreams?"—to show that the grand duchesses had followed their mother into the Siberian's bed. Kokovtsov complained that the letters caused "the most revolting comments. . . . We [he and Interior Minister Makarov] believed that the letters were apocryphal and were being circulated for the purpose of undermining the prestige of the sovereign, but we could do nothing. . . . The public, of course, greedy for sensation, was according them a very warm reception." The girls' letters were genuine, but frankly pornographic fakes were soon in circulation.

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The storm raged on. The Duma seethed with anger at the treatment of Hermogen. Mikhail Rodzianko, its twenty-stone chairman, a bluff country squire with a powerful presence—"on a still day he can be heard for a kilometer"—found it difficult to keep the excited deputies under control. The most ardent monarchists were outraged at the tsar's behavior. "Where do we go?" the extreme right-winger Vladimir Purishkevich demanded of Rodzianko with horror. "Now the dark forces are destroying Russia's last stronghold—the church. And what makes it even more horrible is that all this seems to come down from the highness of the tsar's throne. A rascal, a khlyst, a dirty illiterate muzhik is playing with our churchmen. What abyss are they taking us into? My God! I want to sacrifice myself and kill this vile creature—Rasputin." It was not an idle threat.

Rodzianko recognized that the crisis was real. If the affair could be limited to Alexandra's "passion for Rasputin's imaginary gift of prophesy and his hypnotic power which eased her nervous sufferings and abated her fears for her family . . . then it would not arouse much alarm." But there was more to it than that. Rodzianko was afraid that Rasputin's closeness to the tsarevich would influence the child's receptive soul, "imparting mysticism and making the heir a nervous and unbalanced person." Respect for the dynasty was being undermined. "Ambitious men, climbers and dark crooks"—the Simanoviches, Sablers, Varnavas, Andronnikovs—were crowding around the starets, flies on the dung heap. More terrible, Rodzianko thought, was that senior officials and ministers had split into "two hostile camps, Rasputin supporters, and the anti-Rasputins. . . . The gradual rise of Rasputin's supporters and their success was tempting, and the desertions from the anti-Rasputins to the Rasputin camp grew apace."

Rodzianko gave the example of a lady, a "happy and exemplary family woman," who visited Rasputin to solicit a position for her husband. "All right,

I'll see to it," Rasputin said, openly ogling her. "But come again tomorrow in an open dress with naked shoulders. Otherwise don't bother." The lady left, so Rodzianko said, full of indignation and determined not to submit. Once home she fell prey to "invincible melancholy." The next day she wore a décolleté dress and returned. "Her husband got his promotion eventually," Rodzianko wrote. "It is a documentary story."

It alarmed the Duma president to think of the "repulsive impression" this must make on servants, "for whom there are no alcove secrets," and on ordinary Russians in general. The "gray" people who met Rasputin—"the cabmen who took him and his women to bathhouses, the attendants who gave him separate rooms, waiters who served him during his orgies, the police agents who guarded his precious life"—had no illusions about his holiness. "All they said was 'The masters are up to their tricks,' " and the contempt they felt was helping to tarnish the throne. Rasputin was winning the battle, undermining premiers, ministers, senior churchmen; if it continued Rodzianko was sure it would lead to revolution.

His view was shared by Nicholas's mother. On February 13 she summoned Kokovtsov to discuss the affair. She listened to what he had to say about Rasputin. Then, in tears, the dowager empress promised to speak to her son. "My unhappy daughter-in-law," she said, "does not understand that she is destroying the dynasty and herself. She truly believes in the saintliness of this rogue and we are powerless to stave off this disaster."

Iliodor was continuing to rail against the injustice done to Hermogen and himself, his journey "a triumphal procession." He preached against the synod for a few more days, until he was finally arrested and confined to the Florishchev Monastery; but the damage was done. Rasputin tried to repair it. He spun a pretty tale of sex and hypocrisy to explain his rift with the monk. His daughter Maria and his admirers believed it, but it convinced few others. He said that he had become tired of hearing the monk preach that chastity was all when he did not practice it. He said that, during Iliodor's visit to Pokrovskoye, he had caught him sneaking a look at the maid Dunia while she was stripping to wash. When he had reminded Iliodor of this, in Tsaritsyn the previous summer, the monk had spluttered: "You . . . you . . ." "Come," Rasputin had sneered. "Confession is good for the soul." "Go! Leave me!" Iliodor had yelled back. "You are no friend but a vicious enemy. . . . You are the sinner, not I. My life is blameless. Who knows what yours has been?"

The Rasputin explanation for Hermogen's hostility was equally far-fetched. Maria claimed that her father had found a hole in the accounts of the Union of True Russians, the right-wing league in which the bishop was involved, and was about to expose his fraud when the beating intervened. Its purpose was to kill Rasputin before his allegations against the lecher-monk and the embezzler-bishop could bear fruit.

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Rasputin mentioned none of this when he tried to stem the flood of hostile press articles by giving an interview of his own to the newspaper *Novoye Vremya*. It was published on February 18, 1912. The paper called him Grigory Rasputin-Novykh. The journalist signed himself I. M-v. This was Ivan Manasevich-Manuilov, part journalist, part Okhrana informer, and a full-time intriguer with a penchant for high living and antiques. He wrote it up directly from shorthand notes, catching the jumpiness, the sudden switches in subject, the phrases left to hang in silence.

Rasputin started, like the celebrity he was, by complaining about the press. "Newspapers are like birds," he said. "Once they start singing, they won't stop. They chirp. . . . They hoot. . . . They hurt. . . . They exalt. . . . Some kind of intoxication, a whirlwind. If you get caught in their path, there's no mercy. They'll beat you to death. . . . And why, no one will ask." He slipped skillfully into the role of the little man beaten up by bullies: "Why did they assault me, the little one?" he asked. "What do I signify, me among the big and the strong? One blow, and I'm gone. No one will remember me. They all pounced on me like one. A kind of wild dance. . . . Who could I hit? I'm not strong enough. . . . They've made me out as some sort of athlete. . . . Look at me. . . . I don't even know the ABC. . . . I spell like a little kid. And here, they're all big, clever, learned, and distinguished."

A pause, and some self-satisfaction entered his voice. "Maybe I'm not a little one . . . a bit bigger," he admitted. "Otherwise they wouldn't be interested . . . would not shout in a mighty voice all over Russia. Looks like I stuck in their throat." He became the people's champion. "When everybody was silent as the grave, I, the little one, weak one, spoke up," he went on. "My voice is small but there are people who hear me and want me to speak. . . . I say all I know, all I feel. . . . I say it simply. People with good souls, with pure designs, do not need many words."

He returned to the beating in the Iaroslavl Monastery. "They pounced on me from all sides," he said. "Slanders. . . . Dirty tricks. . . . Bishop Hermogen took it all for granted, that it was true, he didn't understand anything and started shouting. . . . I don't bear him malice. Who gives himself up to malice, walks out on God. . . . And they have given themselves up to malice. . . . With covered eyes, with closed ears they walk about and shout and stigmatize Grigory." He said that a man under the power of lies was worn out and floundered like an animal. "God deprived Bishop Hermogen and Iliodor of wits," he said. "Where has the bright wisdom gone? . . . The sun has come down. . . . It's not seen anymore. . . . Only the darkness, black darkness. They run against each other, break their foreheads. . . . Make a hubbub. Malice has gained the upper hand over the heart."

The delivery became more staccato, more disjointed and consciously poetic; the guru was hitting form. "You have to weep. Hot tears, that's what's needed," he said, flinging in an obscure aside: "And then, monks. . . . Associates. . . . Going into intrigue worse than simple people . . . into politics . . . into the whirlwind of passion where the right does not know what the left is doing. Love is needed . . . and tears. And there's no love, no tears. Where's the selflessness? There's strength in selflessness. . . . The bad, it's like the wind. . . . It makes noise, it hoots. . . . Everyone listens to it." But not the good, not Grigory—"those who are higher, who have pure soul, they won't listen and they step off the malice."

The journalist, dashing down shorthand notes, was barely able to keep up with the jerky flow of ideas—"My thoughts," Rasputin said, "they are like birds in the sky, they fly and often there's nothing I can do with them." He changed tack again, this time into an admission. "I'm sinful," he said. "Great sin more than once tortured me and it was stronger than I. Hermogen knew everything. For him, my soul was open. . . . I went to him with the good and the bad and he spoke of his love for me. There was great solace in his words and in bitter moments I often found joy . . . when I talked to him of all my sins and he listened to me kindly and ordered me to go to Jerusalem."

He followed this lie—there is no evidence that the bishop suggested the pilgrimage—with a confession. It was all that the readers of *Novoye Vremya* dared hope for. "But sin entangled me," he said. "I made a mistake. . . . It was three years ago. . . . Bishop Hermogen knew everything. . . . I was deluded! My women admirers were in the village. . . . They thought they were superior to everyone. Gold, diamonds, and money obscured their brains. They walked about like peahens. . . . I thought I had to humble them . . . to humiliate . . . when a person is humiliated, he understands much. I wanted them to experience all this." After the innuendo came the revelation: "I made them go to a bathhouse with me. . . . There were twelve women. . . . They washed me and they have gone through all the humiliations."

Twelve women, a bathhouse, every form of humiliation—it was as far as he could go. The retraction followed instantly. "Wicked people said that I hurt them, that an animal spoke up in me," he said. "They lie, they impudently lie. They tell bad, dirty things. . . . There wasn't anything like this. . . . I was deluded, I was thinking wrongly. . . . I paid dearly, very dearly for my mistake. They all pounced, especially the local priests. . . . There was no sin. Sin is darkness. . . . All my life I escaped the darkness. I was looking for the sun . . . each ray made my soul quiver."

He spoke of sin and forgiveness, his favorite line, always reliable: "Sinful man, nearer to God," he said. "He always thinks about God, he prays . . . and will be pardoned. His soul is in secret prayer, he is in eternal contrition. The sinner will be the first to present himself in front of God." Suddenly, he was silent.

The journalist had time to look up and see Rasputin smoothing out his beard with jerky movements of his long and bony hand. The eyes were small and colorless; they looked sideways and did not like to be looked into. There was "something nervous in all of him."

"I gave all my soul to Iliodor," Rasputin continued. "But they have forgotten that for me there is nothing superior to the power of God and that of the tsar." The twin pillars of Orthodoxy, God and tsar; it would go down well at Tsarskoye Selo. "All this distresses me. My soul is anxious. Wicked people say that I did harm to the bishop and Iliodor by winning over big men. I know my place. Am I, the little one, to push myself forward? If I'm called, it's only to talk. . . . Big men live as in a dungeon. Lies all around. . . . Everyone with wants, looking for profit, and I don't want anything, I don't need anybody."

He denied that he had ever wanted to be a priest. He'd never even dreamed of it; he hadn't the literacy and the power of concentration that a priest needed. He'd never preached, he claimed, or spoken in public. He almost didn't know his ABCs; perhaps it was for the better, because there was happiness in simplicity. What he liked best was being in Siberia and healing and doing good. "They all love me in my village," he said. "They open their sick souls. I comfort them. Words mean a lot for a sick soul. A person will come to me with black thoughts, giving everything up as hopeless, and then he leaves and, behold, he's in better spirits. . . . A smile on his face. . . . Like the sun on a black day."

A maid interrupted—"Grigory Efimovich, there's someone . . ." Rasputin said he was busy. Whoever it was should call back in the evening. "They say I live wrongly," he went on, whining now. "Libertine. But I live modestly. I've got a household. Two good maids. Kind wife. We get on well. In God's manner. . . . I don't know any women. They've covered me with filth from all sides. But filth won't stick to what is clean."

The journalist was unimpressed by this declaration of innocence. He asked Rasputin whether he had many women admirers. "Women admirers . . . many, very many." The journalist noted that his interviewee was smiling maliciously behind his beard. "Didn't count them. Women, they're poor. They're oppressed. All their life they're in chains. They need consolation. They remember it for a long time. All sorts of them visit me. Many a tear I've seen. Tried to ease their grief." There were men, too, who visited—about twenty of them. "All these people are for me. They'll all stick up for me. They won't let anyone hurt me."

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The next question was ideal for the starets—what impression was Petersburg making on him? He aimed his reply directly at the palace. He knew well that

Nicholas and Alexandra despised the city; he knew, too, their belief in autocracy and in the love that peasant Russia had for them.

"Clerks all around," he said of the city. "Toadying. One eats another. They've pushed truth into the corner here . . . it's afraid to peep out. But Russia needs truth. It must rule. It's strong. Everybody is in a hurry here. . . . Urgent matters. . . . Live in intoxication, that's what they do. . . . They say good words and don't have any notion of what's good. . . . Hypocrites. . . . It's so painful. . . . I wish that God could make it so that truth wins."

He fashioned himself as the little man, the loyal peasant-thinker. "And sometimes I hear untruth and I feel like raising my voice all over the great Russia," he said. "Then I look at myself. . . . Ridiculous, all this. . . . Little one, that's what I am. What can I do? Can I make anyone listen to reason? All sorts of big people here, they lie. . . . They invent things and are listened to. . . . People are strangled in this big city. They think about everything. But they forget about God."

He was pleased with himself. He leaned forward on the arm of his chair, a light shining in his small eyes. He smoothed out his dark-colored blouse. "They've told me here about the ecstasy." Suddenly he laughed out loud. He waved his bony hand. "What sort of ecstasy is that? They all lie. . . . They cheat. And when someone spoke up sincerely, from his heart, they started to cry: ecstasy." He was talking of religious ecstasy, a subject close to khlysts and the sects, and he was careful to circumscribe it. He was guarded, too, when the journalist asked him about visions.

"No, I haven't had them," he said, carefully going on to confirm his spirituality. "But when I'm alone, in the quiet, I feel kind of ethereal. . . . I can hear my heart beat. . . . Begin to feel easy. I start to think about the deeds of the saints. I want selflessness so much." He emphasized the word *selflessness,* and slipped in a claim of personal modesty. "But I'm small. . . . Not fit. Just dreams, that's all. . . . And dreams, they are like flowers. . . . I've been trying my strength. . . . Tortured myself severely more than once. I want so much to be nearer to God. All dreams. And once a man is deprived of God, what'll be left?"

He took a swipe at séances. There is no evidence that Rasputin ever summoned up spirits, or felt the need to; he won his admirers through force of personality, not by tricks. He had fallen out with the Montenegrins by now, and judged it safe to mock table rappers. "You fly in your dreams to God and you feel so warm at heart," he said. "Everyone is looking for it. And the sinful think that it's enough to tap with one's fingers on the table so that a vision appears. . . . Foolishness, all foolishness." He finished his appraisal of the soul with a burst of phrases. "Devotees, they are different. . . . They have visions. . . . The sick . . . must be cured . . . must pray. . . . When I was twenty, I had all these thoughts but my chest ached. . . . I went to the holy places, to Verkhoturye. . . . Prayed there hard. . . . Felt easier afterward."

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Without effort he switched to politics and the state of Russia. Again, beneath the babble, the aim was true. He slipped the knife into the Duma and its politicians, and twisted it with words he knew were sweet for Nicholas and Alexandra. "I've heard somewhere that I was the enemy of the state Duma," he mocked. "Am I, really? I've never been to the state Duma. . . . What's going on there, I don't know, don't want to know. . . . May God judge them. . . . All I think is about Russia, like a son about a mother."

He dropped in a reference to his powerful patrons, a clear warning that he was protected by the palace. The politicians, he said, "don't like me having top people among my acquaintances. But they came to me by themselves. . . . I didn't go into any sort of politics and never will. But the state Duma assaulted me, the little one. . . . They've got big deeds to do but all of a sudden—me. As if the power is in me and I'm in the way. . . . I don't hinder. And when I have to speak, I talk about truth, about ways to God, about human lies. . . . About the soul."

A mirror for the empress, he accused the politicians of ruining the empire. "They have to think in the Duma, and they rush about like women and in this chaos forget about the empire," he said. "I don't really represent anything. Shall I really go against what they want from above? No, I'm not this kind of person. . . . I've never had thoughts like these. I want everything to be good. But there's a kind of whirlwind instead. . . . Destroys our house. The whirlwind is not good. One can do something only when it's peaceful, calm."

He leaned forward. "Strength is needed." He meant the tsar, the autocracy. "Do you understand?"

The interview was over. "I'm leaving for Siberia now," he said. "Want to stay for a while in my own place." It was a bravura performance, never resting long enough to be trapped on any topic, mixing confession with defiance, a shrewd mind digging itself out of trouble. Throughout it, those brilliant little eyes were fixed on the palace.

CHAPTER 14

Miracle at Spala

The tsar issued a ukase forbidding newspapers to mention Rasputin's name; the edict broke the terms of the 1905 manifesto and failed to gag the politicians. Kokovtsov warned Nicholas of the risks he was running by seeing the starets. Maria Rasputin claimed that the audience was overheard by her playmate, Grand Duchess Marie. In her version the tsar spoke of Rasputin's "great service" to the throne; the premier replied that he knew of the heir's miraculous recoveries but said that Rasputin gave the credit to God and not himself. "Ah yes," the tsar said. "But why did God choose to act through him?"

The premier recollected only telling the tsar that the flood of stories of "orgies and disgraceful conduct" was no ordinary gossip. He said that "respectable newspapers call Rasputin a thief and swindler." When the tsar said that the press was beneath contempt, Kokovtsov reminded him as gently as he could that it molded public opinion. "The public does not run the country," the tsar retorted. "It is run for their benefit, and I am the one who decides what is best for them." Nicholas concluded by asking Kokovtsov to see "the simple peasant" who, "by a strange power," relieved the sufferings of his son.

Kokovtsov did so. The peasant strode into the premier's study and sat himself down in an armchair. "I was struck by the repulsive expression of his eyes," the premier wrote. "Deep seated and close set, they glued on me and for a long time he would not turn them away as though trying to exercise some hypnotic influence." When tea was served Rasputin dipped a handful of biscuits into his cup and ate the soggy mass before again fixing his "lynx eyes" on the premier. "I was getting tired of his attempts at hypnotism," Kokovtsov recalled, "and

told him that it was useless to stare at me so hard because his eyes had not the slightest effect on me." He thought Rasputin a "typical Siberian convict, a tramp who had cleverly taught himself to play the fool and who carried out his role according to a tried-and-tested recipe."

It was a grave underestimate. This Siberian had seen off Stolypin, a man the British ambassador considered "the most notable figure in Europe"; though the same source thought Kokovtsov "the best type of the old bureaucracy," he was easier meat and Rasputin knew it. Like his murdered predecessor the new premier demanded that the starets leave the capital for good. Rasputin told Vyrubova that he was offered a sweetener of 200,000 rubles—"a fortune beyond the dreams of avarice to a Russian peasant," she wrote admiringly, "but he declined it, saying that he was not to be bought by anybody." He agreed to return to Pokrovskoye for a while and did so a few days later. It was hardly a concession, for he regarded Siberia as his sin bin, a place to take to when a cooling-off period was needed.

He made sure it was the premier who would suffer by letting Vyrubova know that he did not enjoy the grace of God. Alexandra, so friendly when they had met in the Crimea a few months before, made a point of ignoring Kokovtsov the next time she saw him; she deliberately talked to minor officials and "passed Kokovtsov with averted face, thrusting out a hand for him to salute." The premier was well aware of the implication. "From that time on," he wrote, "though the tsar continued to show me his favor for another two years, my dismissal was assured."

On February 26, 1912, with the starets already on his way back to Siberia, Rodzianko obtained an audience with the tsar. He thought his mission so important that he first prayed for strength in the Kazan cathedral. He was hot with shame that a royalist like himself should have to speak of such matters to his sovereign. "I beseech you, Sire," he said, "as Your Majesty's most loyal subject, will it be your pleasure to hear me to the end? If not, but say one word and I will be silent." Nicholas would not meet his eye but murmured, "Speak." He reminded the tsar that Hermogen's career had been ruined for telling the truth about Rasputin, whom he was sure was a khlyst. "How can the Orthodox Church stand by in silence when Orthodoxy is being destroyed and defiled by this rogue?" he asked. Nicholas replied that he had nothing against Hermogen. "I think he is an honest and sincere archpastor . . . and a staunch man serving the dignity of the Church," he said. "He will soon be taken back. But I had to punish him because he openly refused to obey my command." Rodzianko thought it typical of the tsar's weak character that he should have no personal argument with the exiled bishop. Nicholas asked him if he had read Stolypin's report on the starets; he had not. The tsar suggested he do so and then prepare a further report.

The Stolypin material was with a synod official, Mikhail Damansky, who handed it over with great reluctance. The next day he called on Rodzianko to demand it back, saying that he had been sent by a "very exalted person." Rodzianko asked if that was Sabler, the synod procurator. Damansky replied that the person was incomparably more important; it was, he snapped, the empress herself. If that was so, Rodzianko said, then she should be reminded that she was as much her husband's subject as Damansky was. Rodzianko had been told to prepare a report; he would do so. He refused to hand back the material—provoking a hysterical outburst by Alexandra, who thought he should be hanged for his impudence—and included it with further details of Rasputin's Siberian youth in a second report. The tsar did not so much as glance at it. Rodzianko asked for further audiences. They were refused on the ground that Rasputin was a personal matter for the family, not politicians.

A debate on the budget for the synod was held in the Duma on March 9. Alexander Guchkov took advantage of it to thunder an accusation: "I feel like saying, like crying out that the Church is in danger and the State is in danger too. You all know what serious drama Russia is experiencing. In the center of this drama—a mysterious tragicomic figure, a ghost or survivor through the darkness of centuries, a strange figure in the light of the twentieth century," he said. He did not mention a name; if he had the new ukase would have prevented his speech from being reported. In any event such detail was superfluous to the person who obsessed all St. Petersburg. "In what ways has this man reached such heights that the senior holders of Church and State power bow to his influence? You must ask—who is playing the master at the top? Who is wielding the ax that fells some policies and people, and promotes others?" The man was not alone, Guchkov warned; he was surrounded by "unnoticed individuals greedy for distinction . . . obscure tradespeople, shipwrecked pressmen, contractors."

It was the first attack on Rasputin by a public figure in a public place. A single deputy criticized it, an old reactionary who shouted: "These are old wives' tales!" Inevitably, the tsar took the taunt that the ax of power was carried by another as a personal insult; he ordered the interior minister to have secret police agents shadow Guchkov as a potential enemy of the state. "Conduct of the Duma is profoundly outrageous," he wrote, "and especially disgusting is the speech of Guchkov. . . . I will be very glad if my displeasure reaches these gentlemen. It's not always that one should bow and smile to them." He told Kokovtsov, "I simply suffocate in this atmosphere of gossip, inventions, and malice."

Guchkov did not let the matter rest. The moderate Octobrist party he led commissioned Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich to research the allegations that Rasputin was a khlyst. Bonch-Bruevich, who had already observed Rasputin in a

St. Petersburg salon in 1905, was an expert on sects who had studied Dukhobors, the "Siberian Quakers," in emigration in Canada; he would be a Bolshevik commander during Red October and nationalize Russia's banks. His report concluded that Rasputin was an Orthodox believer, although he showed sectarian habits of speech and thought; Guchkov claimed that Bonch-Bruevich wrote him a private letter in which he described Rasputin as a scoundrel and a practitioner of his own brand of sectarianism but not strictly speaking a khlyst.

Metropolitan Evlogi, another Duma member at the time, read the dossier that Damansky had reluctantly handed to Rodzianko. It did not prove Rasputin to be a member of the sect—in particular, a case against him in 1902 had been dropped by the prosecutor for lack of evidence—but Evlogi found that parts of the dossier appeared to be missing. After the murder the Commission of Inquiry made a final attempt to decide the issue. There was firm evidence that Rasputin took baths with women, and Professor Gromoglassov, who held the chair of religious sects at the Moscow theological academy, was asked to comment on it. He found that in parts of Siberia it was "common practice for men and women to take baths together" and that there was no definitive proof of khlyst activity.

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Villagers found Rasputin uncharacteristically meek on his arrival in Pokrovskoye; no fashionable women came with him, and no bathtime frolics were recorded. A Siberian Duma member, Sukhanov, found that he seemed chastened by the scandal and that the villagers mocked him. He was soon protesting his innocence and warning of Duma "revolutionaries" in cables to the palace. "Dearest father and mother," he wired. "See how the devil gains in strength the evil one. The Duma serves him it is the fault of revolutionaries and Jews. And what is it they want? To get rid of the Lord's anointed as soon as they can. And Guchkov is their ringleader he speaks slander and mindless rebellion. Father the Duma is yours do as you want with it." Rasputin was later to show considerable sympathy to the Jews; for now he was severely rattled, and he chose his words to appeal to the anti-Semite and the reactionary in the tsar. In another cable, he urged: "The rebel Iliodor must be broken. Or this cur will eat us all up. . . . He will stop at nothing. File his teeth. Be harsh with him. Lock him up good. Yes. Grigory."

Alexandra recalled the starets to St. Petersburg a few days after Guchkov's speech. The two met at Vyrubova's cottage; Rasputin also had talks there with Witte, who was hoping to use him to make a political comeback. The imperial family left for a holiday in the Crimea on March 16. Rasputin smuggled himself aboard their train, probably with Alexandra's help, but the tsar had him put off before it reached Moscow. He made his own way to Yalta, arriving there on

March 20, 1912. The local paper, *The Russian Riviera,* carried a news item. "Yesterday, at two in the afternoon, Grigory Rasputin arrived in Yalta by automobile from Sevastopol," it ran. "He is staying at the Hotel de Russie." The newspaper was correct—he was indeed staying at the resort's finest hotel—but it was fined for breaking the ukase in mentioning his name.

The interior minister, Makarov, arrived in Yalta the same day and was astonished to find that the starets was no longer in Siberia. Police removed Rasputin's name from the hotel register, but a local news photographer had taken his picture outside the hotel, and this was printed as a postcard, which fashionable visitors to the resort sent to their friends. The city mayor, Ivan Dumbadze, a bustling, excitable Georgian, was persuaded by right-wing friends that Rasputin's presence was a provocation. They urged him to "drown the dirty adventurer" in the Black Sea. Dumbadze sent a cable to the Okhrana suggesting that he have him thrown overboard from the tourist steamer that ran between Sevastopol and Yalta. He received no reply. Stefan Beletsky, director of the police department, said later that Dumbadze had another plan, to lure Rasputin to a clifftop near the town, rob him, and throw him into the sea "as if he were the victim of brigands."

Rasputin returned unscathed to Pokrovskoye after Easter. He was now escorted by a *konspirativnykh filverov,* a team of undercover agents. The premier had asked Beletsky to maintain surveillance on him at all times, partly for protection and partly to note his activities. Beletsky stationed a plainclothesman in the village; since Rasputin was friendly with the postmaster, the agent had to travel to the next telegraph office to send his reports. Rasputin was not inhibited by his shadows; he enjoyed his time with his family, singing psalms around the samovar in the evening and taking them for a steamer trip down the Tura River to Tobolsk, where they prayed before the relics of St. Ivan.

Far to the east in Siberia, miners in the Lena goldfields went on strike. As they marched in an orderly demonstration to the manager's office, a drink-sodden police officer told his men to fire on them. Two hundred were massacred. A young deputy, the radical lawyer Alexander Kerensky, made a name for himself by heading a Duma inquiry into the killings; a wave of strikes followed this "second Bloody Sunday."

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In August the Romanovs gathered outside Moscow to celebrate the centenary of the battle of Borodino during Napoleon's disastrous invasion of Russia. There was a reminder of the distant Siberian. The tsar cut Rodzianko when he passed him on the battlefield. "He looked askance at me," the politician complained, "and did not acknowledge my salute. I understood that the cause of his dissatisfaction with me was my report on Rasputin." Kokovtsov was alarmed that the tsar's belief in divine right was degenerating into a mysticism

that was impervious to advice from working politicians. He had suggested that some of the many restrictions on Jews—barred from some schools, universities, and professions, and from living in many Russian regions—should be lifted as part of the celebrations. Nicholas agreed that the arguments were convincing. "An inner voice keeps insisting more and more that I do not accept responsibility for it," he said, however. "So far my conscience has not deceived me. . . . I know that you, too, know that the tsar's heart is in God's hands. Let it be so." Guchkov's speech had already confirmed Nicholas's conviction that the Duma, despite its large royalist majority, was implacably hostile to the dynasty.

The premier feared that the tsar's "intimate circle"—by which he meant Alexandra, Rasputin, Vyrubova—had only a dwindling interest in a government as such. "In its place," he wrote, "emerged with increasing force and clarity the purely personal nature of the emperor's rule, while the government increasingly came to be considered as a wall cutting off the ruler from his people." The comment was the more damning for the dapper, loyal, and hard-working man who made it.

The imperial trains—there were two, one a decoy to confuse terrorists—rumbled west after Borodino. Alexis, now eight, his hair auburn, his features delicate and handsome, was so well that there was a false hope of recovery. The train stopped at Smolensk for a reception with local worthies; the boy got hold of a glass of champagne and chattered away to the ladies before complaining that he could "hear my tummy rumbling." The girls were perfecting their German and French to add to their English and Russian.

They stayed first at Bielovezh, a hunting lodge set in forests rich in game in eastern Poland. The girls rode along woodland paths with their father. Alexis was not allowed to ride for fear he would fall. But he slipped while jumping into a boat to go rowing on a lake and hit his left thigh. The bruise hurt for several days, but he appeared to recover. The family moved on to Spala, a rustic hunting lodge set in magnificent forests cut by streams and sandy paths. Guests rose at seven each morning to the notes of a hunting horn and picnicked in glades while a military band played hunting airs. In the afternoon the men hunted—stags, all of ten points or more, elk, bison—and shot snipe and partridge. At dusk the day's bag was laid out on the lawns in front of the lodge for the guests to examine the ranks of antlers by the light of flaming torches. The forests were dark, the paths narrow and yellow under the tangled trees; the windows in the wooden lodge were so small that lamps were left burning through the day. Pierre Gilliard had begun tutoring the heir in French. He was struck by the pallor of his charge, who was carried everywhere by the sailor Nagorny.

At the beginning of October 1912, Alexandra took her son for a carriage drive to get him some fresh air. She cushioned him between herself and Vyrubova. The paths were rough where roots cut through and rains had

scooped out the sand. "Before we had gone very far we saw that indeed he was very ill," Vyrubova recalled. "He cried out with pain in his back and stomach, and the empress, terribly frightened, gave the order to return." He had begun to hemorrhage. The return drive was "an experience in horror." Each jolt brought the boy "the most excruciating torture," and he was almost unconscious with pain when they reached home. Eugene Botkin, the stout court physician, found telltale swelling in the upper thigh and groin. As the blood continued to flow unstemmed, the leg drew up to the chest until there was no longer space to fill and the swelling became as tight as a drum.

For the next eleven days, "dreadful sounds" echoed down the dark corridors outside the heir's room. A stream of doctors—the surgeons Fedorov and Rauchfuss, the hemophilia specialist Vladimir Derevenko, the pediatrician Ostrogorsky—worked without success to stem the bleeding. No painkillers were given to the child; his parents did not wish him to become addicted to morphia. The screams were so penetrating that some of the household staff put cotton wool in their ears. Though normal life seemed impossible, it continued; the secret of the imperial blood was maintained. "One shooting party succeeded another," Gilliard wrote, "and the guests were more numerous than ever." The tsar hunted with Polish nobles each day.

One evening, the two youngest grand duchesses performed two scenes from Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* for the visiting hunters in the dining room. Gilliard watched Alexandra chatting gaily to her guests before suddenly running upstairs, holding the long train of her dress in her hands, her face "distracted and terror-stricken." She returned a few minutes later, her smiling mask intact apart from a single despairing glance she threw at the tsar. The scene brought home to Gilliard "the tragedy of a double life" in which the condition of the heir to the great empire was concealed from his future subjects, for fear it would encourage the millions who wished the dynasty ill, and depress and confuse the loyal.

All night Alexandra sat beside the bed where her son lay on his side, his left leg drawn up so sharply toward his chin that he could not straighten it for almost a year after. His face was "absolutely bloodless," Vyrubova said, "drawn and seamed with suffering while his almost expressionless eyes rolled back in his head." Alexandra "never undressed, never went to bed, rarely even lay down for an hour's rest." She dozed fitfully on a sofa next to the bed, woken by his cries to soothe his forehead, her golden hair becoming streaked with gray. Nicholas could scarcely stand the strain; Vyrubova noticed that once, seeing his son's agony and hearing the screams, "the poor father's courage completely gave way" and he rushed to his study in tears.

The parents, and the doctors, expected the boy to die at any time. On October 6, Dr. Fedorov examined him and warned that the stomach hemorrhage was likely to bring on a fatal abscess. "The days between the 6th and the 10th

were the worst," Nicholas wrote to the dowager empress. "The poor darling suffered intensely, the pains came in spasms and recurred every quarter of an hour." Alexis stirred in his delirium, and when he sat up the movement brought a rushing recurrence of pain and he cried to God to have mercy upon him. He also thought he would die; "when I am dead build me a little monument of stones in the wood," he begged his mother, asking for his grave to be in the light under a blue sky.

There was no church at Spala; a big green tent was raised in the gardens and outfitted as a chapel. Cossack escorts, servants, and huntsmen begged the court priest Vassilyev to hold a Te Deum, and Polish peasants joined them, weeping through the service. Bulletins were sent to St. Petersburg confirming that the tsarevich was gravely ill. Prayers were said for him throughout Russia, and worshipers in the Kazan Cathedral in the capital maintained a vigil by day and night. The cause of the illness was not mentioned; people muttered that Alexis had been wounded by a revolutionary's bomb, that he was mentally abnormal, an epileptic.

Alexandra was twice convinced that the end was imminent. At lunchtime on October 10 she sent a note to the tsar from the sickbed to say that the suffering had become so acute that she was sure the boy was dying. Though he pulled through that crisis, his condition the next afternoon was so alarming that Vassilyev administered the last rites as Nicholas and Alexandra prayed at the bedside. The medical bulletin dispatched to St. Petersburg for October 11 needed little amendment to announce the death of the heir. A single hope remained. "The empress declared that she could believe that God had abandoned them," Vyrubova recalled, "and she asked me to telegraph Rasputin in his home in Siberia, to pray for the child."

That the empress should wait so long before calling on Rasputin—allowing one apparently fatal climax to come and go—is significant. It suggests, strongly, that Alexis's illness was not the basis of her obsession with Rasputin; it is another reminder that her need for a holy man, for a personal guru, for intercession with God, went back to Dr. Philippe and the days before the birth of her son. Rasputin had already survived public scandal, allegations of rape and lewdness, the criticism of two prime ministers, the contempt of the Duma, the hatred of churchmen, and a vitriolic press campaign—all this before he was called on as a last resort to save the heir. It was not Spala that made him inviolable; to the empress, if not to the husband she so dominated, he was already that. Her fatal attraction stemmed from the soul, from her hysteria, mysticism, and isolation; it was cemented by Rasputin's skill and her own obstinacy and autocratic pride. Hemophilia merely—post facto—confirmed it.

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On the afternoon of October 11, Rasputin was walking on the banks of the Tura River when he clutched his heart and said, "Oh, no!" Maria was alarmed for him, but he reassured her that there was no need for worry on his account. "It is the tsarevich," he said. "He has been stricken." A telegram from Alexandra arrived in the village that evening. He prayed in front of an icon, his face gray and sweating with effort, then went to the village telegraph office. He sent two cables to Spala. In the first he said that the illness was not serious but that the doctors should not be allowed to tire the boy. The second told her to have no fear. "God has seen your tears and heard your prayers," he wired. "Do not grieve. The little one will not die."

When Alexandra received them the tsar was discussing funeral arrangements with members of his suite. She relaxed immediately. "I am not anxious now," she told Vyrubova. The next day the hemorrhaging stopped. "The pain subsided," Vyrubova wrote, "the boy lay utterly wasted and spent, but it was obvious now that he was going to live." Recovery was slow and involved the use of mud baths and a steel triangle to strengthen wasted muscles and straighten the crippled leg; his mother sat reading with him for days, his body slowly filling out and regaining color as Nicholas played tennis and went rowing with Vyrubova. But within a month Alexis was able to return to Tsarskoye Selo. The roads to the railhead were smoothed and sanded by hand, and the imperial train steamed slowly without once using its brakes on a track whose points had been specially oiled to prevent any jars or bumps. The tsarevich had survived.

The drama was quickly forgotten by the public; photographs of the heir were carefully composed to conceal the damaged leg. Her child's survival merely deepened Alexandra's existing conviction that Rasputin was a miracle worker, but Nicholas had had doubts. The main effect of the incident at Spala was to drive out his reservations.

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The honor in which the rulers held Rasputin was extended to his family when he returned to St. Petersburg in the fall to put his daughters into school at the smart lycée Steblin-Lamenska. The girls were sent for by the headmistress during morning school. They were told that they were to be presented to the empress and her daughters at Vyrubova's cottage. Maria put on a frock with a sailor collar for the railroad ride to Tsarskoye Selo. The empress was dressed in black; she had a fixed look on her face, proud, gentle, and "profoundly sad." A "vague fear or uneasiness" clung to her; it made Maria tongue-tied. The girl felt she had to say something. "Is it true, little mother," she faltered, "that you have hundreds of servants?" She blushed deeply when she realized that it was a stupid question, but the empress answered sweetly: "Yes, my child, I have lots of servants, but I could do without them if necessary." She patted her cheek.

Maria got on well with the grand duchesses, sitting primly on a sofa with them like "great ladies at a reception." She felt that, as their parents with her father, they were intrigued by meeting an ordinary person. They were prisoners in the palace, bound by etiquette; the life of an ordinary girl "who went to school with other children, and once or twice a week to the movies, sometimes the circus, seemed to them the rarest and most enviable of wonders." They talked of "their little preferences for this or that handsome officer, with whom they danced, played tennis, walked, or rode. These innocent romances were a source of amusement to Their Majesties, who enjoyed teasing the girls about any dashing young officer who seemed to attract them. The empress discouraged association with cousins and near relatives, many of whom were unwholesomely precocious."

The demonstration of royal friendship was soon repeated when Rasputin and Maria were invited to dine at the Alexander Palace. They were asked to use a side entrance in a vain attempt to cover up the relationship. "He went upstairs by a small staircase," Vyrubova commented. "He was received in the private apartments and never in the public drawing room. . . . More than once I pointed out to the empress the futility of the course pursued. 'You know that before he even reaches the palace, much less your boudoir, he has been observed . . . by the police at least forty times?' " Alexandra agreed with her; she realized that there could be no palace secrets but continued to try to shield her visitor.

It was Maria's first visit to the palace. She watched her father embrace the tsar and empress; Alexandra caught her in midcurtsy, hugged her, and, she recounted, "gave me a most motherly kiss." The thirteen-year-old was introduced to the tsarevich, and the young grand duchesses made her feel at home at once. They ate from a table crammed with red and black caviar, meatballs, prawns and herring, with bottles of vodka and wine. At the end of the informal supper they had an ice cream so delicious that Maria asked for the recipe. She wrote it down under the heading "Ice Cream Romanov." It suited her father's sweet tooth; it was made of two and a half pounds of sugar, ten egg yolks, a quart of light cream, one large vanilla bean, and a half pint of whipping cream. She played with Grand Duchess Marie, who was nearest her age; "we became fast friends." She recalled her father discussing Iliodor with the tsar, warning him that it was not in Iliodor's nature "to remain within the walls of an ancient monastery while the world burns outside."

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He was right. Iliodor was not silent in his cell at the Florishchev Monastery. In September the government had forcibly closed his own monastery in Tsaritsyn. It sent him off into a new fit. He wrote a violent letter to Sabler: "You have

bowed down before the licentious khlyst Grischa Rasputin as if he were the devil. You are a traitor and apostate. Your filthy hands are unfit to hold the most holy tiller of God's church, the bride of Christ. They should be shining the devil's boots in hell. I say this from a sense of priestly duty." He followed it by detailing Rasputin's depravity in a letter to Vyrubova.

Iliodor signed a letter to the synod on November 20 in his own blood. "Either indict Rasputin for his horrible crimes or unfrock me," he challenged. Sabler and the synod duly expelled the monk from holy orders in mid-December. He was ordered to be held under house arrest in his native village, Bolshaya Stanitsa, in the Cossack territory of the Don. On his way he wrote in the space reserved in a hotel register for the guest's religion, "My own. Iliodorian." He resumed his secular name, Sergei Trufanov.

Back wintering in Pokrovskoye, Rasputin fretted that his enemy was no longer safely tucked away in a monastery. He sent a rambling telegram to Maj. Gen. V. N. Voyeikov, the palace commandant: "Now there are millions of wasps so believe that in matters of the soul we must all be trusted friends, a small group perhaps but all of one mind while they are many but scattered and their rage shall have no power." He was more specific with the sovereigns. "Dearest papa and mama," he cabled. "Iliodor is joined with demons. He is a rebel. They used to flog monks like him. Yes, the tsars flogged them. Now bring him to heel." In another, he said, "The police must keep an eye on this accursed one." He had good reason for that. Iliodor was obsessed with castrating him.

CHAPTER 15

Before the Storm

Rasputin was back in the capital for the tercentenary celebrations of the Romanov dynasty in March 1913. Each Easter, Nicholas gave Alexandra an exquisite Fabergé egg of gold, silver, and jewels. For this special year the egg had miniatures of the Romanov rulers and their wives, and a blue steel globe showing the expansion of their territory. The first Romanov tsar, Michael, grandnephew of Ivan the Terrible, had ruled a narrow and barren compression between Europe and Asia; the Poles had recently sacked Moscow, and Russian adventurers barely had crept east of the Urals. Nicholas Romanov now ruled an empire that stretched from Poland to the Bering Strait, reaching along the Turkish, Persian, Afghan, Mongolian, and Chinese borders, until it ran into the foggy waters of the Sea of Japan. More than a hundred nationalities were his subjects.

It rained in torrents in St. Petersburg throughout the festivities. Society hoped that the imperial family would venture out of its seclusion, but no balls were held at the Winter Palace. The nobility and the diplomatic corps were asked to *baise mains,* or court receptions; Nicholas and his mother attended without the empress. Politicians hoped in vain that the tsar would make some concession to democracy in his speech to the Duma. An amnesty was announced, but it covered only common criminals. Political exiles, Prince Paul Vassily wrote, "men of culture and the highest civic and private virtue, were left to their sad fate . . . and despairing memories." People muttered of Rasputin. A special one-ruble coin was struck. It showed Nicholas in the foreground with the bearded Michael Romanov behind; he was, they said, a look-alike for the starets.

A solemn Te Deum was held at the Kazan Cathedral on March 6. The crowds lining the streets were "strangely silent" as the sovereigns passed them; they cheered only when the young grand duchesses smiled at them from under their flower-trimmed hats. The cathedral was full. Rodzianko had reserved seats for the Duma leaders close to the front; since Michael had been elected tsar by the people, the burly man insisted, it was right that the people's elected representatives should be treated with dignity at the service. He was waiting in the cathedral porch for the arrival of the imperial family when a sergeant at arms rushed out to tell him that an "unknown man in peasant dress and wearing a pectoral cross" had barged into his seat and was refusing to budge. Rodzianko guessed his identity.

"Sure enough," he wrote, "it was Rasputin . . . in a magnificent Russian tunic of crimson silk, patent leather top boots, black cloth trousers, and a peasant's overcoat." The pectoral cross was hung on a fine gold chain; it was a gift from the empress. "What are you doing here?" Rodzianko bellowed. "What has it got to do with thee?" Rasputin asked, using the familiar pronoun. Rodzianko was not amused. "If you 'thou' me," he roared, "I'll drag you out of the cathedral by the beard. Don't you know I'm president of the Duma?" Rasputin's stare had "an unknown power of tremendous force." Rodzianko did not succumb to it, feeling an "almost animal force" in himself as he worked himself into a frenzy. "Clear out at once, you vile heretic," he said. Rasputin knelt and prayed. Rodzianko kicked him in the ribs and was about to seize him by the hair when Rasputin turned to him and said: "Lord, forgive him such sin!" He got up and left by the western door of the cathedral, where a Court Cossack helped him on with his coat and put him in an automobile that sped him away.

The service Rasputin missed was conducted with great aplomb by Patriarch Antiochus, a great bearded figure in a jewel-studded miter, and the choral singing was superb; but the empress was clearly nervous and the tsar's stern gravity gave no sense of rejoicing. In the evening they went to a gala performance of Glinka's *A Life for the Tsar* at the Mariinsky Theater. Meriel Buchanan, in the British ambassador's box, was so close that she could see the fan of white eagles' feathers the empress held begin to tremble compulsively. The English girl noticed that a "dull, unbecoming flush was stealing over her pallor," while her labored breathing made the diamonds on her bodice glitter with "a thousand uneasy sparks of light." She gave way to her distress, whispered a few words to the tsar, and hid herself at the back of the box. She was seen no more that evening.

A wave of resentment ran through the theater. Women looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders, while the men muttered under their breath. It was always the same story, Meriel Buchanan thought. "The empress hated St. Petersburg, disliked its society, its people, anything to do with it," she wrote. "She refused to take her proper place by the emperor's side, would not put her

own personal feeling in the background and make herself pleasant." Her father, the ambassador, told her that Alexandra hid herself through real torment or affliction, and not by whim or fancy. That was true; on her rare public appearances Alexandra showed all the symptoms of panic attack: panting, faintness, and distress. But the "disagreeable impression remained in people's minds," Buchanan observed, and no amount of argument could make it disappear.

The empress repeated the performance at a big ball given for the family in the Assembly Hall of the Nobility. As tradition demanded she opened it by dancing a Chopin polonaise with her husband, her face grave and unsmiling. She felt so ill that she had difficulty staying on her feet. It was the social debut of her eldest daughter, Olga, and the beautiful grand duchess swept through every dance in a simple pink chiffon dress. Alexandra caught Nicholas's eye; an onlooker thought he was "only just in time to lead her away and prevent her from fainting in public." Even Vyrubova thought that, for all the brilliance of spectacle, the mosaic of uniforms, gowns, jewels, and headdresses, there was "little real enthusiasm, little real loyalty. I saw a cloud over the whole celebration in St. Petersburg."

The Romanovs hoped that the provinces would show more warmth. They went by river steamer to Kostroma, the Volga town where Michael had been three centuries before when he heard he had been elected to the throne. Nicholas's sister Olga described the loyal scenes that greeted them as "bordering on wildness." Peasants waded chest-high into the river to catch a glimpse of the tsar; in the towns workmen fell to the ground to kiss his shadow as he passed. Alexandra took it as confirmation that Rasputin's Russia loved them with all its simple soul. The voyage, she said, showed that government ministers were cowards. "They are constantly frightening the emperor with threats of revolution," she told a lady-in-waiting. "Here—see it for yourself—we needed merely to show ourselves and at once their hearts are ours." Kokovtsov, the principal "coward" who went with them, was not convinced. The premier thought that the interest was no more than "shallow curiosity." If the peasants waded out into the shallows, it was because Nicholas never showed himself on deck, keeping out of the biting wind—and rifle range—below. He feared the tsar did not realize how much the country had changed since a Romanov could rule it by whim.

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The financial boom continued—the 1913 harvest was not to be equaled for more than fifty years—but the country was out of sorts, at once churlish and light-headed. A vandal slashed Ilya Repin's great painting of Ivan the Terrible. It was no isolated act, a journalist wrote, but a sign "of times with no values, no education, and a total absence of moral sense." Million-ruble fortunes, the

novelist Alexis Tolstoy wrote, "appeared as if out of thin air. People doped themselves with music . . . with half-naked women . . . with champagne. Gambling clubs, houses of assignation, theaters, movie-houses, amusement parks cropped up like mushrooms." There was an epidemic of suicides in the capital. Twenty-two were mentioned in the press in the first ten days of April, ten of them on April 10 alone. Only two were aged more than twenty-five, and twenty were girls.

Romanovs joined in the philandering. The tsar's cousin Grand Duke Andrei was living with Nicholas's former mistress, the ballet dancer Mathilde Kschessinskaya; his brother Michael had married a twice-divorced commoner the year before and was living in Bavarian exile as a result; his sister Olga was divorcing. In May the crowned heads of Europe met in Berlin for the marriage of Kaiser Wilhelm's daughter Victoria Louise to the duke of Brunswick. At the state banquet in the Berlin palace, the German kaiser, the tsar, and England's George V wore one another's uniforms—the kaiser the dress uniform of the British Royal Dragoons with the Russian Order of St. Andrew at his breast, Nicholas in Prussian Dragoon uniform and displaying the Hohenzollern—and escorted one another's wives. It was the last meeting of the three royal clans before a war that would destroy two of them.

There was a glittering finality, too, to the last full summer of peace in St. Petersburg. At the Hotel de l'Europe the black barman acknowledged orders for newfangled cocktails in a soft Kentucky accent. In the "phosphorescent, crazy, voluptuous summer nights," the rays of the midnight sun drifted into gardens and lit "long-haired students discussing with girls the transcendental values of German philosophy." Stravinsky's mold-breaking *Rite of Spring* had a sensational premiere. Futurists dressed in cardboard clothes with flowers painted on their faces chanted a poem of one word, *Smekh*, "laughter," and its derivatives. Igor Sikorsky built the world's first four-engined aircraft at the Russo-Balt plant. It cruised above the city, with sixteen people and a dog aboard in a passenger compartment with a sofa and washroom.

Simanovich was making a fortune. "My self-confidence was growing," the gambler-fixer wrote. "I saw that many persons respected my relations with court circles. My requests and wishes were coming to be satisfied in government offices. . . . A lot of people wanted to be useful and complaisant to me. For my part, I tried to be pleasant to them." Rasputin was proving to be a formidable ally. Vyrubova was constantly asked by the empress to take him messages about Alexis's health. Simanovich wrote that "his fabulous success with the royal couple was making him an idol. All the Petersburg officials were excited. One word from him was enough for them to receive high honors or other distinctions. Everyone sought his support. . . . There was no need for special knowledge or talents to make a brilliant career. Rasputin's nod was enough for that."

The holy man's protégé was in "the best relations with all the fast livers of the capital," mistresses of grand dukes, ministers, financiers. "Society ladies, courtesans, famous actresses, and cheerful aristocratic women—they were all proud of their relations with him," Simanovich reported with delight. "They were blinded by his success." With Prince Andronnikov's help, he knew all the scandals, the "liaisons of high-ranking persons, nocturnal secrets of high life." Friendship with Rasputin, and the discreet interest of Simanovich, gave those on the make "the chance to know many secrets and to fix their affairs."

Rasputin took to entertaining them at the Villa Rhode, a restaurant-cum-nightclub on a tree-shaded lane in the suburbs. It was known for its music-hall singers and Gypsies; it was popular with "big names and titles," the ladies often trying to outperform the entertainers. The villa was a wooden plank building in the Russian dacha style, set in a muddy garden behind a stout fence, with heavy double windows and a small winter conservatory projecting from the first floor. An annex had been added to one side for private parties. Adolph Rhode, the proprietor, used this for Rasputin when he telephoned to make a booking. The table was set with flowers and fish and candies, his favorite dishes, and large supplies of Madeira, a powerfully fortified Georgian wine, stronger than the Portuguese original.

Rasputin's nights at the villa had a ritual. He first telephoned women he was interested in. Simanovich said that the invitations were always accepted; women took advantage of them to "solicit for their friends, lovers, and relatives. Very many ladies thus enriched themselves as Rasputin was very complaisant in such cases." There was usually a minister or potential minister present. Rasputin began by drinking steadily, amusing his guests with random quotations from the Bible and stories of his Siberian youth. As he got drunker he described how he watched the stallions in the yards enjoying themselves with the mares. He liked to grasp a woman guest at this stage and leer: "Come, my lovely mare." If the gentlemen present muttered at this, he turned and scolded them: "Yes, yes, my dears, I know you, I can read your souls."

After eating greedily with his hands, he usually called for a Gypsy choir. The Gypsies sat on a semi-circle of chairs, the men with guitars in brocaded shirts and bright colored trousers, the women singers in colored silks with kerchiefs on their heads.

The British agent Robert Bruce Lockhart, later to see Rasputin in a notorious nightclub incident, found Gypsy music "more intoxicating, more dangerous, than opium, or women, or drink"; plaintive, melancholic, half lyrical and half sensuous, the singing "will drive a man to the moneylenders and even to crime." The guests drank the *charochka,* in which tankards of champagne were filled to the brim, emptied, and left upside down on a plate to show that no drop remained.

Rasputin filled his pockets with notes that he gave to the ladies—scrawled maxims: "Go not from the way of love, for love is your mother"; "I gladden you with the light of love"; "God send your soul humility"—and gifts for the Gypsies: candies, silk scarves, ribbons, powder compacts, and perfumes. He tempted the Gypsy singers to filch the trinkets, crying merrily, "The Gypsies are robbing me!" He loved to dance with them, lithe and light in his heavy boots; Simanovich said that "even professional dancers found it hard to compete with him." If he became completely drunk—"Siberian drunk"—Rasputin's warning apparatus failed him and he went too far. He sometimes boasted that the empress was a "second Catherine" and that she and not the spineless Nicholas was the real ruler of Russia; since his guests knew of his influence over Alexandra, it was an unsubtle way of reminding them of his own power. A young Guards officer, Obrasov, once boxed his ears for so insulting the tsar, though most thought it no more than the truth.

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Rasputin had a sobering influence, however, in the fall of 1913. After they had successfully defeated their former Turkish masters, cross-hatreds broke out among the Balkan states. They were fueled by Austria, which annexed Bosnia and was determined to prevent Serbia from gaining freedom from Austrian tariffs by breaking out to the Adriatic. Bulgaria, though exhausted by its war of independence against the Turks, attacked its onetime Christian allies in Serbia over Macedonia. Although a diplomatic peace was imposed in London, Austria brought its three corps on the Russian frontier in Galicia up to wartime strength. Tensions ran high.

Kokovtsov warned Nicholas that conflict with Germany, a disaster that could sweep away the dynasty, was approaching. The tsar was unimpressed; he replied with a shrug: "All is in the will of God." Inflammatory speeches were made in the Duma, and the press whipped up Slav nationalism. Rasputin was frightened by the talk of impending war. In an interview published in the *Petersburg Gazette* on October 13, 1913, he said that Christians should not kill each other, neither should they kill Turks. In contrast to the supposedly Christian people of the Balkans, he said, "the Turks are more fair and peaceful on religious things. You can see how it is—but it comes out different in the newspapers." If there was to be war, then "let the Turks and foreigners eat each other. They are blind, and this is their misfortune. They will gain nothing and simply advance the hour of death. While we, leading a harmonious life, will once more rise above others. . . . Fear, fear War."

Rasputin was given credit for preserving peace by one newspaper, and by Alexandra. "He always said the Balkans were not worth fighting over," she reminded her husband later. By contrast, Rodzianko was telling the tsar to "profit

from the general enthusiasm. The Straits [Constantinople] must belong to us. War will be accepted with joy and serve only to increase the prestige of the imperial power."

Iliodor equally dreamed of violence in his Cossack village. He planned to start a revolution in October. "I planned the assassination of sixty lieutenant governors and forty bishops throughout Russia," he claimed. "I chose a hundred men to execute this plan." It failed; he had no posse of men, but he had gathered a group of women to carry out the castration of Rasputin. One of them was Khioniya Guseva, a twenty-six-year-old, once a handsome prostitute in Tsaritsyn who had turned to religion and Iliodor when she became disfigured by syphilis. She tended him in the village and swore to mutilate the starets who had ruined his life. "Grischa is a true devil," she said. "I will stab him. I will kill him as the prophet Elijah killed the 450 false prophets of Baal. Rasputin is worse than them. . . . Father, bless me so that I finish him." Iliodor hung a knife on a chain around her neck. "With this knife, kill Grischa," he said.

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The new year of 1914 was greeted with church bells, vodka, flags, and bands. Alexandra remained in seclusion, but her daughters Olga and Tatiana appeared in public, Olga more beautiful still than her tip-nosed sister, with dark hair and amber eyes. Countess Shuvalov gave two balls, one all in black and white, the other the Ball of the Colored Wigs, with the guests in red and green and blue wigs and turbans. Balls at the German and Austrian embassies were well attended, tension or not. Crowds packed the Ural Stone Shop with its carved animals of jade and amethyst, and bought lacquered boxes and wooden toys at the Peasant Shop. Fabergé did good business. Couples hurtled down ice slopes on sleds. Dancing bears and vendors of hot toddy and apple and cinnamon tarts took to the frozen river.

But it still seemed a place open to catastrophe, Anna Akhmatova thought; there was something menacing about its "frightening sunsets, the frightening moon." Nicholas had not forgotten the humiliation of his forced signature on the October 1905 manifesto. He continued to chip away at the Duma and his minister. He was urged on in this by his wife, and by Prince Vladimir Meshchersky. The prince had been a childhood friend of Alexander III and had traded on this to extract a government subsidy of eighty thousand rubles a year to support himself and the good-looking young men who surrounded him, and to publish a Black Hundred newspaper called *Grazhdanin*. His catamites prospered as he introduced them to "luxury and dirty work." Meshchersky advised the tsar that the best way to reduce the influence of the prime minister was to appoint his own man as interior minister. He pointed out that it was the interior minister, not the premier, in "whose hands at present lies control over all rights and freedoms."

Nicholas appointed Nikolai Maklakov, a young provincial governor and "slapdash reactionary," to the post. Maklakov was inexperienced and unknown; he said of his new post that "for me it was like a clap of thunder from a clear sky." He had, however, the virtue of loathing the concessions of 1905. He felt that "one leg had been lifted" by them, and that ever since Russia had suffered "a drunkard's walk, tottering from wall to wall." He urged the tsar to carry out a coup d'état against the Duma; he should make a threatening speech in the assembly, to be followed by its dissolution and the abolition of its legislative powers. Nicholas found himself "pleasurably surprised" by the idea, but the rest of the cabinet was opposed to it and the plan was dropped.

This appointment irritated Rasputin, who had played no part in it. He was jealous of Meshchersky's influence. He had his own homosexual fixer-prince, Andronnikov, and he resented the interference enough for the tsar to write to Meshchersky advising him to "visit Grigory . . . he is angry with you." Meshchersky died before he could take up the invitation; Rasputin and Andronnikov ensured that they gained a hold on the new interior minister by finding a place at St. Petersburg university for his slow-witted son. They also worked on Major General Voyeikov, the palace commandant. "Much respected Vladimir Nikolayevich," Andronnikov wrote to him on January 19, 1914, with standard flattery. "Following Your energetic, tireless, and creative activity since long ago, I was indescribably happy to learn that the Emperor chose You. Now one can be quite calm that our dear Emperor will be guarded by firm, reliable, and good hands. . . . I would be very grateful if You would give me the opportunity to call upon You in Tsarskoye Selo at Your convenience so that I may personally inform You of some questions that might interest You." The two duly met, and from then on Voyeikov received "a mass of notes showing in an unfavorable light this or that statesman objectionable to Andronnikov."

The tsar's next reshuffle was entirely to Rasputin's liking. On February 12, 1914, Nicholas dismissed Kokovtsov; the premier had proved too independent, too hostile to Rasputin, and too sympathetic to the Duma and constitutionalism. Nicholas did not have the courage to sack him face-to-face; instead he sent him a letter, "for," he said, "it is easier to select the words when putting them on paper than during an unsettling conversation." The dowager empress saw Kokovtsov a few days after his fall. "My daughter-in-law doesn't love me," she told him. "She doesn't understand that my only desire is my son's happiness. But we are going in great steps toward a catastrophe, and the tsar listens to no one save flatterers." She asked him to see Nicholas and tell him all that he knew and feared. "I told her that no one would listen to me or believe me," Kokovtsov recalled. "The young empress thought me her enemy."

The tsar wrote to Kokovtsov to say that he would be replaced by "a man fresh for the work." This turned out to be Count Ivan Goremykin, a tired, ill