

LE QUEUX WILLIAM

THE MINISTER OF EVIL:
THE SECRET HISTORY OF
RASPUTIN'S BETRAYAL OF
RUSSIA

William Le Queux

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William Le Queux

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TO THE READER

After the issue to the public of the curious chronicle of "Rasputin the Rascal Monk," based upon official documents, and its translation into a number of languages, I received from the same sources in Russia a bulky manuscript upon very thin paper which contained certain confessions, revelations, and allegations made by its writer, Féodor Rajevski, who acted as the mock-saint's secretary and body-servant, and who, in consequence, was for some years in a position to know the most inner secrets of Rasputin's dealings with those scoundrelly men and women who betrayed Holy Russia into the hands of the Hun.

This manuscript, to-day before me as I write, is mostly in Italian, for Rajevski, the son of a Polish violinist, lived many years of his youth in Bologna, Florence, and old-world Siena, hence, in writing his memoirs, he used the language most familiar to him, and one perhaps more readily translated by anyone living outside Russia.

In certain passages I have been compelled to disguise names of those who, first becoming tools of the mock-saint, yet afterwards discovering him to be a charlatan, arose in their patriotism and—like Rajevski who here confesses—watched patiently, and as Revolutionists became instrumental in the amazing charlatan's downfall and his ignominious death.

These startling revelations of the secretary to the head of the "dark forces" in Russia, as they were known in the Duma, are certainly most amazing and unusually startling, forming as they do a disgraceful secret page of history that will prove of outstanding interest to those who come after us.

I confess that when first I read through the bald statements of fact, which I have here endeavoured to place in readable form for British readers, I became absorbed—therefore I venture to believe that they will be just as interesting to others who read them.

William le Queux.

Devonshire Club, London,
January, 1918.

CHAPTER I

RASPUTIN MEETS THE EMPRESS

The Spanish author Yriarte wrote those very true words:

"Y ahora digo yo; llene un volumen
De disparates un Autor famoso,
Y si no alabaren, que me emplumen."

For those who do not read Spanish I would translate the passage as:

"Now I say to you; let an author of renown fill a book with twaddle, and if it
is not praised by the critics, you may tar and feather me."

I am not an author of renown. Indeed, I make no pretence of the delicacies of literary style, or the turning of fine phrases of elegant diplomacy. My object is merely to record in these pages the truth regarding the crumbling of Russia, and the downfall of our Imperial Throne.

Anyone who cares to search the voluminous records in the Bureau of Police in the long Bibikovsky Boulevard, in Kiev, will find my *dossier* neatly filed and tabulated, as are those of most Russians. You will find that I, Féodor, son of Féodor Rajevski, musician temporarily abroad, and his wife Varvara, was born in the Via Galliera, at Bologna, in Italy, on July 8, 1880, and on March 3, 1897, entered the University in the Vladimirskaia. I venture to think that the police have but little inscribed to my detriment save perhaps a few students' pranks in the Kreshtchatik, and the record of that memorable night when we daubed with blue and white paint the equestrian statue in front of the Merchants' Club, and I was fined twenty roubles by the bearded old magistrate for the part I played in the joke.

Had there been anything serious against me I doubt whether I should have occupied, as I did for some years, the post of confidential secretary to "Grichka," that saintly unwashed charlatan whose real name was Gregory Novikh, and whom the world knew by the nickname of "Rasputin."

Of my youth I need say but little. After my student days I obtained, through the influence of a high Government official named Branicki, a friend of my father, a clerical post in the bureau of political police of the Empire, a department of the Ministry of the Interior, and for several years pursued a calm, uneventful life in that capacity. In consequence of a grave scandal discovered in my department—for my chief had secured the conviction of a certain wealthy nobleman named Tiniacheff, in Kharkoff, who was perfectly innocent of any offence—I was one day called as witness by the court of inquiry sitting in Moscow.

It was at that inquiry early in 1903 that I first met General Kouropatkine, who at that time had risen to high favour with Her Majesty the Empress and was—as was afterwards discovered—urging the Tsar to make war against Japan, well knowing that any attacks by us would be foredoomed to failure. At the General's instigation I was transferred to the Ministry of War as an under-secretary in his Cabinet, and he sent me—on account of my knowledge of Italian—upon a confidential mission to Milan. This, I presume, I carried out entirely to his satisfaction, for on two other occasions I was sent to Italy with messages to a certain Baron Svereff, a rich Russian financier living in San Remo, and with whom no doubt Kouropatkine was engaged in traitorous dealings.

One day, having been called by telephone to the house of His Excellency, I found, seated in his big luxuriously furnished room, and chatting confidentially, a strange-looking, unkempt, sallow-faced man of thirty or so, with broad brow, narrow sunken cheeks, and long untrimmed beard, who, as soon as he turned his big deep-set eyes upon mine, held me in fascination.

His was a most striking countenance, broad in the protruding forehead which narrowed to the point of his black beard, and being dressed as a monk in a long, shabby, black robe I recognised at once he was one of those fakirs we have all over Russia, one of those self-sacrificing bogus "holy" men who wander from town to town obsessed by religious mania, full of fictitious self-denial, yet collecting kopecks for charity.

Religion of all creeds has its esoteric phases, and our own Greek Church is certainly not alone in its "cranks."

"Rajevski, this is the Starets, Gregory Novikh," said the General, who was in uniform with the cross of St. Andrew at his throat.

I stood for a few seconds astounded. On being introduced to me, the unkempt, uncleanly fellow crossed his arms over his chest, bowed, and growled in a deep voice a word of benediction.

I expressed pleasure at meeting him, for all Russia was at the moment ringing with the renown of the modest Siberian "saint" who could work miracles. For the past month or so the name of "Grichka" had been upon everyone's lips. The ignorant millions from the Volga to Vladivostok had been told that a new saint had arisen in Russia; one possessed of Divine influence; a man who lived such a clean and blameless life in imitation of Christ that he was destined as the spiritual Guide and Protector of Russia, and to eclipse even Saint Nicholas himself.

As one level-headed and educated I had always had my doubts concerning all "holy" wanderers who meander across the steppes collecting alms. Knowing much of the evil life lived in our Russian monasteries and convents, and the warm welcome given to every charlatan who grows his beard, forgets to wash, lifts his eyes heavenwards, and begs, I had, I confess at the outset, but little faith in this new star in Holy Russia's firmament now introduced to me by His Excellency the Minister of War.

"I have been speaking with the Starets concerning you," the Minister said, as he turned in his padded chair, and flicked the ash from his exquisite Bogdanoff cigarette. "I have detached you from my department to become secretary to the Starets. Yours will be an enviable post, my dear Féodor, I assure you. Russia is in her degeneration. The Starets has been sent to us by Divine Providence to regenerate and reform her."

"But, your Excellency, I am very content in my present post—I—"

"I issued the decree from the Ministry this morning," he interrupted in his fierce, blustering manner, that manner which, years later, carried him through the war with Japan. "It is all arranged. You are the secretary of our protector whom Almighty God has sent to Russia for our salvation."

My eyes met the piercing gaze of the unkempt scoundrel, and, to my surprise, I found myself held mystified. Never before had any man or woman exercised such an all-powerful influence over me by merely gazing at me. That it was hypnotic was without doubt. The fellow himself with his sallow cheeks, his black beard, his deep-set eyes, and his broad brow was the very counterpart of those portraits which the old cinquecento artists of Italy painted of criminal aristocrats.

In the Pitti and the Uffizi in Florence, in the great gallery in Siena; in Venice, Rome, and Milan hung dozens of portraits resembling closely that of Gregory Novikh, the man who, to my own knowledge as I intend to here show, betrayed Russia, and destroyed the Imperial House of Romanoff.

In that look I had foreseen in him something terrible; I had read the whole of his destiny in his glance. His gaze for the moment overwhelmed me. Once or twice in my life—as it comes to most men—I have met with that expression in the countenances of those I have come across: it presaged crime, and the prophecy, alas! has been verified. Crime was in Gregory Novikh.

Perhaps Rasputin—as the world called him and as I will call him—knew that crime was in him. I think he did. By his eyes I knew him to be a criminal sensualist with murder in his heart.

I had heard a whisper of his sordid and miserable elemental passions, even though the Starets was, next to His Majesty the Tsar, the most popular man in all the Empire.

To be appointed his confidential secretary was surely great advancement at a single bound, for though sensuality was to him as natural as the air he breathed, yet he had the highest society of Petrograd already at his feet.

Compelled to accept my unwanted appointment, I bowed, and expressed gratification that I should have been chosen for such a post.

"You must be discreet, my dear Féodor," said His Excellency, throwing his cigarette end into the great bronze bowl at his elbow. "When I have sent you upon confidential missions you have been as dumb as an oyster. This new post I give to you because I know that you are a true patriotic Russian, and if you see and know certain things you will never chatter about them to the detriment of myself, or of our very good friend Grichka. To him, remember, everything is permitted. You will learn much, but rather than speak let your tongue be cut out. And that," he added, looking at me very seriously as he lowered his voice, "and that, I warn you, will be the judgment upon you in the fortress of Schlüsselburg if you dare to divulge a single secret of Russia's saviour!"

I stood aghast between this all-powerful War Minister in his glittering decorations, the Emperor's right hand and confidant, and the unkempt, ragged, wandering collector of kopecks—the man whose eyes held me in their fascination each time they met my gaze.

The suddenness of it all bewildered me. The salary I was to receive, as mentioned by His Excellency, was most generous, indeed, more than double that which I had been paid by the Ministry of War. It meant luxury beyond my wildest dreams; a life of ease, affluence, and influence.

Is it any wonder therefore that I accepted it, little knowing in those days of peace that I was a pawn in the great game of the Hun?

How shall I describe Rasputin? My pen fails me. He was one of a few great charlatans of saintly presence and of specious words, fascinator of women, and domineerers of men, who have been sent to the world at intervals through all the ages. Had he lived in the twelfth or thirteenth century of our era he would no doubt have been canonised. This rough, uncouth, illiterate Siberian peasant, who had been convicted of horse-stealing, and of immorality, who had served years of imprisonment in the gaol at Tobolsk, and who had only a month before we met been flung out of a monastery in Odessa and kicked half to death by its inmates as a fraud, had actually become the most popular person in Petrograd.

With the women of the aristocracy he was well-known, but to the Imperial Court he had not risen. Yet, being a *protégé* of Kouropatkine, matters were no doubt being arranged, although I was, of course, in ignorance of the traitorous plans in progress.

On the following morning, according to my instructions given me by my new chief, I called upon him at the small ground-floor flat which he occupied in the Poltavskaya, close to the Nicholas Station. The house, the remaining rooms of which were unoccupied, was a dark forbidding-looking one, with a heavy door beneath a portico, and containing deep cellars into which nobody ever penetrated save the Starets himself.

On the morning of my first visit there, I was, from the beginning, much mystified. The dining-room was quite a luxurious apartment, so was the "saint's" study—a den with a soft Eastern carpet, a big writing-table, a high porcelain stove of chocolate and white, and silk-upholstered settees. From this den a door opened into the "holy" man's sleeping-room, an apartment of spartan plainness save for its big stove, a replica of the one in the study.

The household, I found, consisted of one other person, an old Siberian peasant woman of about sixty, named Anna, who came from Pokrovsky, the "saint's" native village. She acted as housekeeper and maid-of-all-work.

That first morning spent with Rasputin was full of interest. He was a dirty, uncouth, illiterate fellow who repelled me. His hands were hard, his fingers knotty, his face was of a distinctly criminal type, and yet in my bewilderment I remembered that General Kouropatkine had declared him to be sent by the Almighty as the Protector of Russia.

His conversation was coarse and overbearing, and interlarded by quotations from Holy Writ. He mentioned to me certain ladies in high society, and related, with a broad grin upon his saintly countenance, scandal after scandal till I stood aghast.

Truly the "saint" was a most remarkable personality. From the first I had been compelled to admit that whatever the Russian public had said, there was a certain amount of basis for the gossip. His was the most weird and compelling personality that I had ever met. Even Stolypin had been impressed by him, though the Holy Synod had declared him to be a fraud.

My work consisted of reading to him and replying to letters from hundreds of women who had become attracted by his peculiar distorted emotional religion, many of whom desired to enter the cult which he had established. As secretary it was also my duty to arrange for the weekly reunions of the "sister-disciples," held in a big bare upstairs room, in which hung a holy ikon and several sacred pictures, and in which the mysteries of his "religion" were practised.

Ere long, I found that to those weekly séances there flocked many of the wealthiest and most cultured women in Petrograd, who actually held the ex-horse-stealer in veneration, and believed, as the peasants believed, that he could work miracles.

One afternoon, after I had been nearly a month in Rasputin's service, Boris Stürmer, a well-known Court sycophant, with bristling hair and a sweeping goatee beard, was brought to the monk by Kouropatkine. Both were in uniform, and after ushering them into Rasputin's study I felt that some dark conspiracy was on foot.

They remained in council for nearly an hour when I was called into the room, and to me, as the monk's right hand, the plot was explained so that I could assist in it.

To me the German Stürmer, who afterwards rose to be Prime Minister of Russia, was no stranger. Indeed, it was he who, inviting me to be seated, explained what was in progress.

"It is necessary, Rajevski, that the Father should meet Her Majesty the Empress. He is our saviour, and it is but right that he should come to the Imperial Court. But he cannot be introduced by any of the ordinary channels. Her Majesty must be impressed, and her curiosity aroused."

I bowed in assent, little dreaming of the devilish scheme which, instigated from Potsdam, and paid for by German gold, was about to be worked. Already Germany had decided to conquer Russia, and already the far-seeing Kaiser had watched and recognised that he could use Rasputin's undoubted influence in our priest-ridden country for his own dastardly ends.

"Now," continued Stürmer, stroking his beard as he looked at me. "We have just discovered that Her Majesty intends to pay a visit incognita next Friday to the shrine of Our Lady at Kazan, in order to pray for the birth of an heir to the Romanoffs. We have therefore decided that our Father shall go to Kazan, and be found by the Empress praying before the shrine beseeching the Almighty to grant Her Majesty her fond desire. He will appear to her a perfect stranger uttering exactly the same prayer as that in her mind."

"They will not speak," Kouropatkine added. "Our Father will apparently take no notice of her save to glance into her face, for why should he recognise in her the Empress?"

I saw with what ingenuity the plan was being laid, for well I knew the amazing and quite uncanny fascination for women of all classes possessed by the Starets.

At the time I naturally believed that Stürmer and his friend Kouropatkine were both convinced that it would be to the advantage of Russia if the holy man gained admission to the Imperial Court as spiritual guide to Nicholas II. Such a widely popular figure had the Starets become, and so deeply impressed had been the people of Moscow and Warsaw, where he had performed some mysterious "miracles," that there were hundreds of thousands of all classes who, like the two Ministers of the Crown who sat in that room, really believed that he was possessed of Divine power.

As we walked in the Nevski, people, mostly women, would rush to him and kiss his dirty hand, or raise the hem of his greasy kaftan to their lips, asking for the Father's blessing. By the enlightened Western peoples the ignorance and superstitions of our great Russian people cannot be understood.

You, who have travelled in our Holy Russia, know our trackless country where settlements are to distances, as one of our writers has put it, as fly-specks upon window-panes, where whole villages are the prey of disease, and where seventy-nine people out of every hundred cannot read or write. You also know how in the corner of every room hangs the ikon, how the gold or blue-domed basilica strikes you in every street, the long-haired priests chanting in their deep bass, the passer-by ceaselessly crossing himself, the peasantry crushed and down-trodden, and the middle and upper classes lapped in luxury and esteeming good manners more highly than morals. Such is Russia of to-day—Russia in the age of my employer Rasputin, the era of the downfall of the Imperial Romanoffs, and the fierce struggle with the barbaric Hun.

In accordance with the plan formed by Boris Stürmer I next day accompanied the Starets by rail direct to Nijni Novgorod, by way of Moscow, thence taking steamer down the great Volga, a twelve-hour journey, to that city where they make bells and ikons, Kazan.

Rasputin had put on his oldest and most ragged monk's habit, and carried a staff. Over his threadbare dress he wore another of finer texture which it was his intention to discard ere entering before the shrine, in order to appear most lowly and humble in the eyes of the shrewd Tsaritzza. We left Petrograd at night, that our departure should not be known and commented upon, but ere we did so I received a note from the General to the effect that the director of Secret Police at Tsarskoe-Selo had telephoned that Her Majesty was not leaving till the following day.

Hence we were travelling a day ahead of the Empress.

Kazan is a city full of the odour of sanctity if judged by the number of priests and monks one meets in its streets. It is situated about seven versts from the river, an old-world picturesque place wherein one rubs shoulders with people in all sorts of curious costumes, especially in the Tartar suburb where the low houses border upon narrow unpaved streets dotted here and there with mosques.

On arrival we drove up the hill to the great Preobrazhensky Monastery where Rasputin, as became a holy man, sought hospitality and was immediately very warmly welcomed, while I afterwards went on to the Hotel Frantsiya, in the long busy Vozkrensenkaya, where I took a room in order to watch the arrival of Alexandra Feodorovna, who would travel incognita, and of whose coming I was to give warning to Grichka.

For two days I waited, ever on the alert, and, of course, interested in the adventure. It is not always that one waits in an hotel in expectation of the arrival of an empress. Meanwhile I had made friends with the hotel clerk, without, of course, explaining my business, and he had promised to tell me of all new arrivals.

The Frantsiya is a very comfortable hotel, conducted upon French lines, and the two days I spent in Kazan were certainly quite enjoyable ones.

On the evening of the third day my friend the hotel clerk sent a message to my room, and in response I at once descended to the bureau, when he informed me that the ladies had just arrived, a Madame Strepoff, and her maid Mademoiselle Kamensky. He described the first-named, and I at once recognised her as the Tsaritzza herself, though, of course, the tall, pale young man had no idea of her identity. I had merely told him that I expected the arrival of a lady whom I had met in Moscow some time ago.

"Madame has taken the best suite of rooms in the hotel," the clerk said. "She is evidently an aristocrat though she is only Madame Strepoff. I have just sent their passports to the police."

The hour was immediately before dinner, therefore I lounged about the entrance hall awaiting the appearance of the two travellers who, the clerk had told me, had not ordered dinner in their rooms, so evidently they intended to dine in the public restaurant.

Just after half-past seven they descended the broad staircase. There was but little difference in their ages. In an instant I recognised the handsome Empress by the many photographs I had seen. The other, dark and also good-looking, was evidently a lady-in-waiting, a lady whom I afterwards met at Court.

The pair, dressed inconspicuously in black, seated themselves at a little *table à deux* in the window, while I followed, and having selected a table opposite, ate my meal as I watched.

The Empress in incognita seemed in high spirits, perhaps because she had escaped from the Imperial Court. She chatted confidentially with her companion, and more than once cast an inquiring glance in my direction, as though wondering whether I were not an agent of the Okhrana, the ubiquitous secret police of the Empire. It is only too true that wherever one goes in Russia one is "shadowed" by the police, and Her Majesty knew full well that the bureau of "personal police" at Tsarskoe-Selo would know that she had left the palace and would keep an eye upon her, because just about that period the air was full of plots against the dynasty.

The Empress and her bosom friend Mademoiselle Zéneide Kamensky—whom I afterwards knew her to be—finished their meal unrecognised by the servants, or any of those in the restaurant, and then returned to their rooms. Afterwards I took a droshky up to the Preobrazhensky Monastery, which I reached about ten o'clock. The old monk who answered my ring at the barred door returned with a message from Rasputin to the effect that I was to tell him the object of my visit. This I refused to do, and became insistent upon seeing him. Such hesitation on Rasputin's part greatly surprised me. Indeed, it was not before nearly half an hour had elapsed that the long-bearded old janitor unwillingly conducted me through the long, bare corridors of the monastery where my footsteps on the flags awakened the echoes, and after several turns ushered me into a small, well-furnished room, wherein, in an armchair before the stove, sat the charlatan who was posing as the Saviour of Russia.

In an instant I realised that he was in an advanced state of intoxication. As I entered he rose unsteadily, and addressing me declared that life in the Spasso-Preobrazhensky was most pleasant, and at once began singing a ribald song.

I stood aghast. This was the man who, by the scheming of Stürmer and his catspaw, was to be introduced to the Imperial Court! So fuddled was he by vodka that he was unable to understand the purport of my visit. He merely laughed inanely and began to repeat parrot-like those curious prayers which he recited at the weekly reunions of the sister-disciples—passages culled haphazard from Holy Writ, interspersed with the most obscene and ribald allegations, a jumble of piety and blasphemy that none could ever understand.

Soon I realised the hopelessness of the situation. This was the first I knew that the "saint" was addicted to alcohol, although he drank wine freely at meals and always kept champagne for his friends, paid for out of his collections for charity. In his inebriated state his wild-looking eyes glowed like coals, and as he looked at me I experienced once more the strange sensation of being enthralled. Truly, there was something mesmeric about that gaze of his, a mystery that I have never solved.

A priest entered after I had been there a few minutes, and to him I remarked that the Father being "rather unwell" I would return early next day. He smiled meaningly, and I departed.

Having no knowledge of what hour the Empress intended to visit the shrine of Our Lady, I was back again at the monastery at dawn when I found the Starets had quite recovered. As soon as I told him of the presence of the Tsaritsa he bustled about, and in his oldest robe, rusty, travel-worn and frayed, he accompanied me to the fine church of Bogoroditsky.

It was then only seven o'clock, and we found the church with its many candles and its much venerated shrine quite deserted save for one or two peasant women who had halted to pray on their way to work.

Outside we stood together gazing down the long white road which led from the direction of the Hotel Frantsiya.

"Alexandra Feodorovna must certainly come this way," remarked the ragged "saint" as I stood at his side. "Remain here and keep watch. I shall go to yonder house and speak with the people. When the carriage approaches, let me know quickly."

Then leaving me the Starets crossed to a small house which he entered to give its inmates his blessing—blessing forsooth from such an unholy, unwashed scoundrel!

Through an hour I waited in patience, until in the distance I saw a carriage approaching, and at once gave warning, whereupon the Father entered the church and threw himself upon his knees devoutly before the holy shrine and began to pray earnestly aloud in his deep bass.

I had entered after him, and secreting myself behind one of the massive pillars watched the arrival of the two females in dead black, who, crossing themselves as they entered, approached the shrine.

As they did so Rasputin, apparently unconscious of their presence, cried in a loud voice:

"O God! in Thy gracious bounty give unto our Imperial House of Romanoff a son—one who shall in due time wear the glorious crown of the Tsars and become the Sovereign Defender of All the Russias against our enemies. In this my prayer I most humbly echo the voice of Russia's millions, whose dearest wish is that a son be born unto our Imperial House. O God, I beseech thee to grant us our request!"

From my place of concealment I saw the Tsaritzza start visibly. She wore a veil, so that I could not see her countenance. She had halted, entranced by overhearing that prayer uttered by the unkempt stranger. I noticed that she whispered a word to her companion, who, like herself, was veiled, and then Her Majesty threw herself upon her knees, an example followed by Mademoiselle Kamensky.

The Empress, her head bowed in silence, knelt before the weird impressive shrine, side by side with the Starets. The great church was dark save for the light of the myriad candles, and silent save for the twittering of a bird, yet I could see that the pious exhortation of Rasputin had been taken as an omen by Her Majesty.

Suddenly, the mock saint's voice again rang out clearly in the great cavernous basilica as he repeated the prayer in clear impassioned words—that same prayer which the Empress was repeating in silence.

Only the three knelt there. For a full ten minutes silence again reigned. Neither of the kneeling figures stirred until Rasputin crossed himself slowly, and for a third time, raising his voice still higher he besought the Almighty to grant Russia an heir to the Throne.

Then, at last, he rose with slow dignity as became a saintly priest, and again he made the sign of the cross.

As he did so the Empress who had raised her veil turned her head, whereupon he halted for several seconds and gazed straight into her face with that intense, hypnotic stare which always held women in such mysterious fascination. I saw that the Empress was again startled, but folding his hands across his breast, an attitude habitual to him, the Starets passed out of the church without a second glance at her, leaving her breathless and trembling.

When he had gone she turned in alarm and whispered with her lady-in-waiting. Both women rose, and, following the monk, stood gazing at his receding figure as he went down the long white road.

"A strange man surely, Zéneide!" I heard the Empress exclaim. "How curious that, unconscious of my presence, he should be here, praying for me—a holy man without a doubt! We must discover who he is. What eyes! Did you notice them?"

"Yes. His gaze really frightened me," her companion admitted.

"Ah! His is the face of a true saint—a wonder-worker! Of that I am certain. We must make inquiries concerning him," remarked Her Majesty. "I must see him again and speak with him!"

Then the pair, entering the carriage, drove rapidly away.

While standing upon the church steps they had discussed the Starets while I had lounged close by unnoticed, believing that we were alone.

As the carriage moved off, however, I was startled to feel strong hands laid heavily upon me, as a rough voice exclaimed:

"Halt! You are under arrest!"

Next second I became aware that I was in the hands of two rather well dressed men, no doubt agents of the Okhrana.

"You have been loitering here with evil intent!" exclaimed the elder of the pair. "We have been watching you ever since you entered behind that good Father. We saw you secrete yourself. Have you any firearms?"

I unfortunately had a revolver, and at once produced it.

"Ah!" exclaimed the brown-bearded agent of Secret Police as he took possession of it. "I thought so! You had discovered the identity of the lady with the long veil, and have been here awaiting an opportunity to fire at her!"

"What?" I gasped, aghast at the serious charge levelled against me. "I am no revolutionist! I carry that weapon merely for my self-protection."

The bearded man gave a low whistle, and next moment three grey-coated policemen in uniform sprang up from nowhere, and I was unceremoniously marched through the streets to the head police bureau in the Gostiny Dvor, well knowing the seriousness of the allegation against me.

Two hours later I was taken to the dark-panelled room of the Chief of Police, a bald-headed, flabby-faced functionary in a dark blue uniform glittering with decorations. Before his big table, standing between two policemen, I answered question after question he put to me, my replies being carefully noted by a clerk who sat at a side table. In the room were also the two officers of the Okhrana who had travelled, unknown to the Empress, in order to keep Her Majesty beneath their surveillance.

"Why did you arrive at the Frantsiya and await the coming of the two ladies?" snapped the Chief of Police in his peculiarly offensive manner.

I was at loss what to say. I was unable to tell the truth lest I should betray the plot of Boris Stürmer and General Kouropatkine. I recollected my friendship with the hotel clerk, and my eagerness for the arrival of the travellers.

"Ah! You hesitate!" said the all-powerful functionary with a sinister grin, and knowing what I did of the political police and their arbitrary measures towards those suspected, I realised that I was in very grave danger.

"You had secret knowledge of Her Majesty's journey incognita, or you would not have been watching in the church with a loaded revolver in your pocket," he went on. "Your Brothers of Freedom, as you term them, never lack knowledge of Their Majesties' movements," my inquisitor said.

"I deny, your Excellency, that I was there with any evil intent," I protested. "Such a thing as you suggest never for a second entered my mind."

The man in the brilliant uniform laughed, saying:

"I have heard that same declaration before. It is a clever plot, no doubt, but fortunately you were watched, and the knowledge that you were being watched prevented you from putting your plans into execution. Come—confess!"

"I had no idea that I was being watched until I was arrested," I declared.

"But you cannot explain the reason why you travelled from Petrograd to Kazan. Let us hear your excuse," he said with increased sarcasm.

"I have no excuse," was my very lame reply. I was wondering what had become of the Starets. It was quite evident that they knew nothing of my double journey up to the monastery, and further, there was no suspicion against Rasputin. That being so I hesitated to explain the truth, in the faint hope that Kouropatkine, as Minister of War, would hear of my arrest, and contrive to obtain my release. I saw that, at least, I ought to remain loyal to those who employed me, and further, even if I told the truth it would not be believed.

"It will be best to make some inquiries in Petrograd regarding this individual," suggested the police agent who had arrested me.

"I really don't think that is necessary," replied the Chief of Police of Kazan, tapping his desk impatiently with his pen, as he turned to me and said:

"Now, tell me quickly, young man. Why are you here?"

What could I reply?

"Ah!" he said, smiling. "I see that there are others whom you refuse to implicate. It is useless to send such people as you for trial."

"But I demand a fair trial!" I cried in desperation, a cold sweat breaking out on my brow, because I knew that he had power to pass sentence upon me as a political suspect who refused information—and that his order would certainly be confirmed by the Minister of the Interior.

Too well did I know the drastic powers of the Chiefs of Police of the principal cities.

At my demand the bald-headed man simply smiled, and replied:

"My order is that you be conveyed to Schlüsselburg. You will there have plenty of leisure in which to repent not having replied to my questions."

To Schlüsselburg! My heart fell within me. Once within that dreaded fortress, the terrible oubliettes of which are below the surface of the Lake Ladoga, my identity would be lost and I should be quickly forgotten. From Schlüsselburg no prisoner ever returned!

Would any of the conspiring trio, whose tool I had been, raise a finger to save me? Or would they consider that having served their purpose it would be to their advantage if my lips were closed?

"Schlüsselburg!" I gasped. "No—no, not that!" I cried. "I am innocent—quite innocent!"

"You give no proof of it," coldly replied the Chief of Police, rising as a sign that the inquiry was at an end. "My orders are that you be sent to Schlüsselburg without delay." Then, turning to the two agents of the Okhrana, he added: "You will report this to your director at Tsarskoe-Selo. I will send my order to the Ministry for confirmation to-night. Take the prisoner away!"

And next moment I was bundled down to a dirty cell in the basement, there to await conveyance to that most dreaded of all the prisons in the Empire.

By a single stroke of the pen I had been condemned to imprisonment for life!

CHAPTER II

RASPUTIN ENTERS TSARSKOE-SELO

I confess that I felt my position to be absolutely hopeless.

I was a political suspect, and therefore I knew full well that to attempt to communicate with anyone outside was quite impossible. The Chief of Police of Kazan, honestly believing that he was doing his duty and unearthing a subtle plot against the life of the Empress, on account of the revolver in my possession, had condemned me to imprisonment in the Fortress of Schlüsselburg. Its very name, dreaded by every Russian, recurred to me as I recollected Kouropatkine's significant words. Had he not threatened that, if I revealed one single word of the secret doings of the holy Starets, my tongue would be cut out within those grim dark walls of that prison of mystery?

We Russians had from our childhood heard of that sinister fortress, the walls of which rise sheer from the black waters of Lake Ladoga—that place where the cells of the political prisoners, victims of the thousand and one intrigues of the Russian bureaucracy, consequent upon the autocracy of the Tsar, are deep beneath the lake's surface, so that they can—when it is willed by the Governor or those higher Ministers who express their devilish desire—be flooded at will.

Hundreds of terrified, yet innocent and nameless victims of Russia's mediæval barbarism, persons of both sexes—alas! that I should speak so of my own country—have, during the past ten years of enlightenment, stood in their narrow dimly-lit oubliette and watched in horror the black tide trickle through the rat holes in the stone floor, slowly, ever slowly, until water has filled the cell to the arched stone roof and drowned them as rats in a trap.

And all that has been done by the accursed German wirepullers in the name of the puny puppet who was Tsar, and from whom the truth was, they said, ever carefully hidden.

The Kazan police treated me just as inhumanly as I expected. By my own experience as an official in the Department of Political Police, and knowing what I did in consequence, I was expecting all this.

Four days I spent in that gloomy, but not very uncomfortable cell in Kazan, when, on the fifth morning, I was taken, handcuffed to another prisoner who I found afterwards had murdered his wife, to the Volga steamer which, after twelve hours of close confinement, landed us at Nijni.

A hundred times I debated within myself whether it were best to remain silent, and not reveal my past career in the Department of Political Police, or to state the absolute facts and struggle by that means to obtain a hearing and escape.

One fact was patent. General Kouropatkine and Boris Stürmer both trusted in my silence, while the rascal monk had found in me a catspaw who had remained dumb. In truth, however, my secret intention was to watch the progress of events. Of the latter, Rasputin had, of course, no suspicion. If I were—as I had already proved myself—his willing assistant, then he and his friends might endeavour to save me.

Such were my thoughts as I sat in the train between two police agents on the interminable journey from Nijni to the capital.

On arrival at the Nicholas Station the murderer to whom I was manacled and myself were shown no consideration. We had been without food for twelve hours, yet the three men in charge, though they ate a hearty meal in the buffet, gave us not a drink of water. Humanity is not in the vocabulary of our police of Russia when dealing with political suspects, so many of whom are entirely innocent persons who have proved themselves obnoxious to the corrupt bureaucracy.

We had two hours to wait in Petrograd, locked in one of the waiting-rooms where we were at last given a hunk of bread and a piece of cold meat. Then we were driven out to Schlüsselburg in

a motor-car, arriving there in the grey break of dawn and being conveyed by boat to the grim red-brick fortress which rose from the lake.

Stepping from the boat on to the floating landing-stage we were conducted by armed warders through the iron gate and along innumerable stone corridors where, ever and anon, we passed other warders—men who, criminals themselves, spent their lives in the fortress and were never allowed to land in order that they might not reveal the terrible secrets of that modern Bastille. Those who would form a proper opinion of our Empire should remember that this horrible prison was at the disposal of each of the Ministers and their sycophants, and that hundreds of entirely innocent people of both sexes had for years been sent there out of personal spite or jealousy, and also in the furtherance of Germany's aims for the coming war.

Within those dark, gloomy walls, where many of the dimly lit cells were below the lake, hundreds of patriotic Russians had ended their lives, their only offence being that they had been too true to their Emperor and their own land!

Ever since my childhood I had been taught to regard Schlüsselburg as an inferno—a place from which no victim of our corrupt bureaucracy had ever emerged. Only His Excellency the Governor and the under-Governor had for years landed from that island fortress. To all others communication with the outside world was strictly forbidden. Hence I was fully aware that now I had set foot in the hateful place my identity had become lost, and only death was before me.

And such deeds were being done in the name of the Tsar!

At the time I believed in His Majesty, feeling that he was in ignorance of the truth. Nowadays I know that he was, all the time, fully aware of the crimes committed in his name. Hence, I have no sympathy with the Imperial family, and have welcomed its well-deserved downfall.

Into a small room where sat an official in uniform I was ushered, and later, after waiting an hour, was compelled to sign the big leather-bound register of prisoners. Already my crime had evidently been written down in a neat official hand, yet I was given no opportunity to read it.

"Enough!" said the big bearded officer with a wave of the hand. "Take him to his cell—number 326."

Whereupon the three men who had conveyed me there bundled me down two steep flights of damp stone steps, worn hollow by the tread of thousands of those who had already gone down to their doom, into a corridor dimly lit by oil-lamps—a passage into which no light of day ever penetrated.

There we were met by an evil-looking ex-convict who carried a key suspended by a chain.

"Three-two-six!" shouted one of my guardians, whereupon the gaoler opened a door and I was thrust into a narrow stone cell, the floor of which was an inch deep in slime, faintly lit by a tiny aperture, heavily barred, about ten feet above where I stood.

The door was locked behind me and I found myself alone. I was in one of those oubliettes which at the will of my captors could be flooded!

I held my breath and glanced around. Within me arose a fierce resentment. I had acted honestly towards my scoundrelly employers—though, be it said, my object was one of patriotic observation—yet they had allowed me to become the victim of the secret police who would, no doubt, obtain great kudos, and probably a liberal *douceur*, for having unearthed "a desperate plot against Her Majesty the Empress!"

That there was a plot was quite true—but one unsuspected by the Chief of Police of Kazan.

My paroxysm of anger I need not here describe. Through the hours that passed I sat upon the stone seat beside the board that served me as bed, gazing up at the small barred window.

Clap—clap—clap was the only sound that reached me—and with failing heart I knew the noise to be that of waves of the lake beating upon the wall within a few inches of my window, the dark waters which in due time would no doubt rise through my uneven floor and engulf me. Big grey rats ran about in search of fragments of food—of which there was none. I was a "political," and my food would certainly not be plentiful.

In those awful nerve-racking hours, never knowing when I might find my floor flooded as signal of a horrible death, I paced my cell uttering the worst curses upon those who had employed me, and vowed that if they gave me the grace—for their own ends—to escape I would use my utmost endeavours to destroy them.

I did not blame the Okhrana or the Chief of Police of Kazan. They had both acted in good faith. Yet I remembered that I was the catspaw of Kouropatkine and of Stürmer, either of whom could easily order my release. And that was what I awaited in patience, although in terror.

Days went by—hopeless, interminable days. The lapping of the waters above me ever reminded me of the fate that had been of the many hundreds who had previously occupied that same fearsome oubliette and had been drowned, deliberately murdered by those into whose bad graces they had fallen.

When the grey streak of light faded above me the gruff criminal in charge would unbolt my door and bring me a small paraffin lamp to provide me with light and warmth for the night. When the lamp was brought each night I thought of Marie Vietroff whose name was still upon everyone's lips. The poor girl, arrested though innocent as I had been, had been confined in a cell in the fortress of Peter and Paul, and her fate was known in consequence of certain revelations admitted by the Assistant Public Prosecutor. This official, the tool of higher and more corrupt officials, had admitted that the girl, though entirely innocent of any crime, had been arrested out of spite and sent to the fortress where, to escape a doom more horrible than death itself, she had emptied the oil from her lamp over herself while in bed, and then set fire to it.

Often, even in that deep oubliette, the sounds of woman's shrieks reached me, and each time I thought of the girl-victim of an official's revenge.

Days passed—so many that I lost count of them—until I had abandoned hope. The scoundrels whom I had served had forsaken me now that I had served their purpose. Rasputin had fascinated the Empress by that mesmeric glance of his, and it had probably been deemed wiser that my mouth should be at once closed. At any moment I might discover the water oozing up between those green slime-covered stones.

One day, however, at about noon the gruff uncommunicative peasant who was my gaoler—a man incarcerated for murder in Moscow—unlocked the door and bade me come out.

In surprise I was taken along the corridors to that same small room in which I had put down my name in that Book of Fate they called the Prison Register, and there the same official informed me that it was desired to interrogate me at the Ministry of the Interior in Petrograd.

Another interrogation! My spirits rose. If my captors meant to have the truth, then they should have it. I would expose the plot, let me be believed or disbelieved.

Escorted by two agents of police, I was taken out into the dazzling light of day back to Petrograd, and to the Ministry of the Interior, where in a private room—one that was in a wing of the great building familiar to me—I was left alone.

I had only been there for a few minutes, looking out of the window in wonder, when the door opened, and before me stood the goat-bearded man Boris Stürmer.

"Welcome back, my dear Rajevski!" he exclaimed, coming towards me and shaking my hand warmly. "We only knew yesterday where you were. Those fools in Kazan spirited you away, but that idiot the Chief of Police has been to-day dismissed the service for his meddling. I do hope you are none the worse for your adventure," he added with concern.

"Surely Grichka knew of my arrest!" I said. "Did he not inquire?"

"He did not dare to do so openly, lest he himself should be implicated," replied the German. "We were compelled to wait and inquire with due judiciousness. Even then we could not discover whither you had been sent—not until yesterday. But it is all a mistake, my dear Rajevski—all a mistake, and you must overlook it. The Father is eagerly awaiting your return."

"I must first go home and exchange these dirty clothes," I remarked.

"Yes. But first accept the apologies of the General and myself. You, of course, knew that we should extricate you—as we shall again, if any other untoward circumstances happen to arise. Recollect that we can open any door of prison or palace in Russia," and then he smiled grimly as I took my leave.

I returned to my own rooms to find that they had, during my absence, been searched by the police, and some of my correspondence, of a private and family nature, had been taken away. At this I felt greatly annoyed, and resolved to obtain from Kouropatkine immunity from such domiciliary visits in future.

Upon my table lay a letter which had, I was told, arrived for me that morning. On opening it I found that it was from the head office of the Azof-Don Commercial Bank, in the Morskaya, officially informing me that a sum of fifty thousand roubles had been placed to my credit there by some person who remained anonymous.

The present was certainly a welcome one, made no doubt as reparation for the inconvenience I had suffered.

Half-an-hour later I arrived at the Poltavskaya where old Anna admitted me, and I at once went to the monk's sanctum.

Rasputin sprang from his chair and, seizing both my hands, cried:

"Ah! my dear Féodor! So here you are back with us! This relieves my mind greatly."

"Yes," I said. "Back from the grave."

"The infernal idiots!" declared the monk, his wide-open eyes flashing as he spoke. "I will see that it does not occur again. But you quite understand, Féodor, that it was not wise to reveal that I had gone to Kazan on purpose to pray in the Empress's presence."

I smiled, and said:

"Somebody has placed fifty thousand roubles to my account at the Azof-Don Bank."

In turn the rascal smiled, and said:

"You need not seek its source. It is out of the Government funds, and is yours. Keep a still tongue, and there may be other payments." Then, turning to his table, he showed me quantities of correspondence which had been left unattended in my absence, and urged me to get to work, adding: "I have to be at the Baroness Tchelkounoff's this afternoon, and there is a séance here to-morrow—five neophytes to be initiated."

So five more silly, neurotic and, of course, wealthy women were to be initiated into the mysteries of the mock saint's religion. Grichka had no use for those whose pockets were not well lined, for he was accumulating vast sums from those weak, fascinated females who believed in his divinity as healer and spiritual guide.

Presently I seated myself at the table and recommenced my secretarial duties, while he went forth. In many letters were drafts for subscriptions for Rasputin's convent in far-off Pokrovsky in Siberia, a place which no one had ever visited, yet in support of which he had obtained hundreds of thousands of roubles. I might here state that later on, when I visited Pokrovsky, I found the wonderful convent, of which he told me such pious stories, consisted of a plain house cheaply furnished in which lived his peasant wife and children, together with twelve of his chosen sister-disciples, foolish women who had made over their money to him and devoted their lives to piety as set forth in his new "religion."

A fortnight passed. Of Kouropatkine we saw little. He had, at last, assisted by the traitor Stössel and at Germany's instigation, succeeded in forcing war with Japan, and the streets of the capital were filled with urging, enthusiastic crowds bent upon pulling the Mikado from his throne.

Kouropatkine had, according to what Rasputin told me, assured the Emperor that the victory would be an easy one, and that the Japanese would fly at first sight of our troops. The General had quite recently returned from the Far East, and had presented a personal report to the Tsar describing

Japan's war preparations. He had declared that if Russia meant victory she must strike at once. Hence war was declared; you know with what disastrous results to both the Army and Navy of Russia.

It was, however, on the day before the declaration of war that Rasputin's real triumph came. The Empress, who had been searching Russia high and low for the pious Father beside whom she had knelt in Kazan, had at last discovered him, and he received a command to an audience at the Palace of Tsarskoe-Selo.

The monk, his eyes shining with glee, showed me the letter from Count Fredericks, Minister of the Court, and said: "You must accompany me, Féodor."

At noon on the day appointed we therefore left Petrograd together. The monk wore, in pretended humility, his oldest and most rusty robe—though beneath it, be it said, his under garments were of silk of the finest procurable in the capital—while suspended by a thin brass chain around his neck was a cheap enamelled cross. He was unkempt, unwashed, his face sallow and drawn, yet those wonderful brilliant eyes stared forth with uncanny intensity of expression. His hands were grimy, and his long tapering finger-nails had not been cleaned for weeks. Such was the man whom Alexandra Feodorovna, fascinated by his glance, had called to her side.

On arrival at the station of Tsarskoe-Selo we found one of the Imperial carriages awaiting us, with footman and coachman in bright blue liveries, with outriders.

Two flunkeys, also in blue, advanced, and, placing their hands beneath the saint's arms, lifted him into the carriage, an honour always paid to those who are special guests of His Majesty the Tsar. As for myself I climbed in afterwards, smiling within myself at the spectacle of the unwashed monk being lifted in as though he were an invalid. With us was an officer in uniform and a civilian—an agent of the Okhrana.

The moment we had seated ourselves the Imperial servants took off their cocked hats and replaced them crosswise on their heads as sign that within the carriage was a guest of His Majesty, and in order to signal to passers-by as we drove along to remove their hats or salute.

Rasputin had already been given instructions by General Erchoff, Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, as to how we should act in the presence of Her Imperial Majesty. We had both attended before him, Rasputin well knowing that Erchoff was one of his most bitter enemies, but who on account of the Tsaritsa's interest was now posing as a friend.

After our drive back to Rasputin's house the monk, flinging himself into a chair and lighting a cigarette, thoughtfully remarked:

"That puppet Erchoff will later on regret that he denounced me a year ago. His term of office is at its limit."

The mock saint was possessed of an almost supernatural intuition. In everyday life he would tell me of things that would happen socially and politically, and sure enough they would happen. The gift of looking into the future is given to a few men and women in the world, those persons who sometimes when they look into the face of another hold their breath and remain silent, because they see death written upon the countenance before them. This curious faculty was possessed by Rasputin to a very marked degree—a faculty which has puzzled scientists through all the ages, a faculty which usually runs side by side with an overweening vanity and an amazing self-consciousness. Sometimes the possessor of that most astounding and mysterious intuition is also possessed of a humble and retiring disposition. But it is seldom.

Grichka, as all Russia called him, was an outstanding personality, clever, scheming, and as unscrupulous as he was avaricious. His mujik blood betrayed itself every hour.

Even as we sat there in the Imperial carriage as we drove to the Palace, he smiled with self-conscious sarcasm when the people saluted or doffed their hats to him as an Imperial guest.

At last we arrived before huge prison-like gates, which opened to allow us to pass, sentries saluted, the doors swung back again, and we found ourselves in the great well kept park of the Alexander Palace.

I saw two civilians walking together along the drive, which led into a wood. They were agents of the secret police patrolling the grounds, for every precaution was being taken to guard the persons of Their Majesties. The death of the girl Vietroff had aroused the indignation of Russia to such an extent that the atmosphere was charged with anarchism.

Our road lay through woods, past a model dairy. Thence we went past two large farms, and out into open meadow lands, everything being kept most spick-and-span by the hundreds of servants.

The system of defence of Tsarskoe-Selo struck me as amazingly well designed. The road we had driven along seemed to be a maze, for twice we had left what appeared to be the main road, and passing three guard-houses—small fortresses in themselves, in case of an attack by the revolutionists—we at last arrived before the main entrance of the royal residence, guarded by a detachment of fierce-looking Kubansky Cossacks. These were drawn up standing at the salute, with their officers, as we approached. It was surely a picturesque guard of honour, with their quaint, old-fashioned pointed headgear, their smart comic-opera tunics, and their long, shiny boots.

In a great high white wall is an elegant gate of delicately wrought ironwork, with the usual striped sentry boxes on either side. Around are seated Chinese statues in bronze, each upon its pedestal. Over the gateway is the Imperial cipher in bronze, and beyond in the holy of holies is the long two-storied palace of Tsarskoe-Selo, that spot forbidden to all save to the guests of Their Majesties.

I give this in detail because few outsiders, very few indeed—save ambassadors and other jackanapes in uniform—had, until the arrest of the Romanoffs, ever trod within the hallowed precincts of the palace-fortress, the bomb-proof home of the incompetent weakling who had been crowned Tsar of All the Russias.

As we passed through that last gate I saw before us a building very much like a French château of the sixteenth century, a long low building with sloping slated roofs, few chimneys, and a clock—which, by the way, had stopped—high over the entrance.

Everywhere since we had entered the Imperial domain all was most scrupulously well kept. Not a gravel stone was out of place. Gangs of men were, indeed, kept to rake over instantly the gravel drives so as to obliterate the track of the wheels of the carriages.

At last with due pomp we drew up before the long portico of the comfortable but not imposing house in which lived Their Imperial Majesties.

As we descended an attendant took Rasputin's staff, when instantly there came forward a lieutenant of Cossacks, a curiously crafty-looking fellow, who asked us if we desired to wash, or wished for a drink or for food.

The fellow was repulsive, even to the charlatan himself. The latter gazed at him, and replied in his deep, serious tones:

"I am here to see our Empress. I have no need for thy ministrations."

At this rebuke the evil-looking officer looked daggers, and seeing that I was but a menial as secretary he did not deign to address me.

A few seconds later we were taken in charge by the "skorochodi," servants who are so intelligent that they are nicknamed the "quick-walkers." The palace contains hundreds of servants and hangers-on, but these are the ones picked to take visitors through the semicircular built palace to audience of either the Tsar or his spouse.

Through a long corridor we were conducted past the doors of a number of rooms. At each were two sentries, one a big Abyssinian negro in blue and gold—called an "Araby" in the palace—and the other a stolid Cossack sentry with his fixed bayonet.

At the end of the corridor we were met by one of the Emperor's personal servants who came forward in all humility, and bowing before Rasputin, asked.

"Can I be of service, Father, before you have audience?"

Both of us were surprised. Here, in the midst of all the pomp and ceremony was an ordinary Russian peasant, as unlettered and as uncouth as Rasputin himself, and a personal attendant of his Majesty.

He ushered us into a pretty room, with a long balcony upholstered in pale grey silk, with thick soft carpet to match, an apartment which might have been the boudoir of the Empress herself.

"I am here at Her Imperial Majesty's command," replied the Father, ready for the crowning of the slow and subtle plot which Stürmer had engineered with Kouropatkine. "She desires to speak with me."

Next instant the servant, who no doubt knew of Grichka's wonder-working with his mock miracles, threw himself upon his knees, and craved:

"Oh, our Father, I beseech thee to place thy blessing upon me, and upon my wife and my invalid child. The doctor who came yesterday said that she is suffering from phthisis, and that the case is serious. I beg of thee to cure her."

"Thy name?" he asked quickly, looking straight into his face with those wonderful eyes.

"Aivasoff—Ivan Aivasoff."

"Whence do you come?"

"From Ossa, in the Government of Perm."

"And you are His Majesty's valet, eh?"

"I am one of His Imperial Majesty's valets. He told me that the Tsaritzza had commanded you here, and that I was to introduce you and your secretary, Féodor Rajevski."

Rasputin halted, and assuming his most pious demeanour—that same attitude which had attracted Petrograd society—and incidentally extracted hundreds of thousands of roubles from its pockets—crossed his hands, muttered some words, and bestowed his blessing upon the Tsar's body servant.

A minute later the man Aivasoff straightened himself and, pointing to a door on the opposite side of the room, asked:

"Are you both ready? The Tsaritzza is awaiting you."

Rasputin, though pretending to be careless of his personal appearance, stroked his long beard, and then announced his readiness to pass into the presence of the Empress.

"You will go first, and bow," said our attendant. "Your secretary will remain within the door with hands crossed before him," he said.

Then with his knuckles he rapped thrice upon the white enamelled door, and, turning the handle of the lock, entered, walking before to announce us.

In front I saw a deep glow of electricity shaded with daffodil silk, a pretty artistic room with high palms, choice cut flowers, and soft luxurious couches upholstered in grey and gold brocade. There sat two ladies, one of whom was in a silk gown of bottle green, which was, no doubt, the latest creation of the Rue de la Paix—the Empress—while the other, who was in elegant black, I afterwards recognised as her bosom friend who had accompanied her to Kazan, Mademoiselle Zéneide Kamensky.

Ivan Aivasoff bowed low as he uttered his stereotyped words of introduction. He was one of those ignorant persons with whom the unscrupulous bureaucrats had surrounded the person of the Tsar. He was an honest, well-meaning fellow from the Urals, who had been selected to pose as a palace official, and to act just as I was acting, as the tool of others; a peasant chosen because he would naturally be less affected by revolutionary and progressive influence.

Aivasoff was, as I afterwards learnt, but one of many peasants in immediate contact with the Emperor and Empress, the other servants being German.

As we bowed before the two ladies they rose smiling, while the Father with raised hands pronounced upon them his blessing in that pious, slightly hoarse, but deeply impressive voice of his. Then, after the Empress had welcomed him he fixed her with that impelling, hypnotic gaze of his, and in pretence of never having met her before, exclaimed:

"O Gracious Lady, I have come here at thy bidding, though I am but a poor and unlettered wanderer, unfamiliar with palaces. My sphere is in the houses of the very poor in order to direct, to advise, and to succour them. Such is God's will."

"Already, Father, we have heard of you," responded the Empress, fascinated by the extraordinary thralldom of his gaze. "Your great charitable works are well known to us, as they are known through the length and breadth of our Empire. It is said by many that you have been sent unto us as saviour of Russia."

"Yes—it is so, by God's Almighty grace," the mock saint said, bowing low at the Empress's words, while Mademoiselle Kamensky exchanged inquiring glances with myself.

That scene was, indeed, a strange one, the dirty, unkempt monk in his faded, ragged habit, greasy at collar and sleeves, his black matted beard sweeping across his chest, and his hair uncombed, standing erect and rather imperious, posing as a Divine messenger, in that luxurious private apartment of the Empress herself.

"It is but right that you, as our spiritual guide, should be in direct touch with the Emperor and myself," she said, without, however, referring to the meeting at Kazan, to which I had certainly expected she would allude. "From our friend Stürmer I have learnt much concerning your good works, Father, and I wish to support them financially, if I may be permitted, just as I did those of Father Gapon."

"Truly I thank thee, O Lady," he replied, bowing low again. "My convent at Pokrovsky is in urgent need of funds."

"Then I shall give orders for you to receive a donation immediately," she said in a low voice, and with that pronounced German accent which always reminded those with whom she came into contact that she was not a true-born Russian. "Stolypin, too, has told me of the wonderful miracle you performed in Warsaw."

I knew of that miracle, an outrageous fraud which had been perpetrated upon an assembly of ignorant peasants by means of a clever conjuring trick in which Rasputin's friend, the chemist Badmayev, and another, had assisted. Stürmer had been laughing heartily over it at Rasputin's house on the previous night.

"God hath given me strength," replied the monk simply, and with much humbleness. "I am His servant, sent by Him unto Russia as her guide and her deliverer. As such I am before thee."

As he stood there with devout piety written upon his sallow, shrunken countenance, he certainly presented a most saintly, picturesque appearance, his attitude being that of a most humble ascetic of the Middle Ages. Saint Francis of Assisi could not have been humbler.

That Her Majesty was much impressed by the crafty charlatan was quite apparent. In that strange jumble of quotations from the Scriptures which he so often used, he declared to her that by Divine command he intended to guide Russia in her forthcoming progress and prosperity, so that she should rise to become the all-powerful nation of Europe.

"It is well, O Lady, that thou hast sent for me," he added. "I am thy most devoted servant. I am entirely in thy hands."

And again crossing his begrimed hands upon his breast he raised his eyes to Heaven, and repeated his blessing in that same jumbled jargon which he used at the weekly séances of the sister-disciples.

"O Father, I sincerely thank you," replied Her Majesty at last. "The Emperor is unfortunately away in Moscow, but when he returns you must again come to us, for I know he will welcome you warmly. We are both striving for the national welfare, and if we receive your goodwill we shall have no fear of failure."

"There are, alas! rumours of plots against the dynasty," said Rasputin. "But, O Lady, I beg of thee to heed these my words and remain calm and secure, for although attempts may be made,

desperate perhaps, it is willed that none will be successful. God in His grace is Protector of the House of Romanoff, to whom a son will assuredly soon be born."

Alexandra Feodorovna held her breath at hearing those words. That scene before the shrine of Our Lady of Kazan was, no doubt, still vivid in her mind.

"Are you absolutely confident of that?" she asked him in breathless suspense.

"The truth hath already been revealed unto me. Therefore I know," was his reply. "I know—and I here tell thee, O Lady. The Imperial House will have a son and heir."

That prophecy, duly fulfilled as it was later on, caused the Empress to regard the dissolute "saint" as a "holy" man. In that eventful hour at Tsarskoe-Selo the die was cast. The Empress had fallen irrevocably beneath the spell of the amazing rascal, and the death-knell of the Romanoffs as rulers had been sounded.

When we backed out of the Empress's presence the peasant Ivan, who had introduced us, handed us over to the Tsar's chief valet, an elderly grey-bearded man in the Imperial livery, a man whose name we understood was Tchernoff, and who had been valet of the old Emperor Alexander III.

The Starets left the palace full of extreme satisfaction, and indeed, when an hour later we were alone together in the train returning to Petrograd, he grinned evilly across at me, and said meaningly:

"Alexandra Feodorovna did not forget our meeting at Kazan, though she did not allude to it. Ere long, though she is Empress, I intend that she shall sit at my feet and do my bidding!"

And he chuckled within himself as was his peasant's habit when mightily pleased.

Truly, that meeting with the Tsar's valet Tchernoff was quite as fateful to Russia as the meeting with the neurotic spiritualistic Empress herself.

CHAPTER III

THE POTSDAM PLOT DEVELOPS

About a week after Rasputin's first audience of the Empress Alexandra, the Bishop Theophanus, confessor of the Imperial family, paid him a visit at the Poltavskaya.

The Bishop, a big, over-fed man, had a long chat with the Starets in my presence.

"Her Majesty was very much impressed by you, my dear Grichka," said the well-known cleric to the man who, having pretended to abandon his profligate ways, had parted his hair in the middle and become a pilgrim. "She has daily spoken of you, and you are to be commanded to audience with the Tsar. Hence I am here to give you some advice."

The "holy" man grinned with satisfaction, knowing how complete had been the success of Stürmer's plans. At the moment Theophanus was in ignorance of the deeply laid plot to draw the Empress beneath the spell of the Starets whom the inferior classes all over Russia—as well as the well-to-do—believed was leading such a saint-like, ascetic life in imitation of Christ.

Truly, Grichka dressed the part well, and gave himself the outward appearance of saintliness and godliness. Even the Bishop was bamboozled by him, just as Petrograd society was being mystified and electrified by the rising of "the Divine Protector" of Russia.

Of his doctrine I need not here write. Dark hints of its astonishing immorality have already leaked out to the world through chattering women who were members of the cult. My object here is to expose the most subtle and ingenious plot which the world has known—the Teutonic conspiracy against our Russian Empire.

Rasputin's "religion" was not a novel one, as is generally supposed. It was simply a variation conceived by his mystically-inclined mind upon the one devised by Marcion in the early days of the Christian era. He had conceived the theory that the only means by which the spirit could be elevated was to mortify and destroy the flesh.

The Bishop Teofan, or Theophanus, was a mock ascetic, just as was Rasputin. Bishop Alexis of Kazan, after Rasputin's visit there, had introduced him to the Rector of the Religious Academy, and already the mock saint had established a circle of ascetic students, of whom Teofan and another Starets named Mitia the Blessed (a name derived from Dmitry), who came from Montenegro, were members. But Rasputin, although the leader, had entirely imposed upon Teofan.

In all seriousness the Bishop told the Starets of the interest in him which the Empress had aroused in the mind of the Tsar.

"He is a keen spiritualist, just as is the Empress," said the confessor. "At Court everyone has heard of your marvellous powers. I can promise you great success if you carry out the views I will place before you. You must form a Court circle of disciples. The woman most likely to assist you is Madame Vyubova, who, with Mademoiselle Kamensky, is Her Majesty's greatest confidante."

"Very well, I will meet her. You arrange it."

"To-morrow is Monday, and there will be the usual clerical reception at the Countess Ignatieff's. I will see that she is there to meet you."

"Excellent, my dear Teofan!" said the "saint." "In this affair we will help each other. I will form a circle of believers at Court, and Alexandra Feodorovna shall be at their head."

The fact is that Teofan knew that Rasputin was possessed of a marvellous hypnotic power, and, being aware of the vogue of hypnotists at Court, saw in the Starets an able assistant by whom to gain power in the immediate entourage of Their Majesties. Thus, quite unconsciously, he was furthering the plans of Kouropatkine and Stürmer, who were receiving money from Berlin.

Already one of Rasputin's principal disciples was Madame Golovine, the elder sister of the Grand Duke Paul'smorganatic wife, Countess Hohenfelsen, a woman who had become his most

ardent follower, and who never failed to attend, with her two daughters, the famous séances held weekly in that big upstairs room.

On the following evening I went with Rasputin to the great house of the Dowager Countess Ignatieff to attend the usual Monday gathering of prelates and ascetics, for her salon was a rendezvous for all kinds of religious cranks, theologians, and people interested in pious works. Rasputin's unexpected appearance there caused a sensation.

Outside his circle of "disciples" he was unapproachable. The instructions given me by Boris Stürmer were absolute and precise. The reason that I was always at the charlatan's right hand was because he could only write with difficulty, and was therefore unable to make any memoranda. His letters were the painful efforts of an unlettered mujik, as indeed he was.

And yet already he had become the most renowned man in the Russian capital!

Our Empire's quarrel with Japan had not been finally settled. The country was in a state of serious unrest. While the revolutionary spirit, started by the death of the girl Vietroff, was seething everywhere, the dynasty was threatened on every hand. Yet the ever-open eye of the Okhrana was upon everyone, and arrests of innocent persons were still continuing.

That night the salon of the Countess Ignatieff was responsible for much concerning the downfall of the Romanoffs. In the great luxurious drawing-room there were assembled beneath the huge crystal electroliers a curious, mixed company of the pious and the vicious of the capital. There was the Metropolitan in his robes and with his great crucifix, Ministers of State in uniforms with decorations, Actual Privy Councillors and their wives, and dozens of underlings in their gaudy tinsel, prelates with crosses at their necks, and women of all classes, from the highest aristocracy to the painted sister of the higher demi-monde.

The gathering was characteristic of Petrograd in those times of Russia's decadence, when Germany was preparing for war. The fight with Japan had already been engineered through Kouropatkine as a preliminary to the betrayal and smashing of our Empire.

Of the conflict with the Mikado I have no concern. My pen is taken up in order to reveal what I know regarding the astounding plots conceived in Potsdam and executed in Petrograd, in order fearlessly to expose those who were traitors to their country, and to whom the *débâcle* of 1917 was due.

In that great well-lit saloon, crowded by religious personages of all kinds, the old Dowager Countess Ignatieff, in stiff black silk, came forward to receive the popular Starets as the newest star in Russia's religious firmament. With Stürmer behind him to advise and to plot, aided by an obscure civil servant named Protopopoff—who afterwards became Minister of the Interior and a spy of Germany—the "saint" never held himself cheap. That was one of the secrets of his astounding career. Though he possessed no education and could scarcely trace his own name, he possessed the most acute brain of any lawyer or banker in Petrograd. In every sense he was abnormal, just as abnormal as Joan of Arc, Saint Anthony, Saint Francis, or a dozen others who have been beatified.

The rheumatic old countess, after shaking hands with us both, introduced us to a dozen other persons around her. Suddenly she said:

"Ah! Here is my dear friend the Lady-of-the-Court Anna Vyrubova. Allow me to introduce you, Father."

The Starets instantly crossed his hands piously over his breast and bowed before a good-looking, sleek-faced woman of forty, who was elegantly dressed, and who greeted him with a humorous smile. Having heard much of the woman's scandalous past, I naturally regarded her with considerable curiosity. She was a woman of destiny. Petrograd had not long before been agog with the scandal following her marriage with a young naval officer, who had gone to the Baltic, and unexpectedly returning to his wife's room in the palace at Tsarskoe-Selo, had been shut out by the Empress herself. The husband had afterwards died in mysterious circumstances, which had been hushed up by the

police, and madame had remained as the personal attendant upon Her Majesty with her inseparable friend Zéneide Kamensky.

As I watched the monk's meeting with this woman of adventure, I saw that he had at once fascinated her, just as completely as he had hypnotised her Imperial mistress. She stood before him, using her small black fan slowly, for the room was overpoweringly hot, and began to chat, assuring him that she had for a long time been desirous of meeting him.

As I stood beside Rasputin I heard him say, in that humble manner which always attracted society women:

"And, O Lady, I have heard of thee often. It is with sincere pleasure that I gaze upon thy face and speak with thee. It is God's will—let Him be thanked for this our meeting."

The blasphemy of it all appalled me. I knew of certain deep plots in progress, and I watched the handsome lady-in-waiting, with whom the monk crossed the room, nodding self-consciously to the bishops, prelates, and mock-pious scoundrels of all sorts, with their female victims. I held my breath in wonder.

As I followed I saw Stürmer, the goat-bearded traitor, standing chatting to a pretty young girl in turquoise blue. Then I overheard Madame Vyrubova say to the Starets:

"I came here to-night, Father, especially to meet you. Her Majesty gave me a message. She is in despair. She requires your help, prayers, and advice."

"Ah! my dear lady, I regret; I am fully alive to the high honours which our Tsaritzza has done me to command me to Court. But my sphere is with the poor. My life is with them—for their benefit and guidance."

"I bear you a message," said the well-preserved woman of whom a thousand tongues had gossiped evilly in Petrograd. "To-morrow the Empress expects you informally. She will take no refusal."

"Refusal—how can I refuse my Empress?" he replied. "I can beg of her to excuse me. I have to attend a meeting in the lowest quarter of the city to-morrow among those who await me. And in the evening I go upon a pilgrimage. Her Majesty will not begrudge the poor my ministrations. Please tell her this. My sphere, as designed by God, is with the masses and not in the Imperial Palace."

That was all I overheard. Stürmer called me aside to whisper, and as he did so I saw that the Starets had at once become surrounded by women, of whom he always became the centre of attraction, with hands crossed so humbly over his breast.

His refusal to go to Court was in accordance with his extraordinary intuition and acumen, though his meeting with the woman Vyrubova marked another milestone in the history of Russia's betrayal.

The days passed. The world was, of course, in ignorance, but we in the Poltavskaya, the monk and myself, knew of the despatch of Admiral Rozhdestvensky's blundering fleet on its voyage half-way round the world, how he was ordered to fire upon anything he saw in the North Sea, and how, as soon came out, he fired upon some of your British trawlers on the Dogger Bank, for which our Government paid quite willingly sixty-five thousand pounds in compensation.

But let the first war-chapter of Russia's history pass. With it Rasputin had but little to do. The person who, unwilling or not, carried out the will of Potsdam's Kaiser was the Empress Alexandra. And having done so she, with her curious nature, suddenly turned from gay to grave. She became strange in her conduct and discarded her wonderful Paris gowns—in which, by the way, she was eclipsed by "Liane," the dark-haired diva of the Paris *cafés chantants*, in whom Nicholas II. took such a very paternal interest.

Time after time I had been present when Stürmer and Rasputin, chuckling over the undoubted success of their conspiracy, discussed the situation.

Since Her Majesty had met the rascal monk at Tsarskoe-Selo she had never appeared in public. On certain occasions, when a Court pageant or function had to be held according to custom and

the calendar, it was the Emperor's mother who, with her well-known charm and honesty, received the guests. Excuses were made for Alexandra Feodorovna's non-appearance. The truth was that the Empress, full of spiritualistic beliefs, had suddenly developed a religious mania, centred around the amazing personality of the mock monk.

Thrice had Her Majesty sent him commands through her pro-German puppet Fredericks, and thrice he, at Stürmer's suggestion, refused to comply. This illiterate Siberian monk, ex-horse-thief and betrayer of women, actually disregarded the Imperial order! He had declared himself to be the saviour of Russia, and greater than the Romanoffs.

"The Empress is furious!" declared the Bishop Teofan one day as, with his heavy bejewelled cross upon his breast and wearing clothes of the richest texture, he sat with the rascal in his den. "Sometimes she is in anger, at others in despair. Anna Vyubova is frantic. Why do you not come to audience?"

"She promised that I should see Nicholas," was the reply. "After I have spoken with him I will see her. It does a woman good to wait."

"I agree, but your refusal may be stretched too far," said the Bishop.

"None will tell the truth concerning her," Rasputin said. "I hear on one hand that she thinks herself too fat and is taking the 'Entfettungscure' against the advice of the Court physician. Others say that she has eczema and dare not show her face, while others say she is mad. What is the truth?"

"Come and ascertain for yourself."

"Her devotion is that of a fanatic—I take it?"

"Exactly. She lives only for the entertainment of monks and pilgrims. You are lucky, my dear Grichka. Madame Vyubova was evidently entranced by you at Countess Ignatieff's. She will do your bidding. Only, I beg of you to come to Court."

The charlatan, however, steadily refused the Bishop's advice. Instead, he left Petrograd that night alone, and went away to his wife and sister-disciples at Pokrovsky, in Siberia.

For more than two months he was absent from Petrograd. One day a frantic message came to me over the telephone from Madame Vyubova, who inquired the whereabouts of the Starets.

"The Father has gone to his convent at Pokrovsky, Madame," I replied.

"What!" she gasped. "Gone to Siberia! Why, Her Majesty is daily expecting him here at the Palace. When will he return?"

"I regret, Madame, that I cannot say," was my reply. "He has told me nothing."

"Will you please take a confidential message to Boris Stürmer for me?" she asked. And when I replied in the affirmative, she went on:

"Please go at once to him and ask him to come to the Palace this evening without fail. I am very anxious to see him concerning a highly important matter. A carriage will meet the train which arrives at seven-thirty."

I promised to carry out the wishes of the Tsaritsa's favourite lady-in-waiting, and half an hour later called upon Stürmer at his fine house in the Kirovskaya, where I delivered the message.

During the next few weeks I merely called at the Poltavskaya each morning for the monk's letters, which I opened and dealt with at my leisure.

His correspondence was truly amazing. The letters were mostly from wealthy female devotees, missives usually couched in pious language. Some contained confessions of the most private nature, and asking the Father's advice and blessing. All these latter he had given me strict instructions carefully to preserve. Any letter which contained self-condemnation by its writer, or any confession of sin, was therefore carefully put away, after being duly replied to. At the time, it did not occur to me that the impostor ever intended to allow them to see the light of day, and, indeed, it was not until several years later that I discovered that he was using them for the purpose of extracting large sums from women who preferred to pay the blackmail he levied rather than have their secrets exposed to their sweet-hearts or husbands.

While Rasputin, having thrown off his cloak of piety, was leading a dissolute life in far-off Pokrovsky, and refusing to obey the Empress's repeated invitations, the guns of Peter and Paul one day boomed forth salvo after salvo, announcing to the world that the prayer uttered by the Starets before our Lady of Kazan had been granted.

An heir had been born to the Romanoffs!

There was but little public rejoicing, however, for Russia was, at the moment, plunged into grief over the disastrous result of her attack upon Japan. Nevertheless, the event more than ever impressed upon the neurotic Empress that Grichka was possessed of some mysterious and divine influence. Her Majesty believed entirely in his saintliness, and her faith in the power of his prayers was complete. God had granted his prayer and sent an heir to the Romanoffs because of his purity and perfect piety. Already she was wondering whether, in some mysterious way, the child's life was not linked with that of the holy Father whom the Almighty had sent to protect her son's existence.

Because of this the Empress sent to Rasputin, at Pokrovsky, a number of telegrams, which eventually the monk gave over to me to docket and put away with the incriminating letters of his foolish and fascinated admirers. The women of Russia, from the Empress to the lowly superstitious peasant, were now at the charlatan's feet.

One telegram from Alexandra Feodorovna read as follows:

"Father and Protector of our House, why do you refuse to come and give us comfort? God has given the Romanoffs an heir, and we desire your counsel and your prayers. Do, I beg of you, return to sustain us with your presence. When we met our conversation remained unfinished. I confess that I doubted then, but I now believe. Make haste and come at once to us. From your sister—Alexandra."

Of this appeal the Starets took no notice. He preferred the society of his sister-disciples at Pokrovsky to that of the Tsaritzza. Besides, was it not part of his clever plan to place the Empress beneath his influence by bringing her to the brink of despair? He had not yet met Nicholas II., and it was his intention to place his amazing and mysterious grip upon him also at the crucial moment. So again the Empress sent him a communication—a letter written in her own hand, and delivered by one of the Imperial couriers.

"Why do you still hesitate?" she asked. "I sent you word by Anna [Madame Vyubova] that I desired eagerly to see you again. Your good works are to-day in everyone's mouth. All at Court are speaking of you and your beautiful soul-inspiring religion, of which I am anxious to know more details from your own lips. It is too cruel of you to sever yourself from Petrograd when all are longing for your presence. What can I do in order to induce you to come? Ask of me anything, and your wish shall be granted. Do reply.—Alexandra."

Again he treated her invitation with contempt, for following this, ten days later, she sent him another telegram:

"If you still refuse to come I will send Anna to you to try and induce you to reconsider the situation. Nicholas is extremely anxious to consult you. Father, I again implore you to come to us.—A."

Rasputin, who had created such a favourable impression upon the lady-in-waiting Vyubova, certainly had no intention of allowing her to go to Pokrovsky and see the sordid home which Russia believed to be a wonderful "monastery," and to which Petrograd society had subscribed so freely. He therefore sent Her Majesty a message—the first response she extracted—to the effect that he was leaving for Petrograd as soon as it was possible to fulfil his Divine "call."

In the meantime I had been introduced by Boris Stürmer, whom I met almost daily, to Stolypin, a friend of Rasputin's principal disciple in Petrograd, Madame Golovine, and to Monsieur Raëff, who

afterwards, by Rasputin's influence, received the appointment of Procurator of the Holy Synod. At Stürmer's fine house there were, in the absence of the Starets, constant meetings of Raeff, General Kurloff, the Chief of the Political Police, and a beetle-browed official named Kschessinski, who was director of that secret department of State known as "the Black Cabinet," a suite of rooms in the central postal bureau in Petrograd, where one's correspondence was daily under examination for the benefit of the corrupt Ministers and their place-seeking underlings. In addition, at these dinners, followed by the secret conferences, there attended a certain smart, well-set-up officer named Miassoyedeff, a colonel stationed at Wirballen on the East Prussia frontier, and who had received gracious invitations from the Kaiser to go shooting and to hob-nob with him. This man afterwards became a spy of Germany, as I will later on reveal.

Kurloff, as head of the Political Police, had, before my appointment as secretary to the Starets, been my superior, and therefore I well knew the wheels within the wheels of his department. Naturally he was hand-in-glove with the director of the Black Cabinet, the doings of which would require a whole volume to themselves, and to me it was evident that some further great and deep laid plot was in progress, of which Rasputin was to be the head director.

One day in the Nevski I met Mitia the Blessed, the Starets who ran Rasputin so closely in the public favour. I saw he was hopelessly intoxicated, and was being followed by a crowd of jeering urchins. I did not, however, know that Stürmer and his friends had arranged this disgraceful exhibition of unholiness in order to discredit and destroy Grichka's rival. Five minutes later I met the Bishop Theophanus walking with the Procurator of the Holy Synod, who, like myself, witnessed the degrading sight, and from that moment Mitia the Blessed no longer exercised power, and was not further invited to the salons of those mystical members of the aristocracy. He had been swept into oblivion in a single day.

Rasputin at last returned, forced to do so by the determined attitude of the Empress, who without doubt was suffering from serious religious mania, as well as an acute form of neurotic heart disease. The monk arrived quite unexpectedly at the Poltavskaya, and rang me up on the telephone late one evening.

The Bishop Theophanus was, I found, with him. He knew of his arrival, and had come from Peterhof to meet him and urge him to go next day and see the Empress.

"If it is thy wish, I will," replied the "saint" with some reluctance, for he knew too well that already he wielded an unbounded influence over the Tsaritzza. The fellow whose record was the worst imaginable, and whose very nickname, "Rasputin," meant in Russian "the dissolute," was regarded by the Empress as possessed of divine power, and as saviour of Russia and protector of the Imperial family and its heir.

"I hear that Alexis, Bishop of Kazan, has turned your enemy, and has written to the Holy Synod regarding your questionable monastery at Pokrovsky," remarked Theophanus. "It is very regrettable."

"Bah! my dear friend. I have no fear," declared the man whose vanity was so overweening. "Soon you will see that Nicholas himself will do my bidding. I shall play the tune, and he will dance. All appointments will, ere long, be in my hands, and I will place one of our friends as Procurator of the Holy Synod."

At the moment I was inclined to laugh at such bombastic assertion. Little, indeed, did I dream that within twelve months his prophecy would be fulfilled, and that the ex-horse-stealer, whose secretary I had become, would actually rule Russia through the lethargic weakling who sat upon the throne as Tsar Nicholas II.

A week later I accompanied the Starets to have his first audience with His Majesty the Emperor at the Palace of Peterhof, that wonderful Imperial residence where the great Samson Fountain in gilded bronze throws up from the lion's jaws a thick jet seventy feet high, in imitation of Versailles, and where nearly six hundred servants were employed in various capacities. We passed the Marly Pond, where the carp were called by the ringing of a bell, and the Marly Cascade, where water runs

over twenty gilded marble steps. Truly, the beauties of Peterhof were a revelation to the Starets and myself. On the previous day he had had audience of the Empress at Tsarskoe-Selo, but I had not been present, therefore I remained in ignorance of what had transpired. All I know is that he returned home and drank a whole bottle of champagne to himself, in full satisfaction—not that he cared for the wine, for his peasant taste favoured the fiery vodka.

On entering Peterhof we were met by the valet Tchernoff, who greeted Rasputin very warmly with some meaning words, and said:

"His Majesty is in his private cabinet expecting you. Come."

Another valet took our hats and overcoats, and then Tchernoff led us up a great flight of marble stairs, and on through nearly a dozen panelled rooms with historic portraits, much like those I had once passed through at Fontainebleau, until he entered the blue drawing-room, a great, old-fashioned, eighteenth-century apartment adorned by a number of magnificent pictures by Saltzmann.

Your British public have never truly realised the gorgeousness of the Palace at Peterhof, or the fact that in the Imperial service at the various residences there were no fewer than four thousand domestics, most of them useless and all uniformed. The "Arabys," imported especially from Abyssinia, and who wore fantastically embroidered blue and gold uniforms with a great crimson sash, and a kind of turban upon their heads, were simply well-paid puppets, who added pomp to the gorgeous salons, the doors of which they guarded.

As we passed through the great rooms on our way to the Tsar's private cabinet, a hundred servants and officials bowed to us, but Rasputin remained quite unimpressed. He was possessed of a most astounding intuition, and he knew that by his mystical practices, his mock piety, and by apparently ignoring the Imperial pair that success was assured.

At last we stood before the door of the autocrat's room, which Tchernoff threw open unceremoniously, when we were confronted by His Majesty, who wore a rough tweed shooting-suit, presenting anything but an Imperial figure. I had expected to see him in uniform, like the thousand and one pictures which purport to represent him, instead of which I found a very ordinary-looking, bearded man, with deep-set eyes, a wan countenance, and rather lank hair. He was square-built, a trifle below the medium height, and a man whom, had you passed him in the Nevski, you might have taken for a Jew tailor or a small tradesman. But the room itself was a beautiful one, like all the apartments in Peterhof, semicircular in shape, with a great bay window looking out upon the wonderful fountains, all of which were throwing up their jets, with a great vista of greenery beyond.

The Tsar bowed as the Starets, crossing himself, bestowed his blessing upon him. The owner of twenty palaces and seven hundred million acres of land turned his eyes to the carpet humbly as the mock saint uttered those words of incomprehensible jargon which half Russia believed to be inspired by the Divine will.

When Rasputin spoke His Majesty seemed cowed and thoughtful. Over his whole frame was written fear and exhaustion. His voice was hollow when he replied, and his glance was full of anticipation. At every gesture of the Starets he seemed startled.

Was it any wonder when one recollected, so many were the plots against the dynasty, that at the moment he had removed from Tsarskoe-Selo, where a gang of a thousand men were engaged in digging deep trenches around the palace because the Okhrana had got wind of a desperate plot to tunnel beneath the Imperial residence and blow it up together with its Imperial occupiers.

His Majesty addressed the Starets as "thee" and "thou."

"I know, Father, that thou art our guide and saviour," said the autocrat, when together we were seated in the window, Rasputin explaining that he always took me with him in order that I might take mental notes of conversations and decisions.

"Féodor is mute," he added. "And he is part of myself."

Then His Majesty referred to Rasputin's "miracles" which he had performed in Warsaw, Kiev, and other places, mere conjuring tricks which had held the peasants speechless in amazement.

"Theophanus has told us of them. Thou hast healed the sick and cured the lame," said His Majesty. "Truly, thou art greater in Russia than myself."

"Pardon, your Majesty," replied the impostor humbly, "I am but God's messenger, but thou art Tsar. It is not for me to exert authority, only to pray unceasingly for the Empire and for the well-being of its Imperial House. Theophanus hath, I hope, told thee that I seek no emoluments, no advancement, no favour, no honour; I am but the humble Starets—a pilgrim who hopes one day to see Mount Athos, there to retire in devotion."

"Theophanus has told me much," said the Emperor. "He has told me how at spiritualistic séances thou canst work thy will with our departed, and how at the house of our dear Stürmer not long ago thou didst obtain communication with the spirit of my dear father Alexander. Truly, thy powers are great, and we have need of thee. Why didst thou refuse to come to us even though the Empress sent thee so many commands?"

"Because, as I have replied to Her Majesty, I am no courtier. My work lies in the homes of the poor, not in the palaces."

"Ah, no," laughed the autocrat with good humour. "Thou art truly sent to us to save Russia. Thy place is here, in our own home."

I drew a long breath when I heard the Tsar pronounce those words, for they showed quite plainly the strong, invincible grip the impostor had, by posing with unconcern, already obtained upon the Imperial family and the Court.

The Starets crossed himself, and again bowed. I was amazed to witness the crass ignorance and astounding superstition displayed by the Emperor of Russia, whom all Europe believed to be a progressive, wideawake monarch. That he possessed a spiritualistic kink, as did also his German wife, was quite apparent. Any bogus medium or charlatan could easily impose upon him. A dozen men and women who, by their vagaries and pretended powers, had brought psychic studies into ridicule, had given séances before the Emperor, and had told him things which his crafty entourage had already paid them to "reveal."

On the night of the declaration of war with Japan, Kouropatkine brought to Peterhof the French medium Jules Verrier, who received a handsome fee for pretending to get into touch with the spirit of Peter the Great, who declared that Russia, in declaring war, had carried out his wishes. And Nicholas was at once in high glee, and mightily enthusiastic to know that his historic ancestor approved of his action.

The Imperial Court was full of frauds, traitors, and sycophants. In all of them Nicholas had the fullest confidence, while his wife was possessed of certain knowledge which sometimes caused her to discriminate.

The commonplace-looking man in tweeds, who was the entire reverse of one's idea of an Emperor, grew confidential, and it was plain that he was quite as much impressed by Grichka as the Empress had been, for throughout the audience the monk had used to the full his inexplicable hypnotic power.

"Our good Theophanus and Helidor favour us with their counsel, but, Father, thou hast our most complete confidence. I beg of thee to grant the Empress another interview to-morrow, for she is daily longing for counsel from thee. I will fix the audience. So, as our friend, please keep the appointment. But before we part I wish to grant to thee any request that thou mayest desire—any appointment or advancement of any friend. Speak, and thy wish shall be at once granted."

The monk reflected. It was, indeed, the moment of his first triumph.

"I have a young and extremely able friend named Protopopoff in the Ministry of the Interior," he replied. "He is a loyal son of Russia, and a pious believer. Cannot he be advanced?"

"He shall be. I will make a note of the name," and turning to his desk, he scribbled it upon the blotting-pad with a stubby pencil, repeating the words:

"Protopopoff—in the Ministry of the Interior."

And such was the manner in which the man who was the most audacious spy that Germany employed in Russia was placed in the path of advancement, subsequently in 1915 becoming Minister in his own Department, and betraying his country for German gold.

Truly, the Potsdam plot was rapidly maturing, and its amazing ramifications I intend to disclose.

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDER OF STOLYPIN

Within a fortnight of the mock monk's audience of the Tsar he found himself installed in a fine suite of rooms in the Palace at Tsarskoe-Selo, one apartment being assigned to myself as his secretary.

Rasputin's ascendancy over the Imperial couple became daily more marked. I was the onlooker of a very curious and clever game. Spiritualistic séances were held frequently, at which the Emperor and Empress assisted. In Petrograd the monk also continued the weekly receptions of his "disciples," chief among them being Madame Golovine and the Princess Paley. The Empress fell more and more beneath the evil influence of the Starets, for she felt convinced that his prayer had been answered by the birth of an heir.

To one man—even though of the Germanophile party—the intrusion of Rasputin into the Court circle caused great annoyance. That was Count Fredericks.

Madame Vyubova one day told me that the count had that afternoon, in her presence, inquired of the Emperor:

"Who is this new Starets of whom everybody is talking?"

"Oh! merely a simple mujik whose prayers carry right to Heaven," was His Majesty's answer. "He is endowed with most sublime faith."

The count then warned the Tsar of the displeasure which Rasputin's presence at Court was creating on every hand, adding:

"There are rumours that he is a mere drunken libertine. Make inquiries for yourself of his doings in Petrograd."

"Well, my dear Count," laughed the Emperor carelessly, "better one Starets than ten hysterics."

This seemed to me to prove that Rasputin's presence often saved the Emperor from the hysterical outbursts of his wife.

Indeed, only the previous day the monk put about a story in Petrograd to account for the Empress's hysterical state. He started a rumour that Her Majesty was, against the advice of the Court physicians, following a system of German *Entfettungscure*, or cure for obesity, the result having been a complete breakdown of the nervous system.

Thus, by slow degrees, the artful monk ingratiated himself with the Imperial family, just as years ago, when a mere cabdriver, in his pre-saintly days, he happened to ingratiate himself with Alexis, Bishop of Kazan, who became greatly struck with him, and later pushed him forward as a holy man, yet for his trouble afterwards found himself swept away, and his successor appointed by Rasputin's own hand. The monk was relentless, overbearing, suspicious of any persons who did him a favour, and at the same time ready to lick the boots of Germany's War Lord.

The "Dark Forces" were now strenuously at work. Little did I enjoy the quiet of my own rooms in Petrograd. My "saintly" master was ever active holding conferences, often hourly, with Ministers of State, councillors, and the "disciples" of his own secret cult.

Very soon I noted that his closest friend was Stolypin, a good-looking man with beard and curled moustache, who was President of the Council of Ministers.

At that period Stolypin and the Emperor were inseparable. His Majesty gave him daily audiences, and sometimes, through Mademoiselle Zéneide Kamensky, the Empress's chief confidante, he had audience of Her Majesty.

I met Stolypin often. His Excellency was a bluff but elegant bureaucrat, who had succeeded Count Witte, a man of refinement, belonging to a very old boyar family. He was an excellent talker, and with his soft, engaging manners he could, when he wished, exercise a personal charm that always had a great effect upon his hearers. His Excellency's great virtue in the Emperor's eyes was that he

never wearied him, and that was much in his favour; he always curtailed his business. Whatever he had to report to the Emperor was done quickly, without unnecessary comment, and the conference ended, they smoked together on terms of almost equality.

I beg the reader's pardon if I here digress for a moment. After Stolypin we had a well-meaning statesman as Prime Minister in Kokovtsov, who endeavoured to follow the same lines as his master. He was a talented and eloquent man, whom I often met, and who at first impressed the Tsar by his crystallised reports. But Emperor and Prime Minister had no personal attraction towards each other, as they should have if an empire is to progress. Nicholas never gave him his confidence.

Perhaps I may be permitted to reveal here a scene historic in the history of the Empire, being present with my master Rasputin in the Tsar's private cabinet. It was a very curious incident, and revealed much concerning the attitude of Nicholas towards the nation.

Kokovtsov, who had allowed Akimoff to be present—the latter, I believe, in eager anticipation of a triumph—read to the Emperor his new project for enlarging the Government monopoly system for the sale of vodka. This would have greatly increased the Government's exchequer, but would inevitably have ruined the people.

In the room Rasputin sat in his black robe and his big jewelled cross suspended by its chain, while I stood beside him.

The Emperor, with a cigarette in his mouth, sat in a big arm-chair at his desk, tracing circles and squares upon a sheet of paper, his habit when distracted. Now and then he scratched his head. He was attentive to the report, still drawing his circles, but making no comment, except that his lips relaxed in a faint smile.

Suddenly he turned to Rasputin and asked: "Well Father, what do you understand in all this?"

Kokovtsov ceased reading his project, and stood in wonder. Not a single item of the project had been criticised, no comment had been offered, therefore His Excellency naturally believed that his efforts were receiving approbation. Rasputin was silent.

Suddenly the Tsar rose from his chair with a sigh of weariness, and slowly selected a fresh cigarette from the big golden box upon his writing-table. Then he shook hands with Kokovtsov as a sign that the audience was at an end, and said:

"Really, my dear Excellency, I do not agree with your project at all. It is all utter rubbish, and will only lead the Empire into further difficulties. Surely Russia has sufficient alcohol!"

I watched the scene with wide-open eyes.

Poor Kokovtsov, so well meaning, bowed in assent and crumpled up before the Tsar of all the Russias. The blow was quite unexpected. When I left the Emperor's presence with Rasputin, the latter said:

"Well, my dear Féodor. The day of Kokovtsov is ended. One may be thankful for it, because it will mean less friction between the Emperor and the Empress."

Three days later His Majesty dismissed his Prime Minister, but gave him the title of Count. He had no son, therefore the distinction was a mere empty one.

With this digression, for which I hope I may be pardoned, I will return to Stolypin. The mystery of his assassination has always been carefully hushed-up by the Secret Police, but I here intend to lift the veil, and, at the risk of producing certain damning evidence, disclose the whole of the amazing and dastardly plot.

Few people know of it. Rasputin knew it, I know it, the Empress knows it, and a certain woman living in seclusion in London to-day knows it. But to the world the truth which I here write will, I venture to believe, come as a great surprise.

The cry "Land and Liberty" was being heard on every hand in the Empire. Peter Arkadieitch Stolypin, son of an aide-de-camp general of Alexander II., was in the zenith of his popularity. He had become a *vermentchik*, the traditional appellation applied to the favourite of the Emperor, and as such he loomed largely in the eyes of Europe. He had entered the public service as a youth, and

had later on become governor of the province of Samara, where he had attracted the notice of Count Witte because of the drastic way in which he had suppressed some serious riots there. In due course he was called to Petrograd, where he was introduced to the Emperor, and later on the mantle of Count Witte had fallen upon him.

Though in high favour with the Emperor he was clever enough to court the good graces of Rasputin, knowing full well what supreme influence he wielded over the Imperial couple. For that reason I frequently had conversation with him both at Court and at the Poltavskaya. He was a man of complex nature. A lady-killer of the most elegant type, refined and determined, yet lurking in the corners of his nature was a tyrannical trait and a hardness of heart.

In Samara he had distinguished himself by various injustices to the population, and hundreds of innocent persons had, because they had been denounced by the *agents-provocateurs* of the secret police, been sent to prison or to Siberia by administrative order. At first there was a rivalry between him and General Trepoff in the Tsar's good graces, but Trepoff died, leaving Stolypin master of the situation.

Though Rasputin behaved graciously towards him and often dined at his table, he was in secret his enemy. So cleverly did the monk form and carry out his plot that to the last he never believed but that the holy man, who prayed so fervently for his success in the guidance of Russia, was his most devoted friend.

Many crimes have been committed in Russia beneath the shadow of the Black Wings, but perhaps none more ingenious than the one under notice.

The first I knew of the deep conspiracy was in the spring of 1911, by the visit one night to Rasputin's house in the Poltavskaya of a tall, fair-haired man named Hardt, whom I knew as a frequent visitor to the monk. He was a merchant in Petrograd and a man of considerable means, but, as I afterwards discovered, was an agent of Potsdam specially sent to Russia as the secret factotum of the Tsaritsa. He was ever at her beck and call, and was the instrument by which she exchanged confidential correspondence with the Kaiser and other persons in Germany.

On that evening when Hardt called quite half-a-dozen of the sister-disciples were taking tea with the saint and gossiping, for each Thursday he would hold informal receptions, and with horrible blasphemy bestow upon the society women who attended his accursed blessing. The ladies there on that night were all of the most exclusive circle in Petrograd.

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