THE MINISTER OF EVIL

BY

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Freeditorial

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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 Vladimirskaya. 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, fascinators 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 Tsaritza. 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 Tsaritza 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 Tsaritza 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 Tsaritza 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 Tsaritza'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 Tsaritza 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 Tsaritza 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 thraldom 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 Vyrubova, 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's morganatic 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 Tsaritza 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 Vyrubova 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 'Entfettungscur' 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 Vyrubova 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 Vyrubova, 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 Tsaritza's favourite lady-in-waiting, and half an hour later called upon Stürmer at his fine house in the Kirotshnaya, 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 Tsaritza. 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 Vyrubova] 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 Vyrubova, 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 Raeff, 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 Tsaritza. 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 Vyrubova 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 Entfettungscur, 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 Arkadievitch 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 Tsaritza. 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.

On Hardt's arrival the reception was cut short after he had whispered some words to the Starets, who made excuse that he had to leave to return to the palace.

Indeed, he went to the telephone at the farther end of the room and held a conversation with the Tsaritza's confidante, Mademoiselle Kamensky. None knew, however, that that private telephone by which the charlatan so impressed his visitors was merely a fake one, its wires not extending farther than the end of the garden.

Grichka sometimes when alone rehearsed those conversations, until he succeeded in producing a perfect series of answers which would strike the hearer as a most intimate conversation concerning either Emperor or Empress.

From the chatter upon the mock telephone the assembly concluded that his presence was required at the palace immediately, therefore they rose and retired, leaving the mysterious Hardt alone with us.

Instead of going to Tsarskoe-Selo we retired to the saint's little den, where we opened a bottle of champagne, of which we all three drank.

"Well, my friend Hardt?" asked the monk, flinging himself carelessly into his easy chair and unbuttoning his long black coat for comfort. "What has happened? You can, as you know, speak before our faithful Féodor," he added.

"I have waiting outside a young woman whom I want you to see," replied the German agent.

"Does she wish to enter our circle?" inquired the monk, adding with his usual avariciousness: "Has she money?"

"No—neither," was Hardt's reply. "She does not want to become one of your disciples; indeed, the less you say on that matter the better!"

"Then why should I trouble to see her?"

"I will tell you all after you have chatted with her. May Féodor invite her in? She is sitting in a droshky outside."

"If you wish," growled Rasputin. "But why all this mystery? I have much to do. I am due at Countess Ignatieff's—and am already late."

"Remain patient, I beg of you, Father," urged the German suavely. "I am acting upon instructions—from Number Seventy."

"From Number Seventy!" echoed the monk, instantly realising that Hardt, an agent of the German Secret Service, was carrying out some well-concealed and ingenious project. "Very well," he said. "I rely upon you not to delay me longer than necessary. Féodor," he added, turning to me with that lofty air which his low mujik mind sometimes conceived to be superiority, "go and find this mysterious young person."

A few minutes later I conducted into the saint's presence a dark-haired, extremely handsome young woman of about thirty, who spoke with considerable refinement and whose arrival mystified me greatly.

Hardt introduced her to the holy man, saying:

"This is Mademoiselle Vera Baltz, of Stavropol, a friend of His Excellency Peter Stolypin."

"Ah! Welcome, my dear mademoiselle," exclaimed the monk affably. "So you are a friend of His Excellency—when he was Governor of Samara, I suppose?"

"Yes. I have come here because I crave your assistance. Monsieur Hardt knows all the circumstances, and will explain."

The saint turned to the fair-haired man seated opposite him, Mademoiselle Baltz having been given an easy-chair close by Rasputin's table. It was a writing-table, but the scoundrel never wrote. Sometimes he pretended to do

so, but the truth was that it was a long and painful procedure with him. He preferred to scrawl his initials to any typewritten letter which I prepared.

"The explanation is briefly this, Father," said Hardt in his businesslike way. "Mademoiselle has been the dupe of His Excellency, who, while Governor, often went to Stavropol, where he stayed at an hotel under another name. Mademoiselle never knew his identity until a year ago, when she saw his photograph in the papers as Prime Minister. She never knew that he was married—though I have here a letter in which he proposes marriage to her."

And he produced from his pocket a note, bearing the heading of the Centralnaya Hotel at Samara, which Rasputin read through.

"Well?" asked the Starets, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke from his bearded lips.

"Mademoiselle is anxious to meet His Excellency."

"Ah! I see," exclaimed the monk, whose mind at once turned to blackmail, a course which he himself was actively pursuing. "Mademoiselle wishes for money—eh?"

"No, Father," replied the young woman stoutly. "Not money—only justice! Peter Stolypin misled me, as you see according to his letter. I am but one of his many victims, and I desire to expose him."

"H'm!" grunted Rasputin, who, having ascertained that no monetary consideration was forthcoming, was not particularly interested in the affair. He never did anything without reward. Those who could pay him well obtained through his influence at Court high office and big emoluments. Within my own knowledge in at least twenty cases he was already receiving heavy percentages upon the salaries, including those of two bishops and three under-secretaries, who had been dug out from nowhere and pitchforked into office by him.

By his influence with Nicholas the rascal ruled Russia with a relentless recklessness unparalleled in all history.

"Mademoiselle has already had audience of Her Majesty, who has sent her here to interview you," Hardt explained. "I am placing her case in the hands of our friend Altschiller."

The latter was a well-known lawyer, who, by the way, was afterwards proved to be a spy of Austria.

"What do you desire of me, my dear young lady?" asked Rasputin in the paternal manner he so often assumed towards the fair sex who hung about the hem of his ragged robe, and knelt so constantly before him for his blessing.

"You, Father, are all-powerful in Russia," replied Vera Baltz. "Her Majesty told me that you would help me to—to destroy Stolypin," she said with a fierce expression in her black eyes.

Rasputin exchanged glances with the secret agent of Potsdam who, I knew, did so much dirty work on the Empress's behalf.

"What Her Majesty desires, I am here to obey," was the monk's quiet response. "I pray that no injustice be done," the blasphemer added, piously crossing himself.

"Injustice!" cried the girl angrily. "He deceived me, and left me to starve when he received his advancement and came here to Petrograd. He became the Tsar's favourite because of his cruel and harsh treatment of our poor people of Samara, and has climbed to office over the bodies of those shot down in the streets at his orders. Injustice! There is assuredly no injustice to drag the ghastly truth concerning him into the light of day."

"Not at all! I quite agree," said Rasputin, rising and shaking her hand. "You can tell your lawyer from me that you have my assistance, but in strictest secrecy, of course. Not a soul must know of it, remember!" he added, looking straight at her with that strange hypnotic glance of his, a gaze beneath which she quivered visibly.

"I shall remain silent," she promised.

"If the truth leaks out that you have seen either Her Majesty or myself, then I shall instantly become your enemy, and not your friend," the monk declared.

"Only Monsieur Hardt knows," the girl said. "It was he who took me to Peterhof."

"You may rely upon the silence of both my friends," Rasputin assured her, and a moment later I conducted her downstairs and out into the street.

When I returned to where Rasputin was still seated with his visitor, the latter was, I found, making explanation how he had, after considerable difficulty, traced the woman Baltz at the Empress's orders and taken her to

the Palace, first, however, prompting her to seek revenge upon the Prime Minister.

"I cannot understand it at all," Hardt added.

"I do. Cannot you see that Stolypin is violently anti-German and openly disapproves of the Germanophile party at Court?"

"But he is closeted daily with the Emperor, I understand. And the Empress grants him frequent audiences."

"Because she is endeavouring to ascertain the true extent of His Excellency's knowledge of her own dealings with our friends in Berlin," was the monk's reply. "Alix pretends to be most gracious to him, yet she is distinctly antagonistic, more from fear than anything else. To-day he is a favourite at Court, to-morrow——"

And Grichka made a wide sweep with his dirty knotted hand without concluding his sentence.

"Has Her Majesty spoken to you concerning her fears that Stolypin has discovered something?" asked the man Hardt eagerly.

The monk grinned meaningly.

"Her Majesty is taking precautions," he replied evasively. "Possibly Stolypin has discovered the reason you travelled to Berlin a month ago. I have an idea that you were watched by the Okhrana."

"Do you really think so?" gasped the German in quick apprehension. "Why do you suspect?"

"From something whispered to me a week ago."

"Then Stolypin may know that Alexandra Feodorovna is behind the traitorous dealings of Colonel Miassoyedeff on the frontier—eh?"

Rasputin, his eyes fixed upon his visitor, slowly nodded in the affirmative.

"That means ruin—perhaps imprisonment for me!" Hardt gasped, his face pale and anxious.

"I might say the same thing," remarked the saint, stroking his long, untrimmed beard. "But I do not. We are both strong enough to resist all attacks. Any suspicion against Miassoyedeff must be removed. I will see that

the Emperor promotes him to-morrow. Our one stumbling-block is Peter Stolypin."

"One that, I take it, must be removed?"

"Yes—at all costs. That is why the Empress has sought out this woman Baltz, who, if my estimate of her sex is correct, is a wild firebrand."

"She certainly is viciously vindictive."

"One thing is certain, our friend Stolypin has no idea that he is seated on the edge of a volcano," remarked the monk. "He lives extremely happily with his wife and children in that beautiful villa over on the Islands of the Apothecaries, and has no suspicion of the coming storm. I promised his wife to go to her salon to-morrow night."

"And will you go?"

"Of course. There must be no suspicion. Are we not, all of us, his best friends?" asked the monk, grinning evilly.

"I am returning to Berlin by way of Stockholm on Thursday," Hardt said, for he gave as the reason for his frequent visits to Germany and Scandinavia that he bought leather in those countries. "Have you anything to report?"

"Yes. One or two things," replied the Starets, who ordered me to write at his dictation as follows:

"Memorandum.

"From Gregory to Number Seventy.

"Have acted upon your instructions regarding the Kahovsky affair. Some important correspondence was seized by the police at his arrest, and for two days matters looked extremely unpromising. I paid T. twenty thousand roubles to close his lips, and induced the Emperor to release Kahovsky and restore his papers. I suggest that he should be recalled from Russia and sent to London, where, being unknown, he might be extremely useful to you.

"Madame Zlobine is at the Adlon Hotel in your city. She has quarrelled with the General, and strict watch should be kept upon her. She has been heard to express very decided views against Her Majesty. It may be found that she is in communication with J. If so, it is in the interests of Stolypin's anti-German campaign!

"Hardt will explain verbally the position of the latter, and the discovery of the woman Baltz. Meanwhile His Excellency is unsuspicious that we are aware of his hostile intentions towards us.

"Please do me the favour to assure His Majesty the Emperor of my continued efforts in the service of Alexandra Feodorovna, even though matters are daily growing more complicated. Anna [Madame Vyrubova], moreover, is more difficult to please.

"Both Stürmer and Protopopoff are under my protection, and I have already contrived to advance them. Kokovtsov is growing in favour and will be a force to be reckoned with in the immediate future. Urge Miassoyedeff, from your side, to exercise the greatest caution. There are whispers, but I have endeavoured to stifle them by contriving his advancement through the Emperor, who yesterday decorated him.

"The Imperial pair will shortly visit the Danish and Swedish Courts, and probably go for a cruise in Norwegian waters, though there is, as yet, no announcement.

"I am still working upon the project you set out when we met in Helsingfors two months ago regarding the reduction and weakening of the army. I have already initiated the matter through ladies whose husbands are in the Ministry of War. It will mean the expenditure of a considerable sum of your money, but I know it will be a mere bagatelle if your object is accomplished.

"I have to acknowledge a payment of one hundred thousand roubles into the Azof Bank from an unknown source. Please remember that S. in Paris and J. in Rome are making big claims upon me, and that next month I must receive a similar sum.

"Hardt has told me that matters are progressing well at Carlton House Terrace, and also in Paris. Of that I am glad to hear. Let our next meeting be at the Phœnix Hotel in Abo, where I am unknown, and which you can reach without notice. At present I dare not leave Russia, as Her Majesty will not hear of it.

"It would be as well to make the next payment through the Aktiebank in Abo. They would not suspect.

"Do not fail to impress upon both Sukhomlinoff and Miassoyedeff the necessity for the utmost caution. Till we meet."

When I had typed this at his dictation I handed it to him, and he managed painfully to append his illiterate signature.

Then I placed the sheets in an envelope and gave them to Hardt to convey in secret to the headquarters of the German Secret Service in the Königgrätzerstrasse in Berlin.

"And, friend Hardt," Rasputin said, as the Kaiser's emissary placed the letter carefully in his wallet, "please impress upon Number Seventy what I have said about money. All this costs much. Tell him that sometimes when inordinate demands are made upon me—as you know they are often are—I have to use my own funds in order to satisfy them. Smith in London receives unlimited funds through the Deutsche Bank, I know, so please tell our friend from me that I expect similar treatment in future."

The Starets was one of the most far-seeing and mercenary scoundrels. He had accounts in different names in half-a-dozen banks in Petrograd and Moscow, into which he constantly made payments as the result of his widespread campaign of espionage and the blackmailing of silly women who fell beneath his uncanny spell.

When Hardt had left, the saint opened another bottle of champagne and drank it all from a tumbler, afterwards consuming half a bottle of brandy. I was busy with three days' accumulation of letters, and did not notice it until, an hour later, I found him dead asleep on the floor of the dining-room—a pretty spectacle if presented to the millions of our patriotic Russians who believed in the Tsar as their "Father" and in the divinity of the "holy man" who directed the Empire's affairs.

The saint filled me with increasing disgust, yet I confess I had become fascinated by the widespread and desperate conspiracies which he either engineered himself or of which he pulled the most important strings.

In the plot against Stolypin, though none dreamed of it, he had been the most active agent. Stolypin, a purely honest and loyal Russian, who, on taking office as Prime Minister, was actuated by a firm determination to do his level best for the Empire, was an unwanted statesman. He was too honest, and, therefore, dangerous to the Court camarilla set up and paid by Potsdam.

As the days passed the monk frequently referred to him as a thorn in the side of the Empress.

"The fellow must be got rid of!" he declared to me more than once. "He suspects a lot, and he knows too much. He is dangerous to us, Féodor—very dangerous!"

One night, when we were together in his room at Tsarskoe-Selo, after he had been dining en famille with the Imperial family, he remarked:

"Things are going well. I saw the lawyer Altschiller to-day. All is prepared for the coup against Stolypin, who is still ignorant that Vera Baltz is in Petrograd."

I knew Altschiller, who often called at the Poltavskaya. He was a close friend of Monsieur Raeff, whom Rasputin, when all-powerful a little later on, actually appointed as Procurator of the Holy Synod, having placed the appointment upon the Emperor's desk to sign!

The law case was, however, delayed. Hardt was on one of his frequent absences—in Germany, no doubt—and matters did not move so rapidly as to satisfy the Empress. The whole plot was to keep the Prime Minister in the dark until the moment when the skeleton of his past should be dragged from its cupboard.

As announced by Rasputin, the Emperor and Empress had visited Denmark and Norway on board the Standart, and were back again at Peterhof, when one day Rasputin received his friend Boris Stürmer, the bureaucrat, at that time struggling strenuously for advancement. In the monk's den Stürmer, chatting about Stolypin and the vindictive woman who had come to Petrograd to destroy him—for he was one of the paid servants of Potsdam, and in consequence knew most of the secrets—said:

"Have you, Father, ever met a Jew named Bagrov?"

"Never to my knowledge. Why?"

"Because I know from my friend Venikoff, one of the assistant-directors of Secret Police, that the man, a discharged agent-provocateur and incensed at the way he has been treated by Stolypin, has joined forces with some mysterious young woman named Baltz. There is a whisper that between them they are engineering a plot to assassinate the Prime Minister!"

Rasputin's strange eyes met mine. Both of us knew more than this struggling sycophant.

"Bagrov?" the saint repeated. "Who is he?"

"Oh! A fellow who was assistant to Azeff in some disgraceful matters in Warsaw—an agent-provocateur who lived afterwards for some time in Paris and on the Riviera. He attributes his downfall to Stolypin, and hence is most

bitter against him. He has, I hear, fallen in love with the woman Baltz, who hails from Samara."

"Well?" asked the saint.

"Well?—nothing," laughed the man with the goat-beard. "I simply tell you what I know. There is a plot—that is all! And as far as I can discern the swifter Stolypin leaves the Court, the easier it will be for Her Majesty and ourselves—eh? While Stolypin is daily with the Emperor there is hourly danger for us."

"In that I certainly agree," declared Rasputin. "We must be watchful—very watchful."

We remained alert—all of us. That same night Rasputin informed the Empress of the secret plot of the black-haired Vera and her lover Bagrov.

The Court left for the Crimea next day, and Rasputin travelled with the Imperial family. Stolypin, in ignorance of what was in progress, was of the party, I being left in Petrograd to follow three days later.

On arrival at Kiev, where the Emperor had arranged to review the troops, a gala performance was held in the theatre that night. Opposite the Imperial box sat Stolypin, with two other high officials of the Court, when, during the entr'acte, a man dashed in, and in full view of the Emperor and Empress fired a revolver at the Prime Minister.

The confusion this caused was terrible. Her Majesty fainted and was dragged out of the box by Mademoiselle Kamensky, while the Tsar swiftly jumped to his feet and regarded the scene calmly.

"I'm done!" gasped the patriotic and honest Stolypin, as those present seized the assassin, who was none other than the ex-agent-provocateur Bagrov.

Six hours later the Prime Minister breathed his last, a victim of the Empress and her Potsdam camarilla, while Vera Baltz fled to Switzerland.

Rasputin afterwards told me that he urged the Court to leave Kiev at once, adding:

"It was far best for Alix and Nicholas to pretend horror of the tragedy than to offer condolences."

And so ended another chapter of Russia's underground history.

CHAPTER V

the power behind the throne

The murder of Stolypin, though unsuspected by the chancelleries of Europe, was, as I have explained, the work of the Hidden Hand of Germany. Stolypin had suspected the true state of affairs at the Russian Court, therefore the success of Germany in the coming war depended upon closing his mouth; so Potsdam, using the erotic monk Rasputin as its catspaw, effected a coup which had, alas! sad result to Holy Russia.

Stolypin was but one of many persons of both sexes who, because they knew too much of Germany's secret propaganda in Russia, fell victims in those constant conspiracies whereby they were swept either into the net of the corrupt police or into their graves.

As servant of the head of Russia's "Dark Forces"—as Rasputin and Protopopoff were afterwards denounced in the Duma—I was compelled to be ever at the saint's elbow; hence I saw and heard much that was astounding.

One night, a few months after Stolypin's assassination, we had been bidden to dinner by the great Polish landowner Ivan Volkhovski, who had a beautiful villa outside Petrograd. There I met a smart, middle-aged Russian officer, who, over our champagne, declared to me that things were growing critical in Europe over the Balkan question, but that France and Russia were united against any attack that Germany might secretly engineer.

"Then you think that war is really coming?" I asked him in surprise.

"Think!" he echoed. "You are a cosmopolitan, surely! Don't you know? Are you really blind?"

"Well, I am blind politically," I replied with a wink. "I see that on all sides people are getting rich quickly and receiving ironmongery—as I call the tin decorations from the Sovereign—as reward for closing their eyes to the true facts."

"Ah! I see that you are quite wideawake, my dear Rajevski," said the officer, whose name was Colonel Dubassoff. "Our friends here in Petrograd will continue to remain asleep, for they have every incentive, thanks to the great pro-German propaganda and the generous distribution of German gold. To-day our enemies in Berlin have their hands outstretched and clutching upon Paris, New York, Rome and London, just as they have here in Petrograd. War must come—depend upon it. The English Lord Roberts has forecast it. He knows!"

"Then you believe that Germany is at work actively arming in preparation for war?"

"Most certainly I do," replied the colonel. "Only a month ago I was in London and afterwards in Paris. In London the authorities are not so entirely asleep as we are in Russia."

Suddenly, as he spoke, I noticed that Rasputin, who was in whispered conversation with Bishop Theophanus, a fellow-guest, had been listening very attentively.

Two hours later, when I returned home with Rasputin, he ordered me to sit down and write a note, which the scoundrel dictated as follows:

"Please listen to N.N. Colonel Paul Dubassoff, of the Préobrajensky Regiment, has expressed in my presence to-night disloyalty to the Sovereign, and he is a serious danger to the State. He should be suppressed."

To this lie the monk scrawled his initials, and next morning the letter was sent to the Chief of the Secret Police. Within twelve hours the unfortunate colonel who had dared to pronounce his opinion concerning Germany's activities was already lodged in the fortress of Peter and Paul, where, I believe, he remained until the Revolution of 1917.

At that moment, however, the German propaganda in Russia found itself in an extremely critical state. By Stolypin's murder a new difficulty had arisen. All the colleagues of the late Prime Minister believed themselves entitled to become his successor, and as each had his own particular circle of friends, each naturally pulled all the political wires possible. Intrigues arose on every hand, and though everybody realised the personal danger of anybody appointed to the dead man's position, yet ambition was apparent everywhere.

The Empress, who had now returned from her fateful journey to the Crimea, was in daily consultation with the monk, it being their intention to obtain the appointment of some hard-up Minister who, by being well paid with German gold, would remain inert and keep his mouth closed regarding the world-plot in progress. Being at Tsarskoe-Selo, and conducting the Starets's correspondence, I know how deep was the intrigue to keep out and discredit the Minister of Finance, Vladimir Nicholaievitch Kokovtsov, who was known to be the only strong man who could succeed Stolypin.

The whole machinery of the pro-German propaganda had been set to work from Berlin to prevent the mantle of Stolypin falling upon Kokovtsov. Yet one afternoon, while I sat writing at Rasputin's dictation in his elegant sitting-

room in the palace of Tsarskoe-Selo, the Empress, who was dressed ready to go for her daily drive, burst angrily in, saying:

"Nikki has just appointed that hateful money-grubber Kokovtsov! I tried all I could to prevent it, Father. But I have failed!"

Rasputin smiled at her words, and with that sinister calmness that characterised him in moments of chagrin, he replied:

"Pray do not distress thyself, O lady! Kokovtsov will assuredly not be long in office when the hand of Gregory is lifted against him."

"He must not remain long. He may get to know too much, as others have done. In Berlin his appointment will give the greatest offence," she said.

"I will ask the Almighty's intercession, for I see, O lady, that thou art nervous and unstrung. Compose thyself, I beg of thee. All will be well," and the "healer" crossed himself piously.

Truly, the condition of our dear land was in parlous state. A vogue for asceticism had sprung up, just as other vogues have become popular in other European countries.

As head of this circle of ascetic followers the monk had, with the connivance of Badmayev the herbalist, invented an expedient to deaden the flesh so as to render it benumbed as with cocaine. Hundreds of weak-minded women were flocking about him. Some of them were wives and daughters of the wealthy manufacturing class, but most were of the high aristocracy, who all regarded my employer as the Saviour of Russia, sent by Heaven to reform and deliver the "Holy" land from the toils of unrest and desolation.

We Russians are always idealists. That is our curse. Our religion is, unfortunately, an obsession, for any drunken scoundrel can become a "holy man" by simply making such declaration, and ever afterwards "sponging" upon his neighbours. Rasputin was but an example of this.

After all, it was but natural that, with the bevy of female devotees ever at his knees, he should attract the gossip of the scandalmongers. Much, indeed, of what they said was true, for I happen to know that personally.

But on that day at Tsarskoe-Selo I noted the Empress's agitation that Kokovtsov had been appointed, and began to suspect that the camarilla would take drastic action in order to defeat him. Indeed, when the Empress had left the room, Rasputin grew thoughtful in turn, and stroked his unkempt beard as he paced the floor, saying:

"Ah, Féodor! We must crush this jackanapes. I must see what we can do."

Weeks went by. The usual meetings of the monk's "sister-disciples" were held at the house in the Poltavskaya, and often in the presence of a stranger or a female novice about to be admitted to the cult he pretended to speak to Alexandra Feodorovna over his mock telephone.

Every action of the monk was that of an arrogant and erotic swindler. His intelligence was, however, extremely perceptive, and he was not wanting in finesse of the mujik order, combined with a sense of foresight that was utterly amazing. These, with his suave manner, his affectation of deepest piety, and his wonderful fascination over women of every age and every class, had now brought him to the position of the power behind the Throne.

He already ruled Russia. Tsar and Tsaritza were his puppets, so cleverly did he play his cards, yet as he frequently remarked to me in the weeks that followed:

"Kokovtsov is against me. We are enemies. He must go."

I knew that if the Premier had an enemy in Grichka, then the statesman was doomed.

Now, the plot which Rasputin formed against the new Prime Minister was an extremely clever and subtle one.

While it was being carried out I often met Vladimir Nicholaievitch, who was naturally compelled to curry favour with the Father, and consequently sometimes visited him even against his inclination, no doubt. He was a long, rather narrow-faced, bearded man, with a pair of deep-set eyes and a secretive air, subtle by temperament, and keenly alive to his own interests as well as those of the Empire.

His one sin in the eyes of Alexandra Feodorovna was that he hated Germany.

"He once lost money in a German financial concern," Rasputin declared to me one day with a laugh. "That is why he cannot bear the Germans."

The Premier, risen from the middle-class, was a dandy who never looked one in the face, and whose eyes were ever upon his own clothes, as though expecting to find specks of dust upon them. He was always immaculately dressed, and his newly-acquired manners were so perfect that I often wondered if he carried a book of etiquette in his pocket.

My own estimate of him was that he was too neat, too well groomed, too civil, too bowing, and too anxious not to forget what he should say at the right moment. In a word, he was an elegant who had suddenly entered the Court entourage, in which there was no place for him.

The Tsar had no affection for him, and had merely appointed him because he believed that he might worry him less than others whose names and abilities had been put forward.

Poor Kokovtsov! He was in complete ignorance of the clever plot which Rasputin, at the Empress's suggestion, was engineering against his patriotic activities. Germany intended to rule Russia in the near future, and woe betide any statesman who would not remain inert and be spoon-fed by Teutonic propaganda, or place in his pocket the German marks held out so temptingly to him. In that way lay advancement, emoluments, decorations, and the Tsar's favour. To be Russian was, alas! to court disaster and ignominy.

Monsieur Kokovtsov was typically a good Russian. He had no fighting spirit, but was essentially a man of peace, entertaining a horror of bloodshed or of sanguinary deeds. His placid temper caused him to avoid all questions in dispute. He was prepared to do all possible to benefit our country. He had cleverly conducted the election campaign, and had all the governors of each province with him. The Emperor trusted him; the Empress hated him.

Besides, Kokovtsov was a worker. He did not believe in that favourite expression among Russians, "nechevo," which really means "nothing," but is equivalent to "don't bother" or "don't worry." In Russia we unfortunately always have a "zarftra," or to-morrow. For that reason he was disliked also by the people.

It was not many months after his appointment when one night, at the Poltavskaya, Rasputin received a visit from General Rogogin, the Director of the Black Cabinet, the cabinet noir, the existence of which was rigorously kept secret until the Revolution afforded the public a glimpse of Russia behind the scenes.

Even from the tribune of the Duma it was declared that the Black Cabinet was a fiction. Yet I happened to know that it existed, for later that evening I accompanied Rasputin and the Director to the General Post Office, where in three rooms on the second floor of the building the mysterious department, where correspondence was opened and read, was situated. Here was the most secret establishment of the Imperial Police. For over a hundred years had this mysterious department been at work examining the letters of all

classes of people whose thoughts or doings could be of interest to the Tsar, his Minister of the Interior, or the Okhrana. Indeed, I learned from the general's conversation with the monk—I first having taken an oath never to divulge anything of what I saw or heard—that even the correspondence of the Tsar, his relatives, or friends was not immune from examination.

Then I instantly realised the reason that the Tsaritza and Rasputin, in communicating with their friends in Germany, sent their letters by hand.

On the night in question I stood watching with interest how letters for secret examination were taken from a lift which passed up and down from the sorting-rooms above to the distributing room below. The basket was taken off the lift during its slow descent, and another basket substituted containing letters already examined, so quickly that the man in charge of the lift below noticed nothing.

We saw several processes of opening letters by steaming them, first taking an impression in plaster of any seal, and also by cutting off the end of the envelope by means of a small guillotine. The letters were dexterously opened, photographed, replaced in their respective envelopes, refastened and new seals made, or in other cases the ends of the cut envelopes were resealed by means of paper pulp to match the colour of the envelope, and placed under pressure in a hot press, thus actually remaking the paper!

The watchman of this secret chamber was an illiterate, deaf and dumb peasant.

"Each functionary on being first admitted here," said Rogogin, "is compelled to take a solemn oath never to divulge its existence to a living soul—not to his wife, father, sister, brother, or dearest friend."

All was remarkable, a spying system of which I had never dreamed.

When we entered the Director's well-furnished private room and the door was closed, Rogogin took from a locker drawer a letter which he handed to the monk, saying:

"Here is the letter of which I spoke; if I hold it back it may arouse suspicion."

Rasputin, who could only read with difficulty, looked at the letter, and then, handing it to me with that lofty air he assumed in the belief that he could conceal his ignorance, said:

"Féodor, read it to me."

It was on grey paper, and was as follows:

"Imperial Russian Embassy,

"Unter den Linden, 7.

"June 8th.

"Secret.

"Your Excellency,—In accordance with your instructions I beg to report confidentially as follows: On arrival here I presented my credentials of His Excellency our Ambassador, and in consequence was allowed to conduct a confidential inquiry among the staff of the Embassy, and in other quarters, in which I have been actively assisted with excellent results by P. Ostrovski, agent of the Okhrana in Berlin, whom I recommend for advancement.

"My discoveries are several, and of an interesting nature. First, a person named Hardt, who is often resident in Petrograd, is the secret courier of the Empress between Potsdam and Tsarskoe-Selo. Secondly, a sum of one hundred thousand marks was paid by the Dresdner Bank on March 11th last to the account of one Boris Stürmer, who has an account in Riga at the Disconto Gesellschaft. Thirdly, the Emperor William on April 2nd gave audience in secret at the Berlin Schloss to M. Protopopoff, for which no reason can be assigned. Fourthly, I have learned on the best authority that if Herr Hardt were arrested on any of his journeys to Sweden or Germany, some highly interesting private correspondence would be found upon him. Fifthly, there is no doubt whatever that the monk Rasputin is in receipt of money from this city, as I have in my possession a receipt given by him for two hundred thousand roubles paid him by the Deutsche Bank, and this I am bringing with me on my return.

"Further, I have documentary evidence of a widespread German intrigue in Russia, facts which will, I feel confident, amaze your Excellency. When I return I shall place in your hands weapons by which the enemy may be combated. I hesitate to send any documents through the post in case they miscarry, and I am addressing this letter to Mademoiselle Pauline, as your Excellency suggested.

"I have yet some further inquiries to make on your Excellency's behalf, but I intend to leave Berlin in any case on the twenty-second. I have the honour to remain, your Excellency's obedient servant, Ivan Botkine."

The monk listened attentively, his big, strange eyes wearing a sly, crafty expression. He fingered the jewelled cross suspended from his neck—a habit of his.

"Ah! So Botkine leaves Berlin on the twenty-second. It is well that we know this, my dear Rogogin—eh?"

"Yes," laughed the traitorous general. "He must not reach Russia."

"Of course not," agreed the monk. "We must obtain possession of this documentary evidence that he will carry upon him. Who is he?"

"Botkine is a confidential agent in Kokovtsov's employ," was the Director's reply. "He was, I find, assistant-director of police in Nijni before the Minister was appointed, and is now in His Excellency's private service."

"Well, it is excellent that by your astuteness, my dear General, we are forewarned. If not, there might very easily have resulted a serious contretemps—eh?"

"Exactly."

"And who is this Mademoiselle Pauline?" asked Rasputin, his clever criminal brain already at work to defeat a revelation of the truth.

"Pauline Lahure, the little French dancer at the Villa Rode."

"Lahure!" cried Rasputin. "I know her, of course, a music-hall artiste. She has been lately taken up by the old Countess Bronevski. She was at my house only a fortnight ago, and wanted to become a 'sister'!"

"As spy of Kokovtsov—eh?"

"Without a doubt," I chimed in. "From all I hear His Excellency is a gay dog."

"True, my dear Féodor," remarked the monk, fingering the cross nervously, and then taking a cigarette which the general offered him. "But had not our friend Rogogin been on the alert and opened the dainty dancer's letters, what a trap we should have fallen into—not only ourselves, but the Empress also! Vladimir would have presented the documents to the Emperor, and an unholy domestic scene would have resulted. This fellow Botkine must never reach Russia!" he added seriously.

"I agree," replied the general. "Let us see Gutchkoff at once," he added. General Gutchkoff was a Jew and the director of the dreaded political police, with whom Rogogin, of course, worked hand-in-glove.

It was then nearly eleven o'clock at night, but we all three drove to General Gutchkoff's house in the Spaskaya. He was out, his man informed us.

"I must see him at once," said the monk loftily. "Where is he?"

"He went out to dinner, Holy Father, and he is probably now at the Krestovsky or at the Bouffes."

"Go at once and find him," said the monk. "It is a matter of extreme urgency, and we will await him here."

Thus ordered by Gregory Rasputin—who was all-powerful in the capital—the general's servant ushered us into a cosy little salon, placed a box of cigarettes and some liqueurs before us, and then himself left in a droshky to find his master, who was so well known in Petrograd as a bon viveur.

For half an hour Rasputin, much worried by the secret inquiries of the Premier into the doings of the pro-German camarilla, chatted with the general, more than once expressing fear regarding the perilous situation.

"Revelations seem imminent," he exclaimed anxiously. "The man Botkine must never arrive in Russia—you understand that, Rogogin!"

"I quite agree," said the Director of the Black Cabinet. "But Gutchkoff must see to it. I have done my part in the affair."

"You have done excellently, my dear friend—most excellently," declared the monk. "Nothing could have been better. I will mention your great services to the Empress. Yes, we must rely upon Gutchkoff."

In half an hour the servant returned with his master, the head of the political police, a short, fat man in general's uniform, with decorations, who, when he entered the room, betrayed unmistakable signs of having dined well. Indeed, he had been unearthed from a midnight carouse at a questionable restaurant.

At sight of Rasputin, a power to be reckoned with and a person of whom even the greatest in the land craved favours, he pulled himself together and cast himself into a chair to listen.

The monk was clever enough not to enlighten the Police Director regarding the plot to upset Kokovtsov's undue inquisitiveness. He merely told him that a certain secret agent named Botkine was leaving Berlin for Petrograd on the twenty-second.

"The man is dangerous," he added, "extremely dangerous."

"Why?" asked Gutchkoff, somewhat surprised at our midnight visit.

"Because—well, because I happen to know that he is in possession of certain facts concerning very high personages. He is a blackmailer, and has been to Berlin to endeavour to sell some documents to Maximilian Harden—documents which, if published, would place a certain member of our Imperial family in a very unsatisfactory light," Rasputin said. "My friend Rogogin here will bear me out."

The Police Director, after a few minutes' silence, asked:

"Has he sold the documents in question?"

"I think not," was Rasputin's reply. "If he has not, he will have them in his possession on his return. We must secure them at all costs."

"You wish to close his mouth—eh?"

"Yes. He must be suppressed at all hazards," declared the monk. "It is the wish of the Emperor," he added, a glib lie always ready upon his tongue. "Further, I need not add that if this affair be conducted in secrecy and scandal in the Imperial House avoided, His Majesty will certainly see that you are adequately rewarded. I can promise you that."

General Gutchkoff was again silent. He well knew that if the Tsar had ordered the man Botkine to be silenced there must be some very unsavoury affair to be hushed up.

"There is an agent of yours in Berlin named Ostrovski, is there not?" the monk asked.

"Yes."

"Then he must also be removed at once to another post. Transfer him to Constantinople, or, better still, to Yokohama. He must not remain in Berlin another twenty-four hours, and he must, not, at any cost, be allowed to return to Russia," Rasputin said decisively.

"I scarcely follow you, Holy Father," was the amazed general's reply. "Ostrovski is very reliable, and has been entrusted with the most delicate affairs. He has always given me the greatest satisfaction."

"I regret if he is under your protection, but that does not alter matters. He and Botkine have been acting in unison, and hence Ostrovski knows more of this scandal concerning a certain member of the Imperial family than is good for him to know. Promote him with increased salary to Yokohama, and

send him there by way of Marseilles upon some confidential mission. But on no account must he return to Russia before going to Japan—you understand? He will no doubt wish to travel by way of Siberia, but this must be forbidden. If you will write out his appointment, I will obtain the Emperor's signature to it to-morrow morning."

"You wish me to write out the order now—eh?" asked Gutchkoff, still much puzzled, but eager to get scent of the particular scandal known to Botkine.

"Yes, now," replied the monk, pointing to the writing-table, whereupon the Police Director sat down and wrote out the order transferring the agent Ostrovski to Japan, an order which Rasputin, after pretending to read it, handed to me to place in my pocket.

"And now, what about this person Botkine?" asked Gutchkoff. "How do you wish me to act towards him?"

"In the way that I will direct to-morrow," replied the monk. "I must have time to devise some plan—a plan which will be secret and arouse no suspicion," he added grimly, with a sinister smile.

Early next morning I accompanied him to Peterhof, where the Imperial Court happened to be. Anna Vyrubova was away in Moscow, but without delay he sought the Empress and remained in her boudoir for a full hour, no doubt explaining the discovery of Kokovtsov's inquiries in Berlin.

I met the Prime Minister himself in the long corridor guarded by "Araby" servants which led to the Emperor's private cabinet, and with him was General Gutchkoff, who had evidently also been summoned to audience regarding some matters concerning the police administration. Kokovtsov had no suspicion of what Rasputin had learned, or that Gutchkoff had promised to act as he directed against his trusted agent Ivan Botkine.

The pair strolled along the softly carpeted corridor, chatting affably, for they were apparently going to consult His Majesty together. Truly, the Court world is a strange life of constant intrigue and double-dealing, of lack of morals and of honesty of purpose and of patriotism. In our Holy Russia many good men and women have, because of their love for their own land, been sent to drag out their lives in the dreariness of the Siberian prison camps.

When the monk returned to me he asked for Ostrovski's appointment, written on the previous night, which I carried in my pocket. This he took at once to the Tsar. His Majesty was at that moment closeted with the Prime

Minister, Gutchkoff having already seen the Emperor and, transacting his business, been dismissed.

Five minutes later Rasputin returned with the Emperor's scribbled signature still wet, and in my presence handed it to the Director of Political Police. Ostrovski had been transferred to Japan, where he would be harmless, even though he might have learned facts from Botkine. But what had Rasputin decided should be the fate of the latter? For the sake of Alexandra Feodorovna and the whole camarilla Botkine's lips must, I knew, be closed. That had been decided. I longed to learn what the Empress had said when the monk had revealed the truth to her and pointed out her peril.

No doubt Her Majesty would see to it that the affair was hushed up. I knew full well that she understood that once Kokovtsov obtained evidence too many people would be implicated, and perhaps a public trial might result. Both she and Rasputin, no doubt, realised that it would be unwise to allow a member of the Okhrana—as Botkine had been—to be arrested, for fear of the scandal public revelations would cause. The capital teemed with Germans like Stürmer and Fredericks, traitors like Protopopoff and Soukhomlinoff, men like Azeff, Guerassimoff and Kurtz—one day the bosom friend of Ministers and powerful noblemen, and the next cast into the fortress of Peter and Paul—Rogogin, the sycophant Raeff—whom Rasputin had made Procurator of the Holy Synod—and the drunken "saint" Mitia the Blessed—at last dismissed—spiritualists, charlatans, and cranks. Upon such fine society was the Throne of the Romanoffs based! Was it any wonder that it was already tottering preparatory to its fall?

I left Peterhof with Rasputin at about three o'clock that afternoon, and on our return to the Poltavskaya I spoke over the telephone, at the monk's orders, to Doctor Badmayev, the expert herbalist who prepared those secret drugs with which Madame Vyrubova regularly doped the little Tsarevitch, keeping him in a constant state of ill-health and in such a condition that he puzzled the most noted physicians in Europe.

Badmayev, a small, ferret-eyed man, his features of Tartar cast, came and dined with us, after which Rasputin signed a cheque for twenty-eight thousand roubles, a sum to which "the doctor" was entitled under an agreement. Well did I know that the sum in question was payment for his active assistance in supplying certain drugs of which the monk in turn declared that he himself held the formula. The drugs—which he pretended to be the secret of the priests of Tibet—were those which he doled out in small quantities to his sister-disciples, and which produced insensibility to physical pain, drugs which were so baneful and pernicious that the monk always warned me against them, and never took any himself.

After dinner, at which they both drank deeply of champagne, the monk and his friend went out to spend the evening at a low-class variety theatre, while I was left alone until midnight.

In consequence I visited some friends in the Ivanovskaya, and returned to Rasputin's at about a quarter-past twelve. Twenty minutes later he returned in a hopeless state of intoxication; therefore I did not speak to him till next morning.

Such was the fellow's vitality that he was up before six o'clock. At seven he went out, and returned about nine, when he called me to his den.

"Féodor," he said, "I wish you to leave to-day for Vilna, and go to the Palace Hotel there. Remain until a friend of ours named Heckel calls upon you."

"Who is Heckel?" I asked, surprised at being sent upon such a long journey in that sudden manner.

"A friend of Hardt and myself. Do not be inquisitive—only obey. When Heckel calls please give him this letter," and he handed me a rather thick letter in an official cartridge envelope of the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Heckel will tell you that he is from 'Father Gregory.' He is tall, fair, and rather slim—a German, as you may guess from his name. Your train leaves at two-forty this afternoon. Be careful of that letter and to whom you deliver it in secret. Heckel, after finding you at the hotel, will produce an English five-pound note and show it to you. That will be his passport. If he does not do so, then do not give him the letter."

That afternoon I left for Vilna by the Warsaw express, and after a long journey through the endless pines and silver birches duly arrived at the hotel indicated, and there awaited my visitor. He arrived next day, a fair-haired, slim man, just as Rasputin had described him, evidently an agent-provocateur from Berlin. After he had been ushered into my bedroom by a waiter, he greeted me warmly, and inquired if I had anything to hand him.

To this I made an evasive reply, in pretence of being in ignorance of his meaning, whereupon he said in German:

"Ah! I forgot. You wish first to establish my identity," and laughingly he produced from his wallet an English five-pound note, which he showed to me.

In consequence I handed him the letter from the Ministry, which he placed unopened in his pocket and then left, while that same night I returned to Petrograd.

Three days later I learned the truth.

Ivan Botkine, the trusted secret agent of the Prime Minister Kokovtsov, who had left Berlin on the twenty-second for Petrograd, had been found dead in one of the sleeping compartments on the arrival of the train at the frontier station of Wirballen. His pockets and valise had been rifled, and an inquiry had been opened. Though the doctors disagreed as to the exact cause of death, it was apparent that one of the dishes he had eaten in the restaurant car an hour before had been poisoned.

Further, I have since established the horrifying fact that the mysterious letter from the Ministry which I handed to Heckel in Vilna contained a secret poison! That it was used to remove poor Botkine, Rasputin afterwards admitted to me. Such were the methods of the camarilla who were ruling Russia!

CHAPTER VI

rasputin in berlin

Truly, our Russia was a country of blood and tears under the last of the Romanoffs. Its creed and its motto was "Gallows and Siberia!"

No man's life was safe under a régime run by scoundrels, of whom "Grichka," my chief, was the worst.

An unlimited secret fund was placed at the disposal of the Ministry of the Interior for purposes of the Secret Police, and when I say that Rasputin controlled that Ministry as well as the Emperor himself, it can easily be understood that all who were loyal Russians were "suspect," and denunciation throve on all sides. The Okhrana recruited its agents from all quarters. That is why one was never sure that the stranger who denounced Rasputin and his friends was not an agent-provocateur.

Every Russian subject of any note, and every foreign traveller, was watched, not because of his disloyalty, but because Rasputin and his camarilla, including the Empress, feared lest he should discover how they were daily betraying Russia and its Tsar.

I have been, at Rasputin's orders, many times in the central bureau of the Secret Police in search of the index-card of some person who had fallen beneath the monk's displeasure. In these indices and in the corresponding files the persons concerned were, I found, never designated by their own names, but by code-names that could be telegraphed if necessary from city to city. Thus the Deputy Cheidze (since become famous) was registered under the name of "drawing-room" (gostini), Lenin (also since famous) as "symbol," Miliukoff as "grass," and the traitor Soukhomlinoff as "glycerine."

Those were indeed terrible days in Holy Russia—days when the innocent were sent to their death, while Rasputin, the religious fraud, laughed and drank champagne with his high-born devotees, who believed him, even in this twentieth century, to be divine!

I remember that on May 16th, 1914, when the political horizon was cloudless and no one dreamed of war, I sat in the visitors' gallery of the Duma, having been sent there by Rasputin to listen to the debate and report to him.

The labour leader Kerensky, who afterwards became Minister of Justice in the Provisional Government, rose and from the tribune proclaimed the infamy of the police. He did not mince matters. He said:

"The most notorious jailers of the period of Alexander III. knew how to respect in their political enemies the man who thought differently, and when they shut him up in the fortress of Schlüsselburg they would sometimes come to chat with him. And some of those martyrs, those men struggling for liberty, have been able to return to us with the glamour about them of twenty years' hard labour. But now, the sons of those famous jailers do not hesitate to seize young men of seventeen or eighteen and make them die slowly, but surely, under the blows of the knout, under the strokes of the rod, or by the burns of a red-hot iron. Are we not returning to the days when political prisoners were walled up alive? And you imagine, gentlemen, that you can claim for this country the civilising mission of a European nation!"

He spoke of a man whom I knew well, one of the most sinister persons in all Russia, a man who, like Rasputin and Stürmer, accepted German gold. The man's name was Evno Azef, upon whom unfortunately the French Government bestowed the Legion of Honour.

Before he went to Paris, Azef was a close friend of Rasputin and of Stürmer. He was a criminal of the worst type, an expert in crime, though he was a recognised agent of the Russian Political Police. And yet so clever was he as an agent-provocateur that he actually managed to get himself elected as director of the Terrorist organisation of Petrograd, and as a member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Party!

In my presence he one night, when in his cups, boasted to the merry monk what he had to his credit as a revolutionary. He organised the murders of the Minister of the Interior, Plehve, and of the Grand Duke Sergius. It was he who prepared the attempted murders of Admiral Dubassof, the Governor-General Guerchelman, and the attempt on Nicholas II. The latter was with Rasputin's knowledge and consent! Perhaps Alexandra Feodorovna knew of it. Who knows? That she was not so devoted to "Nikki" as she pretended is well known to everyone who was at the Imperial Court at the time. Happily, however, the plot failed because of circumstances which Azef could not control.

The scoundrel also assisted in the drawing up of the plans for the military mutinies at Moscow, Viborg, and Kronstadt, while he knew beforehand of the preparations for the assassination of General Sakarof, and of Governor Bogdanovitch at Ufa, as well as a number of Terrorist crimes which succeeded.

One of his crimes in conspiracy with Rasputin I will here relate, because it is a mystery which has long puzzled the London police.

On the morning of January 11th, 1909, the London newspapers contained a report of a strange discovery. Four days before there had arrived at Victoria Station a young French lady, dark-haired and extremely good-looking, who took a cab to a small but highly respectable private hotel in the vicinity. There she gave the name of Mademoiselle Thomas, and her profession as governess. Next morning a tall, thin young foreigner called for her, and they went out together, she returning very late that night apparently exhausted after a long motor journey. Next day she remained in her room all day. On the third day an elderly man called, and she went out with him, being absent about a couple of hours. On her return she went straight to her room and nothing was seen of her further until the next day at noon the chambermaid failed to arouse her by knocking. The police were informed, the door was forced, and Mademoiselle Thomas was found dead. She was lying upon the floor fully dressed.

The medical evidence at the inquest was that the pretty French governess had been dead fully eighteen hours. Upon her or in her small hand-luggage there was nothing to establish her identity. That she had taken poison was the opinion of the expert medical witness. Yet the poison could not be established. Apparently it was a case of suicide, for the laundry marks and names of the makers of her clothing had been deliberately removed.

One thing, however, was extremely mysterious. Upon the marble top of the washhand-stand in the bedroom the police found some scrawled words in a character they could not decipher. Experts were brought in, when it was found that the writing was in Russian character, and the words were: "The holy Starets is——"

This conveyed nothing to the London police, who, of course, knew nothing save that a "Starets" in Russia is a "saint."

Therefore the experts at Scotland Yard were, after much patient investigation, compelled to dismiss it as one of London's unsolved mysteries.

Now for the truth.

One night, a year before, when I had returned with Rasputin from Tsarskoe-Selo, we found awaiting us the somewhat dandified man of a hundred aliases and as many disguises, the notorious Azef. He greeted us both warmly, and being a close friend of Rasputin, the monk took him into his cosy little den, where for over an hour they remained closeted together.

I was one of the few who knew the secret of Azef's crimes. Indeed, when I entered the room while the pair were talking I heard him ask with a laugh:

"What if we give him a taste of the necktie of Stolypin—eh?"

"It certainly would be best, my dear Evno," the monk agreed. "That is if you think the accusation can be well made."

"Trust me," laughed the great agent-provocateur. "A denunciation, the discovery of papers—you have those of Buchman in your safe, by the way, and they could be used—arrest, trial, and the necktie! It would be quite easy, and his mouth would be closed."

"He is growing dangerous," growled Rasputin. "What you say is perfectly true."

Then turning to me, he said:

"Féodor, bring those papers which Manuiloff brought me a week ago—the papers used for the arrest of Professor Buchman in Warsaw."

I obeyed, well knowing how that file of incriminating correspondence with an Anarchist group in Zurich had been forged by Stürmer's secretary Manuiloff, and how it had been found among the professor's effects.

"The necktie of Stolypin," was Azef's playful allusion to the ever-ready gallows to which he, plotting with Rasputin, Manuiloff, Guerassimof, and others, was so constantly sending innocent persons. Truly, Russia was a strange country even before the outbreak of war.

The immediate object of Azef's activities, combined with Rasputin's, was at Germany's direction to extend the Terrorist action and thus cause trouble and unrest in the Empire. By every fresh success he obtained more money from Berlin, and at the same time strengthened his privileged position in the ranks of the Terrorists, while his worth was increased in the eyes of both the Minister of the Interior and of the Emperor. The scoundrel's revolutionary career and his police career were inseparable. He was a Terrorist to-day, a police official to-morrow, but, like Rasputin, a secret agent of Germany always!

Terrible as it may seem, the Okhrana, with the connivance of the Wilhelmstrasse, and with the Empress's full knowledge—of this there is no doubt, because documentary evidence exists which proves it—caused the highest personages in Russia to be murdered or hanged in order to prove to those lucky ones who survived how necessary was the organisation for their own existence!

A hundred dramas could be written upon the intrigues of Grichka and Azef. Some of them were amazing; all were disgraceful. The life of the most upright and honest man or woman was not safe if marked down by the pair of scoundrels. The attempt upon Admiral Dubassof, in which Count Konovnicin met his death; the attempt upon General Guerchelman, Governor-General of Moscow; the assassination of General Slepzof at Tver, with half a dozen other murders of the same kind, were all the work of Azef. Why? Because both Azef and General Guerassimof, chief of the Secret Police, were in the toils of Germany. The Wilhelmstrasse paid well, but threatened exposures if this or that person were not removed. Hence Azef, as one of the heads of the Terrorists, received his orders through Rasputin, and, obeying, was paid his blood-money.

Many of the dastardly crimes which Azef, aided by the monk, committed at Germany's orders will never be known. Hundreds of innocent persons were arrested, and when the police searched their homes the most incriminating documents were found concealed—documents which when produced they had never before seen. Hundreds of men and women were hurried to Siberia, and hundreds of others were sent to rot in jails and fortresses, while upon dozens there was placed "the necktie of Stolypin."

"Ah! my dear Gregory," Azef said, after he had lit a fresh cigarette, "there will be no security until that man's mouth is closed. I see that you agree with me."

"Quite," replied the monk, who, I saw, was rather agitated because of something which the police spy had told him.

"Good! Then I will go further. To-day I have proposed to the Council of Workmen's Delegates that we should blow up the Central Bureau of the Okhrana, with Guerassimof in the centre of it. The killing of Guerassimof appealed to them. They hate him—as you know. Really, those people are humorous. They think I am their friend, and yet each day the police arrest one or two members regularly but quietly, and they disappear no one knows whither. I have suspicions of Menchikof, of the Okhrana at Moscow. The other day I met him at Princess Kamenskoi's, and what he told me set me wondering. He poses as your friend, but I feel convinced he is your enemy."

Rasputin's bearded face relaxed into that strange, sardonic grin of his as he replied:

"I know Menchikof. He is harmless. The only man we may fear is Burtsef. He knows far too much of the police organisation and the deeds of our provocating agents."

"I agree. But he lives in Paris, and hence the Okhrana cannot lay hands upon him. If only he would return to Russia, then he would not be long at liberty. That I assure you."

"He is in Paris. Could we not send him a message that his daughter Vera—who married young Tchernof last year—has been taken suddenly ill, and thus summon him at once to Vilna? Once on Russian soil he could be arrested."

Azef smiled. "Our friend Burtsef knows a little too much of our methods to fall into such a trap. He would recognise my hand in it in an instant. No, some other means must be found. Meanwhile we must deal with the person under discussion. We were agreed that he must be suppressed at all hazards, eh?"

"Exactly. And we must suppress Burtsef afterwards."

Paris, Lausanne, Geneva, Zurich and Nice swarmed with Russian secret agents, who, at orders from Azef and Rasputin, kept constant vigil upon the doings of everyone. The directors of the foreign service of our political police were Ratchkovsky in Paris, and Rataef in London. The latter posed as a Russian journalist, and usually spent his afternoons over cups of coffee in the cosmopolitan Café Royal in Regent Street.

All this I knew, and much more. I knew that Ivan Manuiloff, who was now secretary to Stürmer, had begun his lucrative career as the agent and catspaw of Ratchkovsky in Paris. But he intrigued against his chief, and was then transferred to Rome. Of that man and his dastardly doings I will tell more later. Suffice it to say that the Emperor so deeply believed in him that one day he gave him a gold cigarette-case with his initials in diamonds "as a mark of his esteem"!

Having listened attentively to the conversation between the two scoundrels, I at last came to the conclusion that they were conspiring against some mysterious person named Krivochein.

After the pair had consumed a bottle of champagne, Azef rose and, shaking his friend's dirty paw, said:

"I hope to have everything arranged when we meet. I would not yet mention the matter to the Empress."

"Of course I shall not," remarked Rasputin, with that crafty grin of his. "She would only worry over it—and just now she is greatly troubled over the Tsarevitch. He has had another attack."

The monk did not mention the fact that the cause of the attack was one of Badmayev's secret drugs which Anna Vyrubova had dissolved in his milk!

After Azef had left, Rasputin flung himself into his easy chair, and as he lit a cigarette remarked to me:

"Ah, Féodor! What a man! There is nothing he is unable to accomplish."

"He is very daring," I remarked.

"No, it is not daring—it is deep cunning. He has the police at his back; I have Alexandra Feodorovna—so we win always. But," he added, with a snarl, "we have enemies, and those must be dealt with—dealt with drastically. I hear they are setting about more scandals in Petrograd concerning me. Have you heard them?" he asked.

"Gossip is rife on every hand, and all sorts of wild stories are being circulated," I said.

"Bah! Let the fools say what they will of Gregory Rasputin," he laughed. "It only makes him the more popular. It is time, however, that I performed some more miracles among the poor," he added reflectively. "Let us arrange some, Féodor. Do not forget it."

The miracles were arranged a fortnight later. With the assistance of a clever German conjurer named Brockhaus, from Riga, who with others helped the mock saint on the occasions when he imposed upon the credulity of the mujiks, he pretended to "heal" a child of lameness, while a female assistant of Brockhaus, having posed as a blind peasant, was restored to sight.

The miracles took place out at Ligovo, a village outside Petrograd, and like wildfire the news was spread that the Holy Father had again taken compassion upon the people. Hundreds of men and women now flocked round him to kiss the edge of his ragged robe, and as he passed in the streets everyone crossed themselves. By such means did Rasputin retain the favour of the people and of the Empress herself.

One night he received a telegram in cipher, which he gave me to decode. It had been despatched from Paris and read:

"The appointment is at Savignyplatz, 17, Charlottenburg. Do not fail. Please inform A. [Alexandra Feodorovna] and obtain instructions.—Evno."

At once Rasputin became active. He went to Peterhof, where the Court was at that moment, and carried out Azef's desire. He was with the Empress and

Madame Vyrubova for a couple of hours ere he rejoined me, and we took the evening train back to the capital.

That night he called upon Stürmer, who had with him his sycophant and ex-policeman Manuiloff, and they held counsel together. Then, next afternoon, we both left Petrograd for Berlin.

We had no difficulty in discovering the house in the Savignyplatz. It was a good-sized one on the corner of the Kantstrasse, and the old woman who opened the door at once ushered us into a pretty drawing-room, where we were greeted by a rather tall, dark-haired and refined young lady, who welcomed us in Russian, and whose name Rasputin had told me was Mademoiselle Paula Kereicha.

"You must be very tired after your long journey, Father," she said, bowing her head and crossing herself as the monk mumbled a blessing upon her.

"No; travelling is very easy between Petrograd and Berlin," he replied affably; and then he introduced me.

I could see that somehow she resented my intrusion there. She glanced at Rasputin inquiringly.

"Oh, no," laughed the monk. "I quite understand, mademoiselle; you need have no fear." Then lowering his voice to a whisper, he said: "I know full well that living here as secret agent of the Okhrana you have to exercise every caution."

Paula Kereicha—who I afterwards found was a second-rate variety actress who sometimes took engagements in order to blind people to her own calling, that of police-spy—smiled and admitted that she had to be very careful.

"It is not the Germans that I fear," she said. "They know me well at the Wilhelmstrasse, and I am never interfered with. Indeed, they assist me when necessary. No. It is the Terrorists who would do me harm if they could. There is a dangerous group here—as you know."

"I know well," said the monk; "only last week Tchapline and Vilieff were given Stolypin's necktie owing to your denunciations. They came to Russia from Berlin, and were arrested immediately they set foot across the frontier."

"No," she protested. "Azef was here. It was he who put papers into their baggage, and then telegraphed to the police at Wirballen. Neither of the men

was dangerous as far as I could see, but our friend Evno believed them to be; hence he deemed them better out of the way."

I could see that the young woman had some scruples regarding the dirty work for which she received money from the Ministry of the Interior in Petrograd. And surely hers was a highly dangerous profession.

Apparently it was not desired that Rasputin's arrival in Berlin should be known, for we were shown to our rooms by the stout old Russian woman, and I heard the handsome Paula speaking on the telephone in a guarded manner.

"And you will call at half-past nine to-night, eh?" I heard her ask, and presently she rang off.

We ate our dinner together, the monk being very gracious towards his mysterious hostess; and almost punctually at half-past nine the door of the drawing-room opened, and there entered a rather shabbily dressed man, whom I at once recognised as Count von Wedel, the inseparable companion of the Kaiser, and titular head of the German Secret Service. With him was no less a person than the German Foreign Minister, Kiderlen-Waechter. Our visitors were the two Men Behind the Throne of Imperial Germany. Standing with them was that man of kaleidoscopic make-up, the great Azef himself.

That meeting was indeed a dramatic one. Rasputin, taking bribes on every side from officials in Russia who desired advancement, and from the Germans to betray Russia into the hands of the Wilhelmstrasse, sat that evening in the elegant little room listening to the conversation, with all the craft and cunning of the Russian mujik. He made but few remarks, but sat with his hands upon his knees, his deep-set, fiery eyes glancing everywhere about him, his big bejewelled cross scintillating beneath the electric light of the pretty Paula's elegant, tastily furnished little room.

Von Wedel, though dressed so shabbily, was the chief spokesman. Kiderlen-Waechter, who had so cleverly pulled the strings of Germany's diplomacy in the Near East, and had now been recalled to Berlin and placed at the helm of the Fatherland's double-dealing with the Powers, spoke little. He seemed to be learning much of the Kaiser's duplicity.

"The Emperor William, I can tell you frankly, Father, is displeased," von Wedel said to Rasputin reprovingly. "Only by an ace has the whole of our arrangements with your Empress, and with yourself as our agent, been suppressed from Downing Street. And that by steps taken by our friend here, Monsieur Azef. But we are not yet safe. I tell you quite frankly that though you are a good servant of ours, yet your habit of taking intoxicants is

dangerous. You boast too much! If you are to succeed you must assume an attitude of extreme humility combined with poverty. Be a second St. Francis of Assisi," added the Count, with humour. "You can act any part. Imitate a real saint."

"It surely is not through a fault of mine that any secret has leaked out," the monk protested.

"But it is," the Count declared severely. "I am here to-night at the Emperor's orders to tell you from him that, though he appreciates all your efforts on his behalf, he disapproves of your drunkenness and your boastful tongue."

"I am not boastful!" the monk declared. "Have you brought me here to Berlin to reprimand me? If so, I will return at once."

And he rose arrogantly from his chair, and crossed his hands over his breast piously in that attitude he assumed when unusually angry.

Von Wedel saw that he was going too far.

"It is not a matter of reproof, but of precaution," he said quickly. "Happily the truth has been suppressed, though a certain agent of Downing Street—a man known by the nickname of 'Mac'—very nearly ascertained the whole facts. Fortunately for us all he did not. But his suspicions are aroused, together with those of Krivochein."

"Cannot this man Mac—an Englishman, I suppose—be suppressed?" asked Rasputin. "If he is in Russia I can crush him as a fly upon the window-pane."

"Ah! but he is not in Russia," replied the Count. "He is a very elusive person, and one who tricks us every time. 'Mac the Spy,' as they call him at Whitehall, is the first secret agent in Europe—next, of course, to our dear Steinhauer."

"I disagree," interrupted the Foreign Secretary. "The man Mac is marvellous. He was in Constantinople and in Bucharest recently, and he learned secrets of our Embassy and Legation which I believed to be sacred. He even got hold of our diplomatic telegraph code a week after it had been changed. No, the English Mac is the most astute secret agent in Europe, depend upon it!"

Paula Kereicha sat listening to the conversation, but without making any remark. I noticed that Azef seemed very uneasy at her presence, and presently sent her from the room to ask for a telephone call. The instant she had gone he exclaimed in a low voice:

"It is a pity to have spoken before Paula! She knows too much. One day, when it suits her, she may reveal something unpleasant concerning us."

"But you made the appointment here, at her house!" Kiderlen-Waechter protested.

"Of course, because it is the safest meeting-place, but I did not know that matters were to be freely discussed before her."

"Then you do not trust the woman?" remarked Rasputin. "You are like myself, I never trust women," and he grinned. "Shall we drop our conversation when she returns?"

Azef reflected for a few moments.

"No," he said. "She knows most of the details of the affair. There is no reason why she should not know the rest. Besides, I may require her to assist me."

In the discussion which ensued I gathered that Rasputin and Azef had resolved, with the connivance and at the instigation of the German Foreign Office, to assassinate a certain well-known British member of Parliament who had been in Russia and had learned, through the British secret agent Mac, the betrayal of Russia into the hands of the Wilhelmstrasse. It was believed that this Englishman—whom Rasputin had nicknamed "Krivochein," so that in correspondence his identity should not be revealed—would place certain facts before the British Government to the detriment of the plans of the pro-German party in Russia.

Of the actual identity of the unfortunate member of Parliament whom Azef and Rasputin had marked down as their victim I could not learn. No doubt Paula knew who "Krivochein" was. And it was certain also that both von Wedel and the German Foreign Secretary were privy to the plot.

Apparently the Empress had been informed of the danger, and knew of the steps the conspirators were taking. Indeed, Rasputin declared:

"Alexandra Feodorovna is very anxious as to the future. She has had a violent quarrel with Nicholas regarding his refusal to dismiss Sheglovitof."

"He must be dismissed," declared von Wedel. "The Emperor William insists upon it. Each hour he remains in office he becomes more dangerous."

"I am already engineering disagreements in the Duma," the monk replied. "If he does not fall by them, then he will go naturally, for he is not a puppet hypnotised by the wishes of Tsarskoe-Selo, as are so many of our Ministers. The Tsar, who so quickly takes offence nowadays, prefers flunkeys to

Ministers whose personality is too marked. Besides, we have the Woman [the Empress] ever on our side. No, Sheglovitof's hour has come."

The meeting lasted nearly three hours, until at last Azef and the two German officials left, and Rasputin went to his room, where he consumed half a bottle of brandy. Meanwhile I sat chatting with Mademoiselle Paula until it was time to retire.

Next day, in consequence of a telephone message, I left with Rasputin for Paris, where we put up at the Grand Hotel, being visited on the day following our arrival by Azef, who, dressed differently, I would certainly have passed in the street unrecognised. The two scoundrels retired to Rasputin's room, where they remained for half an hour, and then we all three went forth into the sunshine of the boulevard.

"It is about his time to pass," the notorious spy remarked to the monk, who, by the way, wore an ordinary suit of tweeds and a soft felt hat. "Let us sit here—at the Grand Café."

In consequence we took seats at one of the little tables on the terrasse and ordered "bocks."

Presently, as we watched the stream of passers-by, Azef raised the newspaper he had been pretending to read, so concealing his face, and whispered:

"Here he is! That is our friend Krivochein!"

I looked and saw a well-dressed, quiet-looking English gentleman passing along with his wife, who had apparently been shopping. Little did he dream that the eyes of the two most evil men in Europe were upon him.

"He leaves to-night on his return to London," remarked Azef, when five minutes later we rose and returned to the hotel.

That same afternoon Rasputin, who declared that he had a bad headache, sent me to an English chemist's in the Avenue de l'Opéra for a bottle of tabloids of aspirin. I was rather surprised, for he never took drugs. When I gave him the little bottle he drew out the plug of cotton-wool and extracted a tabloid, which he put upon his dressing-table, afterwards replacing the wool.

About six o'clock a lady was announced, and when she was shown up to our sitting-room I found to my surprise that it was Paula Kereicha.

Rasputin was out with Azef, so Paula declared that she would wait till their return.

"I am staying at the Hôtel Chatham, and have to go to London to-morrow," she told me. "Krivochein has left the Chatham with his wife, and I am to follow."

"The Father and Azef have gone round to the Chatham," I said. "They are evidently hoping to find you there."

"Ah! Then I will return and see if they are there," she said, and, rising, she left.

I did not see her again. She went to London next day, according to Azef's instructions, and as a French governess took a room in that quiet hotel near Victoria Station—the room wherein she was afterwards found dead.

At the time I had no knowledge of the tragedy, but later on I learned from Rasputin's own lips, while in one of his drunken, boastful moods, how he had introduced into the bottle of aspirin a single tabloid of one of Badmayev's secret poisons, made up to resemble exactly the other tabloids. With Azef he had gone to the Hôtel Chatham on purpose to extract from her dressing-case her own bottle of aspirin—which she had purchased on the previous day from the same chemist in the Avenue de l'Opéra—and replace it by the one containing the fatal dose.

The latter she had swallowed in ignorance because of a headache, death ensuing in a few seconds, and the post-mortem revealed nothing.

"Ah! my dear Féodor, that girl knew far too much! Besides, we discovered that, though she had been sent by our friend Azef to assist two of our friends to bring 'Krivochein's' career to a sudden end, she had actually warned him, so that he has succeeded in escaping to America to avoid us!"

CHAPTER VII

scandal and blackmail

As the power of the monk Rasputin increased, so also my own social position became advanced, until as the "saint's" confidential secretary, and therefore as one who had his ear, I became on friendly terms with half the nobility of Petrograd.

The pious fraud declared to true believers, "If you do not heed me, then God will abandon you."

Leading as he was, freely and openly, a life of shameless debauchery, wholesale blackmail and political intrigue, it is marvellous how his power became so unlimited. To those who disbelieved in his doctrine or in his divinity, he simply smiled evilly, and said: "If you fail to do my bidding you will be punished by my friends."

Such warning was sufficient. Everyone knew that Rasputin's power was already, in 1912, greater than that of the Tsar Nicholas himself. Day after day ambitious men called at the house in the Gorokhovaya, to which we had now moved, all of them anxious for ministerial and clerical appointments, which he obtained for them at prices fixed by himself. The highest in the land bowed before the rascal, while any man who dared to belittle him, or attempt to thwart his evil designs, was at once removed from office. Through Madame Vyrubova, who received her share of the spoils and acted upon the Empress, Rasputin reigned as Tsar, the Emperor doing little but sign his name to documents placed before him.

Thus Russia was compelled to witness a regular procession of officials whom the "man of God" appointed, in accordance with value received. Even Goremykin was compelled to bow before the mystic humbug. Rasputin for five years caused to be appointed or dismissed all the bishops, and woe betide any person who attempted to interfere with his power.

The Archbishop Theophanus, full of remorse at having lent a helping hand to the scoundrel, tried to overthrow him by publicly denouncing his evil practices, while the Bishop Hermogenes, who knew of the monk's past, attempted to reveal it. In an instant the vengeance of Rasputin fell upon them, Theophanus being sent to Tadriz, and Hermogenes confined to a monastery. Helidor was hunted by the police and sought asylum abroad; while a man named Grinevitch, who had also known Rasputin long ago at Pokrovsky, was invited to dinner by the monk one night, and next morning was found dead in his bed; while another was arrested by the police on a

false charge of conspiracy, and sent to prison for ten years, though perfectly innocent.

Rasputin's overbearing insolence knew no bounds. Now that he was the power behind the Throne, he compelled all to bow to him, the educated as well as the peasantry. On entering a house, whether that of prince or peasant, he would invariably kiss the young and pretty women, while he would turn his back upon and refuse even to speak with those who were older.

Our new house was larger and more luxurious than the old one. But it also had the false telephone in the study, which was supposed by the "saint's" dupes to be a private wire to the palace of Tsarskoe-Selo! The house had been furnished entirely at the expense of the Empress, with valuable Eastern carpets, fine furniture, tasteful hangings of silk, beautiful pictures, autographed portraits of their Majesties, and, of course, ikons of all sorts and sizes to impress the pious.

An example of the rogue's impudence occurred on Easter Day in 1912. We were breakfasting with Madame Vyrubova's sister at her house just off the Nevski. With us was Boris Stürmer and two minor officials of the Court, and we were awaiting the coming of the Tsaritza's favourite lady in waiting.

At last she arrived from Tsarskoe-Selo bearing a parcel for Grichka, which she gave him merrily, saying:

"The Empress has made this for you with her own hands. She spent part of last night in finishing it for you, so that you should have it as an Easter present."

The "saint" cut the string and withdrew a blue silk coat of the kind he was in the habit of wearing, in the Russian style, over loose trousers and high boots of patent leather.

"Alix wishes you to wear it to-day," Madame Vyrubova went on, "after you have taken Holy Communion."

Rasputin, with a disappointed look, cast it and its paper upon the floor, and said:

"Now let us have breakfast," and promptly began to eat with his fingers, as he always did, in order to show his contempt for the more refined manners of those about him.

A few weeks after this incident there occurred the Ganskau affair, which was a most disgraceful transaction, and which was very carefully hushed up. Though there were many rumours in Petrograd concerning it, I am able to place the whole of the astounding facts on record here for the first time.

Rasputin, tiring of his lascivious pleasures, also became bored by those who called in order to enlist his influence in their cause for monetary consideration. Hence he surrounded himself with a trio of expert swindlers. They consisted of a certain adventurous prince named Gorianoff, a man named Striaptchef—who had been his companion in his early horse-stealing days in his native Pokrovsky—and a notorious woman named Sabler. These precious persons constituted a sort of bodyguard, and they first interviewed any petitioner, fixed the amount of the gift proposed to the "holy man" for the exercise of his influence, and carried out the "deal."

If a wealthy man desired a Government appointment; if an under-secretary desired a portfolio; if a wife desired her husband's advancement or his appointment to an office at Court; if a father desired a lucrative job for his profligate son; or if a rich man, who was being watched by the police because of some crime he had committed, wished to escape scot-free, then they interviewed the elegant Prince Gorianoff at his house in the Zacharievskaya. This individual, whom the police of Europe know as a Continental swindler, would quickly gauge the petitioner's means, and screw from him every rouble possible before putting the matter before the caster out of devils.

One day, as I sat alone at lunch with Rasputin, the prince called, and sitting down at the table unceremoniously declared:

"I have done a very good stroke of business this morning, my dear Gregory. You have probably heard of Ganskau of Tver."

"The great banker, eh?"

"The same. He is one of the wealthiest men in Russia. He wants something, and he can afford to pay, though he seems very close-fisted at present."

"What does he want?" growled the monk.

The scoundrel who bore the title of prince made a grimace, and said:

"He wants to put a suggestion before you. He refuses to tell me what it is—except that it is very urgent and brooks no delay. I told him that he would have to pay five thousand roubles if he desired to have an interview—and he

has paid it. Here is the money!" And he drew from his pocket a bundle of banknotes.

"But, my dear Peter," exclaimed the pious fraud, "I have no time to barter with these people. I cannot see him."

"Take my advice, Gregory, and listen to what he has to say," replied the adventurer, who had lived all his life on his wits in London, Paris and Rome—and had lived well too. "If I am not mistaken he will tell you a strange thing, and if you get it down in writing—in writing, remember—that letter will be worth a very large sum of money in the near future. As I have said—he wants something urgently—and he must be made to pay."

"Very well," Rasputin replied grudgingly. "I will see him—at four o'clock this afternoon. Féodor," he added, turning to me, "make a note that I see this banker man."

At four o'clock punctually a fine car drew up, and a stout, overdressed, full-bearded man alighted and was shown into the room where I awaited him with the prince.

"Ah!" cried the latter, welcoming him warmly. "You had my message over the telephone. I have, after great difficulty, induced the holy Father to consent to see you. He is due at Tsarskoe-Selo, but he has just telephoned to the Empress that he is delayed. And the delay is in order to hear you."

"I am sure I am most grateful, Prince," declared the banker, who seemed very pale and much agitated. His wealth was proverbial in Russia, and even in banking circles in Paris and London. His brother was one of the secretaries of the Russian Embassy in Paris.

With due ceremony, after the banker had removed his light overcoat, I conducted him into the monk's presence.

As Ganskau bowed towards the mysterious influence behind the Imperial Throne, I saw the quick, inquisitive hawk's glance which Rasputin gave him. Then I turned and, closing the door, left the pair together, and returned to where the prince was waiting. Gorianoff was a clever and unscrupulous scoundrel of exquisite manners and most plausible tongue. It was for that reason that the holy Father employed him.

As he leaned back in a padded arm-chair, smoking lazily while he awaited his victim's reappearance, he laughed merrily and whispered to me that the rich man from Tver would, "if properly handled," prove a gold mine.

"Mind, Féodor—be careful to impress upon the Father to obtain something incriminating from the banker in writing. He is hard pressed, I know, and in order to save himself he will commit any folly."

"Men who are pushed into a corner seldom pause to think," I remarked.

"If the police are upon them, as I know they are in this case, then no time is afforded for reflection."

By the prince's manner I knew that he felt confident of making big profits. The great Ganskau, the Rothschild of Russia, desired Gregory's aid, and Gregory would assist him—at a price. While we were talking Madame Vyrubova rang on the telephone to inquire if Rasputin had left for Tsarskoe-Selo.

I replied in the negative, whereupon she said: "Tell him not to come to-night. The Emperor has quarrelled with Alix, and it will be best for him to be absent. The boy [meaning the little Tsarevitch] will be taken ill in the night, and then he can come to-morrow and heal him."

I understood. The woman Vyrubova, so trusted by the Tsaritza, was about to administer another dose of that baneful drug to the poor invalid boy—a drug which would produce partial paralysis, combined with symptoms which puzzled every physician called to see him.

It was not until nearly half an hour later that Rasputin opened the door of his room, and, crossing himself piously, laid his hands upon his breast and dismissed his petitioner.

"Your desire shall be granted," he said in final farewell. "But you must write me the reason you desire my assistance. I always insist upon that in every case."

"But—well, it is not nice to confess," declared the desperate man, pausing on the threshold of the room.

"Probably not. But you do confess to me, and surely you can trust me, a servant of Heaven, with your secret? If not, please do not rely upon Gregory Rasputin," he added proudly.

For a second the victim hesitated. Then he said in a low, hard voice: "I will do as you wish—well knowing that you will keep the truth a secret."

Rasputin, his hands still crossed upon his breast, bowed stiffly, and the banker, recognising us standing at the end of the passage, walked towards us.

As soon as he had left the house, Rasputin called us, and throwing himself into a chair became unduly hilarious.

"Really, Peter, you are extremely clever!" he declared. "Where you find these people I do not know. You said you had done a good stroke of business, but I did not believe you. Yet now I see that the banker's millions of roubles are entirely at our disposal. We must be diplomatic—that is all!"

"Why does he require your influence?" inquired the prince.

"In order to extricate himself from a very dangerous position. At any moment he may be arrested for murder!"

"For murder!" Gorianoff echoed. "Is he guilty of murder?"

"Yes. He has confessed the truth to me as a father confessor. Now he has promised to put his confession down in black and white."

In an instant I saw the trend of Rasputin's evil thoughts. By the written confession he would, through his princely friend, be able to extort money without limit.

"Of what is he in fear?" asked the prince eagerly.

"Of arrest for the murder of a young French girl, Elise Allain, who had been singing at the Bouffes in Moscow," Rasputin replied. "He has just told me how he committed the crime three months ago, in order to rid himself of her, and escaped to Brussels believing that the police would never be able to establish his guilt. On his return to Tver three days ago, however, he found that the police had been making active inquiries, having discovered in one of the dead girl's trunks that had been left at the station cloak-room in Warsaw, certain letters from him. Indeed, he has received a visit from the Chief of Police at Tver, who closely questioned him."

"Ah! Then he may be arrested at any moment—eh?"

"That is what he anticipates," said the monk. "He has gone to his hotel to write his confession, and will return here in an hour with a banker's draft for one hundred thousand roubles."

"Did I not say that I had been doing some good business, Gregory?" asked his friend.

"Yes—and it will prove better business later—you will see."

At Rasputin's orders I went round to Malinovsky, Assistant Director of Police, who at the monk's request telephoned to Tver to inquire what suspicions there were against the banker Ganskau. When Malinovsky returned to where I was sitting, he told me that the reply of the Chief of Police of Tver was to the effect that there was no doubt that Ganskau was guilty of a very brutal murder, committed in most mysterious circumstances. The banker's wife, with whom he lived on very disagreeable terms, had discovered a letter from the girl Elise, and duly handed it to the police out of revenge. This led them to find the box at Warsaw wherein were other letters, one of which forbade her to come to Russia, and threatening her with violence if she disobeyed.

I returned at once to the Gorokhovaya, where the monk and the prince sat with a bottle of champagne between them, and gave them the message.

A quarter of an hour later the banker returned excitedly, and was ushered in to Rasputin, who saw him alone. They remained together for about ten minutes, and then the victim departed.

At once the monk came to us, waving in one hand Ganskau's confession of guilt, and in the other a draft on the Azov Bank for one hundred thousand roubles.

"I suppose we had better pretend to do something—eh, Peter?" asked the monk, with an evil grin.

"Of course," was the reply.

Then I sat down, and at the "holy man's" dictation wrote to the Minister of the Interior as follows:

"There is a charge of murder against Nicholas Ganskau, banker, of Tver. I wish to see all documents concerning the crime. Orders must be given not to arrest the assassin for one month, and that due notice be given me before any action is taken."

To this the monk scrawled his illiterate signature.

From that moment the unfortunate banker was irretrievably in Rasputin's hands, and I saw much of his dealings with him. Pretending to leave everything with his friend Prince Gorianoff, he refused to see the guilty man again. In the meantime the prince, whom I accompanied as the monk's secretary, went to Tver three weeks after the first transaction, and we saw the victim in secret. Gorianoff told him that, although the monk had been

able to prevent his arrest, the police were not satisfied, and pressure was being placed upon them by one of his enemies in high places.

This, of course, greatly alarmed him.

"All is unfortunately due to your wife!" the prince remarked. "It is a pity you have not made peace with her. It was she who took one of the girl's letters to the police."

The banker started up as though electrified.

"My wife!" he gasped. "Is it her doing?"

"Most certainly," was the prince's cool reply. "Féodor knows it. He had it from the Chief of Police of this city himself."

I confirmed my companion's statement, while the banker, terror and despair written upon his pale features, stood staring like one who saw death before him.

"My wife left me a fortnight ago!" he stammered. "That is why. She expected me to be arrested. What can I do? How can you help me? Who is this enemy in a high position who is determined upon my arrest?"

"The holy Father alone knows; I do not," declared the prince very seriously. "It is somebody at Court—somebody who is a friend of his and who let the fact drop in the course of conversation. I regret it, but I may as well tell you that your arrest is imminent."

"But what can I do to avoid the scandal?" cried the murderer in despair.

"Well—the only way is to propitiate your unknown enemy," replied the prince insinuatingly.

"I gave the Father a hundred thousand roubles," he remarked.

"True; and the Father used his influence so that the inquiries were dropped. He had no knowledge of the fact that you had such a bitter and relentless enemy in the higher Court circle."

"Nor had I. I wonder who it can be—except, perhaps, Boyadko, with whom I once had some financial dealings over which we quarrelled."

As a matter of fact, the unknown enemy only existed in Rasputin's fertile imagination.

"Well, as I have said, the Father may find means of propitiating him—if the payment is a liberal one," said Gorianoff. "I suggest that you return with us to Petrograd at once, and I will endeavour to accomplish something."

Eagerly he acted upon the adventurer's advice. During the journey the banker was nervous lest at any moment the police might lay hands upon him. At each station the sight of a grey uniform caused him to hold his breath. Thus to work upon his nerves was part of the prince's game, for he well knew that the more terrified Ganskau became, the greater amount of money he would be prepared to pay.

Back in Petrograd he begged of Rasputin to receive him, and the monk, after two refusals on the plea that he was too busy, at last consented ungraciously.

The result of that interview was that Nicholas Ganskau disgorged a further hundred thousand roubles for the bribing of an enemy who did not exist!

After the banker had left, Rasputin, full of satisfaction as he held the draft for the amount in his dirty paw, dictated to me another letter addressed to the Minister of the Interior, which read:

"His Majesty the Emperor, having full knowledge of the charge of murder made against Nicholas Ganskau of Tver, orders that the inquiries concerning the case be abandoned and that the person suspected be not further molested."

This was duly signed by the monk and delivered by me at the Ministry an hour later.

Such orders Rasputin frequently gave in the name of His Majesty, who, even if he knew of them, never questioned them.

This, however, did not end the affair, for twelve months afterwards Ganskau, who, scot-free, had taken up his residence in the Avenue Villiers, in Paris, where he was leading a very gay life, received an unexpected visit from Prince Gorianoff, who, making pretence that he had severed his friendship with Rasputin, hinted that as the monk held in his possession the written confession of his crime, it might be worth while to obtain and destroy it.

This suggestion Ganskau at once welcomed, thanking the prince for his kindly intervention.

Then the latter made a remark which in itself showed how expert a blackmailer he was.

"You see, as the girl Elise was a French subject, if the French police ever get hold of the truth it would go very badly with you," he declared.

The banker's face went pale as death.

"I never thought of that!" he gasped. "Yes, I must get that confession at all hazards," he cried.

"I am prepared to assist you," said the scoundrel coolly. "Of course to obtain it from such a man as Rasputin presents many difficulties. He will never part with it willingly."

"Then how shall we get it?"

"It must be stolen."

The banker remained silent for a few moments.

"You see," went on the prince, "one can never tell into whose hands may fall that collection of confessions which the Father has extracted from those who are guilty."

"And you think you can obtain it for me?" asked the banker.

"I am still friendly with many of Rasputin's friends. It is merely a matter of payment—another hundred thousand roubles, and surely it is worth it."

The banker, seeing himself in great danger should either Rasputin or his visitor turn against him, at length consented, and before Gorianoff left he had in his pocket a draft upon the Crédit Lyonnais for the sum mentioned. The assassin had at first made it a condition that the confession should be handed to him before he paid, but the prince pointed out that the money was required for bribery, and would have to be paid before the confession could be extracted from Rasputin's safe.

Needless to say, the banker never received back his written confession of his crime, and so constant was the strain of his guilty conscience and his hourly dread of arrest and capital punishment, that a year later he shot himself at an hotel in Plymouth.

Another illustration of the monk's greed and unscrupulousness was the Violle affair.

Monsieur Felix Violle, a Frenchman who had become a naturalised Russian, and who carried on business as a wholesale furrier in the Nevski in Petrograd, had a very pretty young wife. One day, at one of the weekly reunions of the sister-disciples, this young woman was brought by Madame Vyrubova's sister, she having expressed her desire to enter Rasputin's cult. There were present on that occasion about thirty other women, mostly young and good-looking, and nearly all of the highest society in Petrograd. The youngest present was about seventeen, the daughter of a certain countess who was one of Rasputin's most attached devotees.

After Madame Violle had been initiated into the secrets of the erotic sect, the whole party sat down to tea, when a photograph was taken by one of the ladies, which showed Madame Violle seated by the "holy Father."

Rasputin, from that day, took a great deal of interest in the furrier's wife. He introduced her to Anna Vyrubova, who presented her to the Empress. Hence, from being a tradesman's wife, Olga Violle, within a fortnight, had entered the vicious Court circle which revolved around Alexandra Feodorovna, and which was rapidly conspiring to betray Russia into the hands of the Germans.

Madame Violle told her husband nothing of her social advancement. The furrier was in a large way of business, a man of means who liked to see his wife well dressed; therefore she was able to cut an elegant figure at Court. She accounted for her absences from home by the fact that she frequently visited a married sister living about twenty miles outside Petrograd.

Under the evil hypnotic influence of Rasputin, the smart little woman, who often called at the house and whom I sometimes met at the palace, was quickly transformed from a steady tradesman's wife into a giddy, pleasure-loving and intriguing degenerate, perhaps even more vicious than the rest. Indeed, it was this very fact which caused the Empress to look upon her with favour. Thus she soon had the run of the private apartments, and became upon friendly terms with both Stürmer and Fredericks.

This went on for some months, and even at the Imperial Court, where nobody was over-squeamish, the conduct of little Madame Violle—who came from nowhere and whose past was quite obscure except to Rasputin, Madame Vyrubova, her sister and myself—was looked upon somewhat askance.

Violle, who was most devoted to his extremely pretty wife, one day had a sudden shock. By some means a copy of the photograph of the sister-disciples went astray in the post. A photographer obtained possession of it

and promptly made some picture post-cards, which were quickly upon the market, much to Rasputin's chagrin. Somebody, recognising Madame Violle in the picture, sent one anonymously to her husband. The result was a terrible domestic scene.

Madame Olga came to Rasputin in great distress, and in my presence, falling upon her knees before him, in tears, kissed his unwashed hands and begged him to advise her.

"Your precious husband has made a fool of himself," the monk remarked grimly. "Let him take warning lest Gregory Rasputin lift his hand against him. Return home, and tell him that from me."

That was all the advice he would give her. He was full of anger that the woman who had taken the picture should have been so negligent as to allow a copy to fall into the hands of others. Always elusive, he hated to be photographed, as he feared that it might constitute evidence against him.

The pretty woman, still much agitated, went out, and took train to Tsarskoe-Selo, where she had audience of Her Majesty, who, in turn, urged her to defy her husband.

Meanwhile the latter was going about Petrograd in a state of fury at discovering that his wife was one of the monk's followers. But he was not the first furious husband who had had cause to hate the hypnotic peasant. The man Striaptchef and the woman Sabler, who constituted Rasputin's bodyguard, assisted by Prince Gorianoff, quickly heard of the furrier's anger and told the monk. Therefore it was not with any degree of surprise that, when a ring came at the door late that same night, I found myself face to face with the wronged husband.

"I wish to see the Father," he said quite coolly.

"I regret that he is out," was my prompt reply.

"You lie!" he shouted. "He is at home. This house has been watched ever since six o'clock, when he returned. I will see him, and you dare not stop me."

Then, ere I was aware of it, he seized me by the throat, hurled me back into the entrance-hall, and before I could prevent him marched straight to Rasputin's room.

I dashed after him, hearing the monk's shouts for assistance, and on entering found the "holy man" lying on the floor and the infuriated Violle

lashing him with a short whip he carried. The scene was a dramatic one. The scoundrel was shrieking with pain, and in endeavouring to avoid the blows succeeded in rising, but as he did so the furrier administered another sound whack, which sent the Empress's pet "saint" skipping across the room howling.

"You dog of a mock monk!" cried the furrier. "Take that!—and that!—and that!"

So beside himself with anger was he that I believe he would have beaten Rasputin to death had not Striaptchef dashed in, and together we succeeded in dragging the angry man off and turning him out of the house.

As soon as the "saint" had recovered from the fracas, he gave vent to a volley of fearful oaths, cursing the pretty woman who had been the cause of the assault.

"She shall be kicked out. I will see that she goes to the palace no more," he declared. "If a woman cannot manage her husband then she is dangerous. And Olga Violle has proved herself to be dangerous. I will see that Alix dismisses her to-morrow. And all on account of that thrice-accursed picture-making. To think that I—the Saviour of Russia, sent to these people by the Almighty—should be whipped like a dog!"

He strode up and down foaming with fury.

"The skin-dealer shall suffer!" he cried. "I'll make him pay dearly for this!"

Then, turning to me, he ordered me to go at once to Manuiloff, Stürmer's secretary, adding: "Bring him to me. Tell him that it is a matter of greatest urgency."

I had great difficulty in finding the man he had indicated, and who was one of Russia's "dark forces." He was not at his house, but by bribing the doorkeeper I learned that he would be found in a very questionable gambling-house in the vicinity. There I discovered him and drove him to the Gorokhovaya.

"Listen," the monk said as I ushered him in. "There is a furrier in the Nevski named Violle. Both he and his wife are dangerous revolutionists and must be arrested at once. You understand—eh?"

Manuiloff, the catspaw of both Stürmer and Rasputin, and who was well paid to do any dirty work allotted to him, did not quite understand.

"You denounce him—eh?" he asked. "There are reasons, of course."

"Of course there are reasons, you fool, or I should not bring you here at this hour to tell you of the conspiracy against the Throne. I make the allegation; you must furnish the proofs. Do you now understand?" asked the "saint."

"Ah, I see! You want some documents introduced into the furrier's house incriminating both him and his wife?"

"Exactly. And at once. They must both be arrested before noon to-morrow," Rasputin said. "I shall leave all the details to you, well knowing that they will be in good hands, my dear Manuiloff," laughed Rasputin grimly. "One thing is important. There must be no loophole for either of them to escape. The Empress wills it so. Both must be sent to Schlüsselburg. Tell His Excellency so from me. We want no trial or attempt at scandal. The pair are dangerous—dangerous to us. Now do you understand?"

Manuiloff, who had forged incriminating documents many times, and who had a dozen underlings who assisted him in these nefarious deeds, understood perfectly. He was paid to act as his two chiefs directed, and dozens of innocent persons were rotting in prison at that moment because they had fallen beneath Rasputin's displeasure.

So it was that by noon next day both Violle and his pretty wife—who had only the day before been a close friend of the Tsaritza—were on their way to Schlüsselburg as dangerous to the State.

Truly, the monk had neither scruples nor honesty, neither compunction nor pity; for the woman who was his favourite he had turned upon and sent to that grim island fortress, where in one of those terrible oubliettes below the level of the lake her death took place eight months later.

CHAPTER VIII

rasputin the actual tsar

The tragi-comedy of Tsarskoe-Selo was being played with increasing vigour just prior to the war. Berlin, through Rasputin, piped the tune to which the Imperial Court was dancing—the Dance of Death!

One night, after Rasputin had dined with Madame Vyrubova and myself, General Soukhomlinoff, Minister of War, entered, swaggering in the uniform of the Grodno Hussars.

This man, who, as I write, is in a convict prison as a traitor, had only a week before assured the Emperor that the army was ready "to the last button" for a possible war, and the troops devoted to him. I happen to know how many thousand roubles passed into his banking account from the Deutsche Bank in Berlin as price of that lie!

Poor weak Nicholas! On the day following, Protopopoff, the wily schemer and spy of Germany, who was admitted to all the secrets of the Allies, went to the Emperor and echoed what Rasputin had declared to His Majesty, namely, that God was with Russia and that the Holy Spirit approved of the righteous work accomplished under the guidance of Stürmer and Soukhomlinoff. Truly the camarilla were supporting each other, and I, an onlooker, stood amazed and astounded. All four were half-mad with wild dreams of the prosperity which war would bring to them, for the bribes promised by Berlin were heavy, and Hardt and other secret messengers were constantly passing between the two capitals bearing confidential orders from the Wilhelmstrasse, of which the War Minister's assurance to the Tsar had been one.

But Soukhomlinoff, whose wife was declared to be the most chic and extravagant woman in all Petrograd, strode up and down the room that night in a fury of rage.

"Gregory!" he cried. "An untoward incident has happened. Your enemy Vorontsof Dachkof has been at work against you this afternoon."

"Curse him! How?" growled the monk, for the Lieutenant-General of the Caucasus had been a personal friend of Alexander III.

"I was at audience with Nicholas after luncheon, and the count was there. After he had presented his report he became familiar, and said: 'Now I must talk to thee. Dost thou know that, with thy Rasputin fellows, thou art going

to thy doom, that thou art gambling away thy throne and the life of thy child?'"

"What?" gasped the monk, starting up. "Did he openly say that?"

"He did."

"Then the count shall be disgraced!" declared Rasputin. "He has long been my enemy; but I will suffer this no longer."

"Well, when the count spoke, Nicholas huddled himself up on a settee and sobbed. 'Oh! why did God confide to me this heavy task!'"

"The fool!" laughed Rasputin. "To-morrow he shall see me playing with the Tsarevitch in the Park, and Nicholas shall be with us."

And indeed Rasputin carried out his plan, and the count saw them together.

The monk was not blind to the fact that he was surrounded by enemies, all of whom were jealous of his power and sought his downfall. By bribery, blackmail, and the unscrupulous use of the secret police, which was under Protopopoff as Minister of the Interior, the camarilla were waxing fat, and woe betide any who dared utter a warning to the Emperor.

Monsieur Gutchkoff had denounced, before the Duma, the scandal of the sexually-perverted peasant's presence at Court and prophesied the direct disaster. Kokovtsov had loyally warned his master of the effect upon the country which the low intrigues of his courtiers was producing. Then, when Goremykin urged the Tsar to prorogue the Duma, General Polivanof had the courage to sign an address to His Majesty urging him not to do so, as it would be a highly dangerous measure. Rodzianko, too, regardless of consequences, took to Tsarskoe-Selo a full report of the accusations made in the Duma, and urged His Majesty to put an end to the outrageous scandals.

The monk had noted all this, and had already marked down all his enemies for destruction. He well knew what aversion the Tsar had to anyone who spoke what was unwelcome. Weak and vacillating, His Majesty hated to be told the plain truth, and for that reason he was so constantly kept in the dark. Even his loyal Ministers knew that by being outspoken they would be seeking dismissal. Indeed, with Rasputin's clever intriguing, Kokovtsov, Sazonov, Krivochein and Polivanof all paid for their sincerity by the loss of their offices and the displeasure of their Imperial master. Again, it was the monk who had contrived to dismiss Monsieur Trepof, for I actually wrote out the order, which Nicholas signed, dismissing him! And, in addition, Rodzianko, whom the Emperor nicknamed "the Archdeacon" because of his

deep, impressive voice, lost the sympathy of his sovereign because he had prophesied evil.

And now yet another enemy had arisen in the person of Count Vorontsof Dachkof.

"The count shall pay for this, and dearly!" repeated Rasputin, as he sat with his brows knit, stroking his unkempt beard.

"At least he can be dismissed, just as you sent into disgrace Prince Orlof, the fidus Achates of the Emperor," remarked Anna Vyrubova, who was handsomely dressed and wearing some fine diamonds.

Rasputin gave vent to an evil laugh.

"And Witte also," he said. Then, with his unbounded egotism he rose, and added: "Yes, Anna, I am Tsar, though Nicholas bears the title!"

Only on the previous night the Tsar, accompanied by Soukhomlinoff and Rasputin, had dined at the mess of the officers of the Guard, and all three, His Majesty included, had become highly hilarious, and later on hopelessly drunk.

"True!" exclaimed the Minister of War, who had so misled Russia and the Tsar into a belief that all was prepared for hostilities against Germany. "You are the most powerful person in the land to-day, Gregory. That is why you must not only suppress Vorontsof Dachkof, but also Yakowleff—who is his friend, remember."

"Ah, Yakowleff! I had quite forgotten, General! How foolish of me!" cried the monk. "The concession for the gambling casino at Otchakov has been granted to him, but we must have it. It will be a second Monte Carlo, and a mine of wealth for us."

"I quite agree, my dear Gregory. And it lies entirely with you whether we stand in Yakowleff's place or not," exclaimed the woman who was the evil genius of the Tsaritza.

The fact was that a rich financier, Ivan Yakowleff, who had offices in Petrograd and in London, for certain personal services rendered to the Tsar—the buying off of an unwelcome female entanglement, it is said—had been granted a concession to establish public gaming-rooms at Otchakov, on the Black Sea, not far from Odessa. The financier, who was elderly, had recently married a young and rather pretty wife, and being a friend of Count

Vorontsof Dachkof, was in the happiest circumstances, well knowing that a huge fortune awaited him.

"At the moment Yakowleff is in London, I hear, forming a syndicate to take over the concession," the general remarked.

Rasputin smiled evilly, and after a pause said:

"Anybody who puts money into the venture will never see that money again. I will take care of that."

"Good!" laughed His Excellency the Minister, flicking some dust from the sleeve of his uniform. "We must have that concession for ourselves. But ought not we to know what is in progress in London—eh? Shall we get Protopopoff to send instructions to his agents in England?"

"No. Something might leak out. I do not trust the Okhrana in London," replied the wary woman, Vyrubova. "Have you forgotten the Meadows affair, and how they betrayed me and very nearly caused a scandal by their bungling? No, if we are to watch Yakowleff, let us do it ourselves. Why should you not go, Féodor?" she suggested, suddenly turning to me.

"I? To London!" I exclaimed, in no way averse to the journey, for I had been in England on three occasions previously.

"Yes," said Rasputin. "You shall go. Start to-morrow. Telegraph to Madame Huguet. She will help you, for she is not suspected, and all believe her to be French. Besides, she is pretty, and therefore useful."

"As a decoy, you mean?" I exclaimed.

"Of what other use is a woman?" laughed the scoundrel, whose unscrupulousness where the fair sex were concerned was notorious. He rose, and, unlocking a drawer, took out a book in which were registered many addresses of those who were in his pay, and hence under his thraldom.

I searched the pages eagerly and found the address, together with notes of certain payments. Madame, I saw, lived in a flat in Harrington Gardens, South Kensington.

There and then I received instructions to leave next day by the through express to Ostend, seek the lady, and then watch the movements of the Russian, who was busily forming the syndicate for the new Monte Carlo.

"If we are to strike against him we cannot know too much of his doings. Besides, when we do strike we must not blunder—eh, General?" laughed the monk, after which he opened a bottle of champagne, of which we all drank.

A week later I was in London, and one afternoon called upon Madame Huguet, who was expecting me. She was a vivacious, dark-haired young Frenchwoman, who had been one of the Father's sister-disciples in Petrograd, and whom he had sent to London upon some secret mission, the purpose of which was not quite clear to me. She had lived for some years in London before, and was well known in certain go-ahead circles of society. Seated in her cosy, well furnished drawing-room, with its silken curtains and bright chintzes in the English style, I told her exactly what Rasputin and Anna had instructed me to say.

"The Father wishes you to lose no time in becoming acquainted with the financier Yakowleff," I said. "He has offices in Old Broad Street, and he lives in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead, when in London."

"He is there now," she said. "I saw something about him in the papers three days ago—something concerning a concession for a gaming casino."

"Oh!" I cried. "Then it is in the papers—eh?"

She obtained the copy of the newspaper, and I saw it was announced that an "Establishment" was about to be constructed at Otchakov, which was to be a formidable rival to Monte Carlo, and that Monsieur Yakowleff, of Petrograd, was the originator of the scheme.

Fortunately Yakowleff did not know me by sight; therefore, while Madame Huguet set to work to scrape acquaintance with him, I spent my days watching his movements when he came to his City office, and noting his constant and busy peregrinations to and fro. Certainly his scheme was attracting around him many influential and wealthy men, to whom the prospect of huge profits proved alluring.

He was short, stout, rather Hebrew in appearance, unscrupulous no doubt, or he would not have stooped to do such dirty work as he did for Nicholas; nevertheless, he seemed highly popular in financial circles. He had left his wife in Petrograd; therefore the life he was leading was, I found, a pretty gay one. Each day he lunched at the best restaurants with his business friends, and discussed the great Otchakov scheme, and each night he took one of his lady friends out to dinner, the theatre, and the Savoy, Ritz or Carlton afterwards.

Within ten days of my arrival in London I found that his guest at dinner at the Ritz one night was the sprightly young Frenchwoman, Julie Huguet!

Next day she called me by telephone to Harrington Gardens, and said:

"I discovered a good deal last night. The syndicate is already formed. One hundred thousand pounds has been subscribed, and next week Yakowleff is leaving for Paris, and thence back to Petrograd."

Within half an hour I had telegraphed the news to Box 296, Poste Restante, Petrograd, which was the one used by Rasputin.

In reply I received from the monk a message which read:

"Obtain names of subscribers."

This I succeeded in doing after some considerable trouble, and they were the names of some of the shrewdest speculators in the City, none of them over-scrupulous, no doubt. To Rasputin I wired that I had the list, and asked for instructions, to which I received the reply:

"Excellent! Return without delay.—Gregory."

On my way back, during those many hours in the Nord Express between Ostend and Petrograd, I reviewed the whole affair, and saw the sinister working of the monk's mind. That Count Vorontsof Dachkof was in danger I knew full well. The monk never allowed any person to express open enmity without retaliating quietly and patiently, but with a crushing blow.

I wondered what was being planned between the Ministers of War and Interior. No doubt the Empress had been informed of what the count had told the Emperor, and she would at once conspire with the holy Father to cast him into social oblivion—or worse!

That the cupidity of Rasputin knew no bounds I was well aware. He intended to obtain that most lucrative gambling concession for himself, for Russians are born gamblers, especially the better classes, and the establishment of a casino on the Black Sea, with French hotels and restaurants, pretty villas, and an opera house in imitation of Monte Carlo, would in summer attract those thousands of rich Russians who in winter went to the Riviera to gamble.

It was a chance which Rasputin would never allow to slip. Of that I was quite certain.

The evening I returned to Petrograd the monk had left me a message to go to Tsarskoe-Selo; therefore I took my green pass, which admitted me past the many guards of the innermost holy-of-holies, the Imperial apartments, where I knew I should find the real ruler of Russia.

He had been spending the evening with the Empress, her daughter Olga, and Anna, and when I sent word to him he joined me in a small ante-room, and, closing the door, eagerly questioned me.

"When does Yakowleff return from Paris?" he asked when I had read over to him the list of those adventurous London financiers who had put their money into the Otchakov scheme.

"Next Thursday he leaves," I said. "Madame has gone to Paris on pretence of shopping, but in reality to keep watch. 'Axanda, Poste Restante, Avenue de l'Opéra,' will find her. She arranged it with me before we parted."

"Then this money-bag has really formed an influential syndicate in London to exploit our country—eh?" asked the monk grimly. "I have been speaking to the Empress about it, and she declares that the whole circumstance of Nicholas granting a concession, and for such service, is scandalous."

Scandalous! Surely Alexandra Feodorovna knew that her own actions had caused her name to be execrated through the length and breadth of Russia. Helidor and the "Blessed Mitia" had both attempted to reveal what they knew. Helidor and Mitia had many powerful friends, so they were severely left alone by the police; yet others who but opened their mouths and criticised had been sent to prison without trial, while those who had gained undue knowledge and might transmit it to England or America were sent to those dreaded oubliettes of Schlüsselburg—worse even than the Bastille, and not one has ever returned across the lake alive.

Rasputin was at that moment occupied by two matters—first, the fierce antagonism of Vorontsof Dachkof; and secondly, his avariciousness concerning the concession for gambling at that pretty little town east of Odessa.

So wide was the monk's influence that, hearing at that moment that the King of the Hellenes had granted to another British syndicate a concession to open public gaming-tables in Corfu, Rasputin had already been to Stürmer, the President of the Council, and contrived to have diplomatic pressure brought through Prince Demidoff, Russian Minister at Athens, to bear upon the King to cancel the concession as opposed to public morals! This view Rasputin contrived to have supported by the Wilhelmstrasse, because the Kaiser had his spring palace in the vicinity, and, with his mock

piety, he discountenanced any Temple of Fortune. The result was that the Corfu casino was prohibited.

Thus the Otchakov scheme was the only one in Europe. San Sebastian was declared by the monk to be only on a par with Ostend, and Otchakov was to be the great rival of Monte Carlo, with more varied and added attractions.

In that room, while he was hearing me through, Protopopoff, who had been making a report to the Emperor, joined us, and listened to what I had to say.

"I was looking at Yakowleff's dossier to-day, as you wished," remarked the Minister to the monk. "He seems a very honest, clean-living man for a financier. There are no suspicions of disloyalty, or even of anything."

"Then they must be made," declared Rasputin. "I intend to hold that concession. He would never have had it had it not been for Dachkof. But the latter is already out of favour. The Emperor has promised me to dismiss him to-morrow. His Majesty prefers cheerful people, not men who are pessimists," he laughed.

Indeed, next day the count, who was one of the most loyal and devoted servants of the Romanoffs, and who had risked everything in an attempt to open the Emperor's eyes, was actually dismissed. Such was the power of Rasputin.

But the plot against Yakowleff to dispossess him of the concession for Otchakov was a much more deeply-laid and evil one. The financier had returned to Petrograd, flushed with his success with his moneyed friends in London. Already news had gone round that a wonderful casino was to be built to eclipse Monte Carlo, and he had given an interview to the Novoye Vremya concerning it.

One afternoon, while in the handsome room set apart for Rasputin's use at Tsarskoe-Selo, I was sitting writing at his dictation, when there suddenly entered the Emperor, who had just come in from one of his frequent solitary walks in the park.

His Majesty flung himself wearily in a chair, and began to discuss a diplomatic matter concerning Austria, and to ask the Father's advice, for he now scarcely ever acted upon his own initiative.

Rasputin reflected for a few moments as he stood gazing out of the window, and then, having given his opinion as to the proper course to pursue, he added:

"There is another matter which should have thy attention—a matter which is being hidden very carefully from thee."

"And pray what is that, Father?" inquired the Emperor.

"It is the secret and traitorous dealings which one Yakowleff is having with British agents with a view to betraying Russia into the hands of the English," declared the sinister monk.

"I do not follow."

"To this man Yakowleff thou gavest the concession for improvements at Otchakov. On pretence of obtaining financial assistance he has been to London, and there, according to what my friends tell me, has been in consultation with certain British agents, whose intention it is to obtain our military and naval secrets."

"Then you denounce Yakowleff as a traitor—eh?" snapped the Emperor.

"I certainly do. If thou doubtest me, order Protopopoff to make a police search at his house in the Vosnesensky. Something will certainly be found there," he said, with insidious cunning, well knowing that Protopopoff's agents-provocateurs had already taken steps to secure the financier's undoing.

"I have here the names of two Englishwomen who are in the British Secret Service, and who were recently in Petrograd with Yakowleff." And he produced a piece of paper upon which he had scrawled the two names in his illiterate calligraphy. "The women are back in London, but he was with them a fortnight ago."

"Are you quite certain of all this?" asked Nicholas dubiously. "I always believed Yakowleff to be my friend. Indeed, he has already shown his loyalty to me."

"And in return thou gavest him the valuable concession for Otchakov," growled the monk.

"If you assure me, Father, that what you have said is the truth, and not mere hearsay, I will call Protopopoff, and he shall make full inquiry."

"It is a pity that the Otchakov scheme should be given into the hands of thy enemy," the monk declared, and thus the matter dropped.

In Petrograd late that night, after the usual evening assembly of the sister-disciples, when all the women had departed and I was again alone with the monk, Protopopoff arrived, and said jubilantly:

"Your words to Nicholas have borne fruit regarding Yakowleff. The Emperor spoke to me on the telephone, and, acting on his instructions, I ordered a police search, when some documents in cipher were found in a drawer in his writing-table."

"And you arrested him?"

"No. He seems to have somehow got wind of what was in progress, for he left Petrograd yesterday for Helsingfors, and has escaped!"

"Escaped!" shrieked Rasputin, springing to his feet in dismay.

"Yes. Gone back to London, I believe."

The monk knit his brows and stood stroking his unkempt beard. He was thinking out some further devilish plot.

"Féodor," he said at last, turning to me, "write down what I say."

I crossed to the table, and when I was ready he dictated the following:

"In consequence of his traitorous dealings with emissaries of a foreign Power, I, Nicholas, refuse to grant Ivan Yakowleff his application for a concession for improvements at Otchakov, and hereby grant the privilege unreservedly to Alexander Klouieff, of 48 Kurlandskaya, Petrograd. Further, I order the arrest of Ivan Yakowleff and the confiscation of all his property."

Alexander Klouieff! The fellow was an ex-agent of secret police, a man ready to do any dirty work, even murder, for Rasputin, if paid for it—a low-bred criminal of the worst possible type! So the concession was to be given to him, and he, of course, would in due course, in exchange for payment, hand it over to the monk, who would share the huge profits with his friends.

"Nicholas shall sign that to-morrow," Rasputin remarked with confidence. "As soon as he has done so I will see that copies be sent to each of the men in London who have subscribed, and they will no doubt prosecute Yakowleff for fraud. In any case, he is ruined and cast out, so he no longer stands in our path."

"Excellent!" said Protopopoff. "Does Klouieff know?"

"Of course not. I shall pay him something for the use of his name before he knows exactly what has transpired," was the crafty reply of the "blessed Gregory"—as so many termed him.

Two days later I went as usual to the palace with my master, and he took me with him along to the Emperor's room, in case any writing was to be done. The monk's first words were of the escape of Yakowleff.

"The traitor has gone back to his English pay-masters!" said the Starets. "I have written here the order for his arrest and the confiscation of his property."

And he placed before the Emperor the document I had written. To Rasputin's dismay, however, His Majesty seemed disinclined to append his signature. To me, Nicholas, who was wearing an old grey tweed suit, seemed very doubtful regarding the whole transaction.

"Who is this person Alexander Klouieff?" he demanded. "I must know something more of him."

"He is a man of considerable wealth—upright, honourable, and devoted to thee," Rasputin assured him. "Canst thou not place thy trust in those I recommend? If not, I say no more."

"Of course, Father; but the concession was granted—while this order makes it appear that it was only applied for."

"Surely it is not wise that thou shouldst be known to have granted favour unto a traitor?" was the monk's clever reply.

Still Nicholas hesitated, at which Rasputin grew furious, declaring that he had no time to waste in idle discussion.

Dropping the familiar form of speech he was in the habit of using to the Emperor, he stood erect and said:

"You know the message which your dead father gave you at the séance last night! If you refuse to sign this decree, then I will abandon Russia to-day and leave you, the Empress and the lad to your fate. Remember, I am God's messenger and your divine guide!"

The Tsar stood terror-stricken and in fear lest the real ruler of Russia should once again depart from Petrograd and refuse to return. Further refusal to sign was useless; therefore he bit his lip in chagrin and appended his signature to the document, which not only deprived the unfortunate

Yakowleff of his concession, but also denounced him as a traitor and a swindler.

The result was that not only did Rasputin obtain possession of the concession for Otchakov, but he sold it a month later for a huge sum to a syndicate of bankers in Vienna, who still hold it. The monk, after paying a dole to the ex-agent of police, divided up the spoils with Protopopoff, Stürmer and Soukhomlinoff, and, in addition, he bought a very valuable diamond necklace for Anna Vyrubova.

As for poor Yakowleff, he was, as Rasputin had plotted, prosecuted in London for fraud, and sentenced at the Old Bailey to a term of imprisonment.

As the months went on, in the first half of 1914, I noticed that the acquaintanceship between Rasputin and his well-paid chemist-friend, Badmayev, became closer. Badmayev held the formula of the poisonous concoction which at intervals Anna Vyrubova secretly introduced into the food of the Tsarevitch, causing the poor lad those mysterious illnesses which were puzzling the physicians of Europe.

That some fresh plot of a diabolical nature was in progress I felt confident, but of its actual motive I could ascertain nothing. Yet it turned out to be a conspiracy—no doubt inspired and suggested by Potsdam—of a peculiarly devilish character.

It was on that fateful day that the "Germanisation" of Russia became complete. Thanks to the traitorous assurances of Soukhomlinoff, Minister of War, Russia, alas! found herself suddenly plunged into hostilities. Petrograd, of course, went wild with excitement. Our loyal Russians, who believed in official declarations and in their Tsar, were ready to fly at the Teutons, little dreaming that already, before a single shot was fired, Germany held all the honours of the game, and had the Russian bear shackled hand and foot.

At four o'clock in the afternoon Rasputin called me, and handing me an envelope which seemed to contain some small object—a lady's silver powder-puff case I afterwards knew it to be—said:

"Féodor, I want you to go to the booking-office of the Finnish station at the departure of the train for Helsingfors at five-thirty. There you will meet a fair-haired young man who knows you by sight. He will say the word 'Anak,' and when he does, hand him this in secret. He will quite understand."

This order I carried out. I had not been at the crowded station five minutes when a young man, carrying a small handbag, elbowed his way through the

excited crowd and uttered in an undertone the word "Anak." I greeted him, and surreptitiously handed him the little packet, for which he thanked me and disappeared on to the platform.

My curiosity being aroused I waited until after the departure of the train, when I watched the mysterious young man return from the platform, hurry out of the station, and jump into a droshky and drive off.

When I returned and reported my meeting with the young man, Rasputin seemed much gratified, and even telephoned to Stürmer, who was at that moment at the palace, having been called to the War Council which the Emperor—who had again consulted his dead father's spirit at a further séance on the previous night—was now holding.

It appeared that a dinner had a week before been arranged by Prince Galitzine, to which the Grand Dukes Nicholas Nicholaievitch, Constantin Constantinovitch, and Michael Alexandrovitch, together with Generals Arapoff, Daniloff, Brusiloff, and Rennenkampf, had been invited. At first it was proposed to cancel the engagement owing to the critical position of affairs, but on the suggestion of the Grand Duke Nicholas it was not abandoned, for, as he pointed out, it would bring together the loyal leaders of the army on the eve of great events, and that, after dinner, views might be exchanged in confidence for the national benefit.

Now earlier that same day Rasputin had given me a note to deliver to the Grand Duke Michael, whom I had failed to find, but was told that he was to dine at Prince Galitzine's. So about half-past six o'clock I took it to the prince's house, when, to my surprise, as I passed into the great hall I saw the same fair-haired young man to whom I had delivered that envelope in secret an hour before. He was one of the prince's servants, but he had not seen me!

A sudden suspicion seized me. I asked to see the prince, and when shown up to his room I delivered the note for the Grand Duke.

Then, having seen that the door was closed, I asked permission to say something in strictest confidence, and told him of the mysterious envelope I had delivered to his servant.

He heard me through, gave me his hand in promise that he would not betray my confidence, thanked me, and dismissed me.

Next day the prince called me to him in secret, and told me that in the possession of the young man was found a lady's silver powder-puff box filled with what looked and smelt like toilet-powder. This, on being examined, was

discovered to be a most subtle and dangerous poison—one evidently prepared by that diabolical poisoner, Badmayev.

The young man had been forced by his master to swallow some, and had died in great agony. Thus it was proved that Rasputin and the camarilla had, on the very night of the outbreak of war, plotted to sweep off at one blow our most famous Russian generals, and leave our country practically without any military leaders of experience and at the mercy of the Huns!

The vile plot would no doubt have succeeded, and the deaths put down to ptomaine poisoning, as so many have been, had I not so fortunately recognised the young valet as he crossed the hall of Prince Galitzine's house.

Thus it will be seen that Rasputin and his friends hesitated at nothing in their frantic endeavours to gain their own sordid ends and to secure victory for Germany.

CHAPTER IX

the tragedy of madame svetchine

"Sister! thou who hast chosen to become the bride of Heaven, listen unto me, and repeat these words after me!" exclaimed the monk Rasputin, holding over the kneeling countess the big bejewelled cross which the Empress had given him, and in which were set some of the finest jewels of the Romanoffs.

"I will, O Father," replied Paula Yakimovitch, a pretty young woman, whose husband was Governor of Yakutsk, far off in Siberia, and who had begged him to leave her in Petrograd.

"Then repeat these words," said the bearded saint, fixing his weird, hypnotic eyes upon her. "Thou art my holy Father—"

"Thou art my holy Father——" exclaimed the Governor's wife in obedience.

"To thee I bow, and to thee I acknowledge that thou art sent by Almighty God to save our holy Russia."

She repeated the words amid the silence of that afternoon assembly of the sister-disciples at the Starets' house, a gathering which included Madame Vyrubova and her sister, Madame Soukhomlinoff; Madame Katacheff, wife of the Governor-General of Finland; pretty little Madame Makotine, to whose salon everyone scrambled; and old Countess Chapadier, bedecked, as always, with diamonds.

"I hereby swear in my belief that God has sent to our Russia his divine saviour in the human form of Gregory Rasputin, and that the sin I commit in my belief is the sin which is easiest forgiven, and that by prayer and fasting my sins will be remitted, even as I am admitted to the sect of the righteous and holy."

These blasphemous words the young woman repeated after the unwashed saint, who, standing upon a sort of dais in the big upstairs salon, still held up the jewelled cross suspended from his neck in front of him.

"Salvation is in contriteness," the monk went on, for that was what the sly scoundrel had invented. "Contriteness can only come after we have sinned. Let us therefore sin, my sisters, in order to gain salvation! By sinning with me," he added, having reached the apogee of his influence, "salvation is all the more certain to come to you for this reason—that I am filled with the Holy Spirit!"

"God be thanked! God be thanked!" fell from the lips of those thirty or so bamboozled and hysterical women, who, seated on forms as school-children might sit, had assembled to assist at the admission of Countess Yakimovitch to the secret and disgraceful cult of the blasphemous charlatan.

The date was September the 7th, 1914.

Russia had been at war with Germany for a month, and the Press of the Allies was full of cheerful optimism regarding what one of your London journalists had called "the Russian steam-roller." We in holy Russia believed in "the mills of God," and the nation as a whole was confident that it could resist the Teuton invasion.

The neophyte, beneath the extraordinary hypnotism of the "saint," felt the dirty fingers upon her brow, as, in a strange jargon of religious phrases and open blasphemy, he pronounced a kind of benediction upon her, adjuring her carefully to preserve the secrets of the sect "from your own mother and father, sister, brother, husband and child." Then he added: "In me, Gregory Rasputin, you see the One sent by Heaven as the Healer and Deliverer of Russia from the hands of the oppressor. To me the Emperor, but an earthly king, hath delegated his imperial powers. I am the saviour of Russia. Believe in me and in my teachings and ye shall have life, health and prosperity—with the life beyond the grave. Disobey, and thou shalt be eternally damned, together with all thy family. I, Gregory Rasputin, who hath been sent to thee as saviour," he added, "take unto me as sister Paula Vladimirovna to be my disciple!"

"May God forbid!" cried a woman's voice from among those assembled. "Let us end this blasphemy!"

The effect was almost electrical. Rasputin started, and gazed at the rows of elegantly-dressed women, his disciples, and the few good-looking young women whom he had invited to be present.

"Yes," went on a young and pretty woman seated at the back of the little audience. "I repeat those words!"

Startled myself at the boldness of the young lady, I saw that she was dark, extremely good-looking, and refined. Rasputin had met her a week before at the salon of old Countess Lazareff, and she having expressed a desire to know more of the secret cult of which so many curious rumours were rife in Petrograd society, he had allowed Madame Trevetski, the wife of the ex-Commander-in-Chief in the Caucasus, to bring her that afternoon.

Now, it must be said that no lady was admitted to those weekly reunions of the sister-disciples unless she first had the full approval of the Starets. She must be good-looking and possessed of either wealth or influence, but in preference wealth. And it was certain that no woman was ever invited unless it was Rasputin's intention to admit her to the secrets of his "religion."

Yet here was open defiance! This lady, whose name was Madame Anastasia Svetchine, was the wife of Colonel Svetchine, who was on the Staff of the Etat-Major at Vilna, and who was already at the battle front. Before Rasputin had allowed her to be brought to his house it had fallen to my lot to make some inquiries concerning her, and I had found that she was of good family, that her husband was possessed of fair means, and that besides their house in Vilna they had a comfortable residence in the Kirotshnaya, in Petrograd. She moved in that rather gay, go-ahead set of which, prior to the war, the reckless Madame Soukhomlinoff was the centre, and she had recently become quite a notable figure in Petrograd society.

Rasputin, furious at her interruption, roared:

"Silence, woman! Go out of the room at once!"

But Madame Svetchine, springing to her feet, cried: "It is monstrous! Disgraceful! Blasphemous! It is true what Purichkevitch has said in the Duma—that you are the evil force in Russia! Though a woman, I will have none of your mock piety and disgraceful licentiousness!"

"Ah! I see, madame, that you are an enemy—eh?" he said in a slow, deliberate way. "And let me tell you, when Gregory Rasputin has an enemy, he does not rest until that enemy is swept from his path. If you defy me, you defy your God!"

"I defy you!" cried the woman shrilly, making a dramatic scene. "But I fear my God, and Him alone."

"Oh! be silent, I beg!" cried Countess Lazareff in French, wringing her hands, she having introduced her, while all were horrified that the holy Father should be thus openly denounced before his "sisters."

"What is that woman saying?" the monk shouted across to me, for he did not know French, and was suspicious that the words contained yet another insult until I translated them to him.

"I refuse to be silent!" declared the colonel's young wife. "I will describe to all whom I meet what has taken place here to-day—the mockery of it all. It is

shameful how any woman in her senses, refined and educated, should fall beneath the fascination of such a brute!"

This was greeted with wild exclamations of surprise and indignation. Indeed, so furious became the "sisters" at such open insult that I was, at Rasputin's orders, compelled to conduct her out.

In the hall the young lady, who was certainly very pretty, became quite quiet again, and turning to me said:

"Monsieur Rajevski, I came here on purpose to denounce that infernal charlatan who is your employer. I am not without friends—and influential ones. I have spoken my mind fearlessly and openly. No doubt I have made an enemy of Grichka, but for that I care nothing, so long as I have exposed him."

Little did the unfortunate young lady know of Rasputin's low cunning and diabolical unscrupulousness when she had uttered those words. I made no reply, for I feared that she would live to regret having created that scene in the monk's holy-of-holies.

Late that evening, having been out, I returned to find the "saint" seated with the Minister Maklakoff, the man whom the newspaper Utro Rossy described as "The love-sick Panther." Both were in an advanced state of intoxication, and when I entered, Rasputin, in a thick voice, exclaimed:

"Ah! my dear Féodor, I have just been describing the scene to-day with that woman Anastasia Svetchine—the little spitfire! But a pretty woman, Féodor—very pretty woman, eh? It's a pity"—he sighed—"a great pity!"

"Why?" asked the long-moustached Minister, who had just come from an official reception, and was in his hussar uniform, with gold braid and many decorations. "Are you not better rid of her, my friend? Women of her sort are usually dangerous."

"I know she is dangerous," growled the holy Father, taking a deep gulp of champagne. "That is why I intend that she shall pay dearly for her defiance."

"Is she worth troubling about?" I queried. "You have so many affairs to attend to just now."

"Gregory Rasputin always attends to his enemies first, Féodor," he replied huskily.

The eyes of "The love-sick Panther" twinkled through his rimless pince-nez. Well he knew the bitter revenge which the Starets wreaked upon any who dared to challenge his divinity.

Maklakoff was at the time the Tsar's favourite Minister, and it was quite usual after a Cabinet Council for the Emperor to ask him and Soukhomlinoff to remain behind, as both were voted "really jolly fellows." Then Their Majesties would unite with the children and a few intimates, including the Father and Anna of course, and they would have a little fun. Maklakoff was famed for his power of mimicry. He could imitate the barking of dogs, and frequently announced his presence to the Imperial family by barking in the corridors of Tsarskoe-Selo, while his most famous imitation was that of a panther. And this of a Cabinet Minister in days of war!

"O Nicholas Alexievitch, do let us see you as a panther!" the Emperor would often say.

Then the Minister of State would coil himself up beneath a sofa and roar like a panther. Then, crawling slowly out on all fours, he would suddenly take a leap and land in an arm-chair or upon a sofa, greatly to the delight of the Imperial family, while the Grand Duchesses and the Tsarevitch would go wild with glee.

When, by the way, Maklakoff was dismissed in 1915, as a result of the anti-German riots in Moscow, the paper Utro Rossy was fined three thousand roubles for publishing an article headed "The Leap of the Love-sick Panther."

Maklakoff was a bosom friend of Rasputin, a dissolute evil-liver after the monk's own heart, and more than once had, in my presence, mentioned the names of certain good-looking women in various classes of society who might be invited to become disciples of the sadic Anti-Christ.

Within a week of the scene created by Madame Svetchine, Rasputin had already commenced to seek his revenge in a deep and cunning way. He had heard from several persons that Madame Anastasia was going about Petrograd openly denouncing him, and that she had been in communication with Monsieur Miliukoff of the Cadets, and also Count Bobrinski. For the time being Rasputin was devoting his days to the reorganisation of his "disciples." His traitorous interference in politics had already borne fruit in favour of Germany.

The events that were happening at that very moment mercilessly showed up the faults of our Russian administration, which was Germanic by origin in its traditions and its sentiments. Indeed, at that moment, when the enemy at the gates was knocking over the fortresses of Poland like ant-hills,

intrigues for place and honour were rife everywhere, and Maklakoff was playing the "panther" to amuse the ladies of Tsarskoe-Selo!

Rasputin one day called to him one of his half-dozen sycophants of the secret police, whom the Minister Protopopoff had placed at his disposal for purposes of personal protection, but in reality to act as his spies and agents-provocateurs.

To this fellow, Depp by name, he had given instructions that the dossiers of both Colonel Svetchine and his wife should be brought to him. Next day they arrived, and for half an hour Depp sat reading over to him the various police reports from Vilna and those of Petrograd.

The monk, leaning back in his arm-chair, stroked his unkempt beard, his eyes fixed out of the window, brooding over his devilish scheme.

An hour later, after he had dispatched Depp to make certain inquiries in Petrograd concerning the doings of the colonel's young wife, he said to me:

"Féodor, I must see Soukhomlinoff to-night. Telephone to him at the Ministry. If he is not there, you will find him at the palace. If so, tell him to call here at once when he returns to Petrograd."

I found the Minister of War was at Tsarskoe-Selo, and spoke to him there, giving him Rasputin's message, and receiving a reply that he would be with us at ten o'clock that night.

I had to keep an appointment, at Rasputin's orders, with Protopopoff—to deliver a letter and receive a reply; therefore I was not present when His Excellency the General arrived. What the pair arranged I had no idea, for when I returned to the Gorokhovaya the general was just stepping into his big car with its brilliant headlights.

"Good night, Féodor!" he shouted to me merrily, for he was of a genial nature, and next moment the powerful car drove away.

Events marched rapidly during the next fortnight. I had gone with Rasputin to the General Headquarters of the Army at the Polish front, a journey which the intriguer had been sent upon by those at Court whose mouthpiece he was—to discuss a peace necessary for the Empire, he declared.

Truth to tell, I knew that three days before the secret messenger Hardt had arrived from Berlin by way of Sweden, bearing a dispatch with elaborate instructions to the Starets.

The Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaievitch received us on the evening of our arrival at Headquarters, and, of course, the monk was full of one of those fantastic tales which succeeded so well with many, either the ignorant or credulous, or those to whose personal advantage it was to pretend to believe him.

The Grand Duke received the Starets politely but stiffly, for he well knew the power he wielded in the Empire, and that his will was law.

"Ah, Highness!" exclaimed the monk, "war is indeed a calamity. Alas! that Russia hath offended God by entering upon it. But thou, in thy wisdom, must put an end to it. The Holy Virgin appeared to me in a dream, and told me we must conclude peace. I come to inform thee of her will."

"When didst thou see the Virgin?" asked the Grand Duke.

"Three days ago."

"Now that's odd," he replied. "I, too, saw her, but it was only two days ago, and she said to me: 'Gregory is coming to see thee. He will advise peace. Don't listen to him, but expel him like the scoundrel he is. If he goes on troubling and intriguing have him thrashed.'"

The monk went livid.

"And further," continued Nicholas Nicholaievitch, "if you remain here, you infernal charlatan and blackmailer, that is what I shall do. So you can return to Alexandra Feodorovna and tell her what I say. My soldiers are fighting for Russia, and they will continue to do so, however many visions you may have—and however much German gold you may grab with your filthy paws. Get out!"

Rasputin stood speechless for a moment. Then, with an imprecation upon his lips, he turned and retired.

Three days later we were back in Petrograd, but the monk, who never forgot, at once set about plotting the Grand Duke's retirement.

One morning, among the monk's correspondence, I found a letter for Rasputin, which had been brought by hand from the Ministry of War, marked "Strictly private." On opening it, I read the following, which bore as signature the initials of Soukhomlinoff:

"In a further reference to the suspicions against Colonel Svetchine, inquiries made fully confirm your view. The political police who made domiciliary visits to his house in Petrograd and his apartments in Vilna found nothing

of importance. In Vilna, however, it has been discovered that, immediately prior to the war, he had established friendly relations with Elise Isembourg, who was an agent of Germany and a friend of Miassoyedeff. At my instructions we have allowed the Colonel leave, and he returned to Vilna to meet the woman, who had, at our orders, written to him. She, acting upon our instructions, offered him a sum of money to betray certain plans of the defences of Grodno, agents of secret police being concealed during the interview. At first he stoutly refused, but next day he met her again and succumbed to the temptation, so at the present moment he is preparing the information she seeks."

I read this over to the monk, who at once rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

"Ah! all goes well, my dear Féodor!" he exclaimed. "That woman will be sorry she denounced me, I assure you."

I could discern the motive of the conspiracy, but as yet had no idea of its true depth.

It was not until a week later, when one night the Minister of War called upon the monk, and in my presence they discussed the Svetchine affair.

"You did well, General," declared Rasputin, with an evil smile. "What has really happened in Vilna?"

"Well, the woman Isembourg, though she was a spy of Germany, is now on our side in the contra-espionage service," was his reply. "From the first she assured me that the colonel was extremely honest and patriotic. Though before the war she had several times tried to induce him to give her military information, yet he always declined and endeavoured to avoid her."

"Well, that difficulty can be overcome, surely?" asked the monk.

General Soukhomlinoff, a traitor himself, laughed lightly as he replied:

"Of course. There were other means. Elise, three days ago, handed over to me a typewritten document revealing the secrets of the defences of Grodno, which she reported had been given to her by Colonel Svetchine in return for a promise of ten thousand roubles when she could obtain the money from a secret source in Petrograd."

"Then he is a traitor!" exclaimed the monk eagerly.

The general winked, and replied: "Elise Isembourg declares that he is, and that he gave her the document."

"He, of course, denies it?"

"He knows nothing as yet," said His Excellency. "I have issued orders for his arrest to-day, and have given instructions for the court martial to be held here, in Petrograd."

The evil monk laughed gleefully.

"Ah! I see," he remarked. "And probably the colonel has never yet seen this typewritten document?"

"Probably," replied the Minister of War, with a mysterious smile. "There have been such cases. I have fixed the court martial for next Thursday, and I assure you it will be difficult for the colonel to prove his innocence!"

From that conversation I gathered the diabolical nature of Rasputin's plot against a perfectly innocent man, as revenge for his wife's insults.

Next day we were called to the palace, for the Empress was sorely worried over the health of the Tsarevitch, and she implored the holy Father to pray for him, little dreaming that the ever-recurring attacks were due to the subtle poison administered in secret by her most trusted favourite, Madame Vyrubova. For several days we remained at the palace, while Rasputin performed one of his "miracles," namely, the restoration of the lad to his normal condition.

What if the Empress had known that the "miracles" in which she so fervently believed were merely performed by the administration of certain antidotes to the poison already given!

While at the palace on that occasion I witnessed some strange doings at a spiritualistic séance to which Bossant, the notorious French medium, had been commanded. The Emperor, Empress and their intimates were present, including Rasputin and myself, and when the circle was formed and the séance in full swing the Tsar consulted the spirit of his dead father as to how he should act in the conduct of the war against Germany.

The reply, of course, arranged by the Empress and her friends, was something as follows:

"Thou hast done well, my son, and thou art worthy the throne of the Romanoffs. Continue to defend our beloved land. Trust in the counsels of those about thee, of thy wife, of thy Ministers, especially Stürmer, Protopopoff and Soukhomlinoff, as well as the advice which the holy Father

is ever giving thee. All have been sent to thee as good and faithful guides. My blessing is upon thee, O my son!"

Such was the "message" so cleverly given to the credulous monarch by the traitors and intriguers about him. And alas! he believed truly and absolutely, ignorant of the fact that some thousands of roubles had gone into the medium's pocket as price of his connivance.

On returning to Petrograd late on Thursday night I found among the monk's correspondence a letter from Madame Svetchine, a long, regretful letter, in which she expressed the greatest sorrow for the words she had uttered at the assembly of the sister-disciples, and begged to be forgiven. Further, she announced her intention of calling upon the Father "upon a serious and urgent matter."

I told him this, whereat he growled:

"Ah! the woman is coming to her senses. Yes. If she comes I will see her. She is pretty, Féodor—pretty—yes, very pretty."

I drew a long breath. The unfortunate woman knew, no doubt, the serious charge against her husband, but never dreamed that Rasputin was the cause of that false accusation.

Just before I ascended to my room to retire—the hour being about one o'clock in the morning—the telephone bell rang, and I answered it.

One of the officials at the War Office was, I found, at the other end.

"His Excellency the Minister has an urgent message to transmit to the Father," said the voice.

"Very well," I said, stating who I was.

"Then listen, please. The message he has written reads: 'Colonel Ivan Svetchine has been tried by court martial, which sat until half an hour ago. He has been condemned on a charge of dealing with the enemy and revealing military secrets to Germany, and ordered to be executed for treason. The execution is fixed to take place in the Peter and Paul Fortress at dawn on Saturday.'"

I replaced the telephone receiver with a heavy heart. Yet another innocent man was to die as victim of Rasputin's overweening vanity and evil influence in every quarter.

When I entered and told the monk, who was already in bed in a half-drunken state, he merely turned over and continued snoring.

On Friday night, when, as usual, we had returned from Tsarskoe-Selo in one of the Imperial motor-cars, I was told that a lady was waiting to see the Starets, but she would give no name. She was persistent that she must see him, and had already waited nearly three hours.

When I entered the waiting-room, a small chamber at the end of a corridor, I found it to be the wife of the condemned man. She was dressed in dead black, her beautiful face tear-stained and deathly pale.

"Ah! Monsieur Rajevski!" she cried, rushing towards me. "You know me—Madame Svetchine—eh?"

"Yes, madame," I said. "I remember you."

"You will let me see him—won't you?" she cried in great distress, as she gripped my hand nervously. "He has, I hope, forgiven me; surely he——"

"I gave him your letter," I said.

"Yes—and what did he say?" she gasped in eagerness.

"Well, the truth is that he said nothing," I replied, adding: "He was much occupied with other things."

"Ah! I must see him!" cried the frantic woman. "I was wrong to speak as I did. The Father is the great power in Russia. I must throw myself upon his mercy."

I promised to take her to him, and left her to inform Rasputin of the arrival of his expected visitor.

With an evil glint in those terrible eyes of his, he rubbed his hands together.

"Good, Féodor!" he said, striding across the room. "I will see the woman. Oh, yes, if she wishes to see me I will not deny her that pleasure," he added with biting sarcasm. Truly, he was weird and horrible in the hour of his triumph.

A few moments later I ushered the pale, wan woman in black into his presence.

"Holy Father!" she cried wildly, "forgive me—say that you forgive the unconsidered words of a weak and unworthy woman."

"Forgive—why?" he asked, standing erect and fingering his bejewelled cross. "I do not understand why I am honoured by this visit, madame."

"Ah! Of course you do not know. Pardon, I have forgotten to explain. My husband——" And she broke into tears. "My dear husband——"

"Well, what of your husband?" asked Rasputin. "He is at the front. Has he been wounded—or——"

"No, no—not that!" she cried. "They have made a false charge against him. Some woman named Isembourg, whom he knew in Vilna before the war, has made an allegation against him of traitorous dealings with the enemy. She has given over to the Ministry of War some documents containing the plans of the defences of Grodno, which she declares he has sold to her! But it is lies—all lies. I know it!"

"Really, this is quite a romantic story, madame," said Rasputin, quite unmoved. "Why should this woman make such charges?"

"How can I tell? Ah! but you do not know the worst!" she went on. "The court martial actually accepted this woman's statements—statements that were lies—all of them! My husband is devoted to me, and I love him—ah, so dearly! He is all in all to me. And——"

"But the woman—Isembourg, I believe you say—she is a friend of his, eh?" interrupted the monk, his hands crossed over his breast in that pious attitude he always assumed when listening.

"She says she was his friend before the war—before we married, indeed. Perhaps she was," answered the condemned man's wife. "But she is undoubtedly an agent-provocateuse of police set to tempt men to their downfall."

"Of that I have no knowledge," was Rasputin's cold reply.

"But you will help me, holy Father! Do—for the sake of a man who is innocent—for the sake—the sake of his unborn child! Ah! you will show mercy, won't you?" she begged.

"I do not follow you," was the monk's reply, in pretence of ignorance.

In a frenzy of despair the wretched wife flung herself upon her knees before the scoundrel, and cried:

"My husband! There is yet time to save him! He—he is to be shot—to-morrow—as soon as it is light! You—and you alone—can induce the

Emperor to order a revision of the sentence or a new trial. You will—you are all-powerful and divine!"
"Pardon, madame, that is not your true estimate of Gregory Rasputin," he said, with biting sarcasm. "Only a short time ago I was a charlatan and a fraud! No; your opinion cannot have altered in so short a time."
"But you—if you are sent by God to Russia—will never allow an innocent man to be murdered in this fashion—condemned upon the word of a notorious woman."
"The affair does not concern me, I assure you," he laughed. "If your husband has been condemned to death he must have had a fair and impartial trial by his brother officers. I am not a military man, and know nothing of such matters. If he has been found to be a traitor," added the unholy spy of Germany, "then the sentence is just."
"But he is no traitor. He is as patriotic as you are yourself, Father! He has ever been so," cried the despairing woman.
"I have no means of knowing that," he replied in a hard voice, gazing at her with those strange, wide-open eyes, and endeavouring to put that spell upon her that few women could resist. "Nevertheless, I will forgive you, and, further, I will exercise my influence to save your husband's life if you will consent to enter the circle of our holy disciples."
The desperate young woman held her breath for a few seconds, staring at him wildly as upon her knees she still knelt, clutching the "saint's" dirty hands.
"No," she replied. "That I will never do."
Rasputin saw that his plot had failed. Here at least was one woman over whom he was powerless, one who regarded him as a fraud. In an instant he flew into a sudden rage.
"Enough!" he cried, throwing her off. "You refuse to accept my condition—therefore your husband shall die!"
The wretched woman, her countenance pale as death, tried to speak. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Next moment, by dint of supreme effort, she struggled to her feet and rose stiffly. Then, a moment later, her hands clenched and despair in her splendid eyes, she turned and staggered out.

Four hours later Colonel Svetchine boldly faced a firing-party in the yard of the fortress. There was a word of command, and next second the gallant soldier fell forward on his face—dead.

CHAPTER X

traitorous work

The true story of the tragic death of a Russian civil servant named Ivan Naglovski, and of the mysterious explosion which destroyed the great munition works at Okhta and killed over four hundred and fifty persons and injured seven hundred, has never been told.

There have been sinister whisperings in Russia, but I am here able to unfold the amazing truth for the first time.

I had accompanied Rasputin to the Verkhotursky Monastery at Perm; the house in the Gorokhovaya was closed, its wooden shutters were fastened, and the Empress was desolate without her "holy Father." Stürmer, the Prime Minister, was with the Emperor, daily plotting and striving for the betrayal of our nation to the Germans, and "Satan in a silk hat"—as one of the Grand Dukes had nicknamed the Minister of the Interior, Protopopoff—had gone on a mission to London, ostensibly in Russian interests, but really as a spy of Germany. The latter was, of course, not known at the time, for the British Government sent him on a tour of munition and other centres, showed him what they were preparing, and fêted him in London as the representative of their ally. We now know that, on his return to Petrograd, he at once became violently anti-British, and made a full report of all he knew to the Wilhelmstrasse!

The purpose of the monk's pilgrimage to Perm was to form a branch of his believers in that city. He had left Petrograd dressed as a pilgrim, with hair-shirt and staff complete, and as such he posed to everybody. The world, however, did not know that the rooms allotted to him in the monastery by the rascally bishop, whom he had himself appointed, were the acme of luxury, and that in them he held drunken orgies every night.

After we had been there three weeks an Imperial courier brought him a letter from Peterhof. It was night, and the monk was in an advanced state of intoxication with his companions, three other mock-pious rascals like himself.

When I handed him the letter he glanced at the Imperial cipher on the envelope, and, grinning, exclaimed:

"It is from the Empress. Read out what the woman says."

I hesitated, suggesting that it would be better if I read it to him in private.

"Bah!" he laughed. "There is nothing private in it. Read it, Féodor."

So, thus ordered, I obeyed. The letter was written in Russian, but with mistakes in grammar and orthography, for the Empress had never learned to write Russian correctly. These are the words I read for the delectation of the dissolute quartette:

"Holy Father,—Why have you not written? Why this long dead silence when my poor heart is hourly yearning for news of you and for your words of comfort?

"I am, alas! weak, but I love you, for you are all in all to me. Oh! if I could but hold your dear hand and lay my head upon your shoulder! Ah! can I ever forget that feeling of perfect peace and blank forgetfulness that I experience when you are near me.

"Now that you have gone, life is only one grey sea of despair. There was a Court last night, but I did not attend. Instead Anna [Madame Vyrubova] and I read your sweet letters together, and we kissed your picture.

"As I have so often told you, dear Father, I want to be a good daughter of Christ. But oh! it is so difficult. Help me, dear Father. Pray for me. Pray always for Alexis [the Tsarevitch]. Come back to us at once. Nikki [the Tsar] says we cannot endure life without you, for there are so many pitfalls before us. For myself, I am longing for your return—longing—always longing! Without our weekly meetings all is gloom——"

Here I broke off. What followed ought, I saw, not to be read aloud to that trio, who might at any moment turn to be enemies of the Starets.

"Yes," he said, smiling in gratification. "The woman evidently misses me. It places a woman in her proper position to discard her for a while," he added with a drunken laugh. "What else does she say?"

"Only that they are due to go to Yalta, but that Her Majesty awaits your return," I replied.

"Then let her wait. I am very comfortable here. Perm is pleasant as a change."

I knew well that he was enjoying himself hugely and had already formed a great circle of hysterical women who believed in his divinity and practised the rites of his disgraceful "religion."

The final words of that amazing letter, which in itself showed the terms upon which Alexandra Feodorovna was with the convicted horse-stealer from Pokrovsky, were as follows:

"Here, O dear Father, we have only the everlasting toll of war! Germany is winning—as she will surely win. She must. You will see to that! But we must all of us maintain a brave face towards our Russian public. In you alone I have faith. May God bring you back to us very soon. Alexis is asking for you daily. We are due to go to Yalta, but shall not move before we meet here. I embrace you, and so do Nikki and Anna.—Your devoted daughter, Alix."

The unkempt quartette, treating the Empress's expressions of affection as a huge joke, filled their glasses with champagne and drank heavily again, while Rasputin began to regale his "saintly" companions with stories of the intimate life of the pro-German Empress.

Truly, it was a gay, dissolute life that the verminous rascal was leading at the Verkhotursky Monastery, and many were the women over whom he exercised his weird, uncanny fascination.

"Believe in me and you will receive God's blessing," was his constant blasphemous declaration to every woman whose looks were even passable. "Doubt me and you will be damned."

By Russia's millions in the provinces he was looked upon as the holy man sent by God to the Tsar. Did not the "saint" eat at the Emperor's table, and did he not prompt His Majesty in fighting the Germans? None ever dreamed that the unkempt miracle-worker, whose fascination for women was so astounding, was the secret ambassador of the Assassin of Potsdam.

Two of those companions of his nightly drinking bouts at Perm were named Rouchine and Yepantchine, brawny fellows whose evil life was almost as notorious as Rasputin's. Rouchine had been a conjurer before he adopted a "holy" life, and by reason of his knowledge of magic and illusions he frequently assisted the Starets in performing those "miracles" that so astounded the mujiks who witnessed them with open mouths.

Whenever things grew a little dull, or Rasputin believed that his divinity was being doubted, he would calmly announce:

"I have had a vision. Last night the Holy Virgin appeared unto me and declared that I must again perform a miracle so that the world should be made aware that God, through me, is protecting our dear nation Russia."

Instantly the news would spread from mouth to mouth—Rasputin's name being forbidden to be mentioned in the newspapers—that the Starets was about to perform a miracle, and thousands would assemble in some open place, where one of Rouchine's conjuring tricks would be performed.

By this time so deeply had Rasputin corrupted the Russian Church in its centres of power and administration that half the highest ecclesiastical dignitaries were of his creation, his fellow-thief in Pokrovsky having been appointed to a bishopric.

Very naturally, Rasputin had made many enemies. His overbearing vanity, his relentlessness in dealing with any who stood in his path, and the exposure of his use of agents-provocateurs in securing the conviction and imprisonment of anyone who displeased him, had aroused against him a fierce hatred in certain quarters both in Petrograd and Moscow. Many of those who had sworn to be avenged were wronged husbands and fathers, a number of whom it had been my duty to endeavour to pacify even at personal risk to myself as the rascal's secretary.

It was while at Perm that Rasputin received news that a man named Ivan Naglovski had been in Pokrovsky busily inquiring into his past, and interviewing his sister-disciples who were living there. Further, it was reported that he had been in communication with the monk Helidor, a man named Golenkovski, whose young wife was a "disciple" in Petrograd, and with Marie Novitski, who was preaching loudly against the erotic doctrine of the new "religion."

It was plain that Ivan Naglovski was a secret enemy.

Acting upon the monk's instructions I returned to Petrograd, and at the headquarters of the Secret Police made application that Naglovski's movements should be watched. Three days later I was assured that a small league of patriotic men and women had been formed, with Naglovski at their head, determined to unveil and unmask the traitorous rascal who was my employer.

I was compelled to return to Perm and inform Rasputin of the result of my investigations. Before doing so I went, at Rasputin's instructions by telegraph, to Peterhof and was admitted by Madame Vyrubova to the Empress's presence.

The handsome woman was resting in a gorgeous negligée gown prior to dressing for dinner, but she was quickly eager and interested when I explained that I had come from the monk and was returning to Perm at midnight.

"When will the Holy Father's pilgrimage end?" she inquired with a sigh. "He has been away weeks, and never replies to my letters."

"His time is no doubt fully occupied with constant devotion," remarked Anna Vyrubova in excuse.

"The Father is much occupied, Your Majesty," I said.

"Tell him for me that I am daily longing for his return," she said. "But wait. I will write to him and you shall convey the letter," at which order I bowed.

"The Father is much troubled and perturbed," I remarked.

"About what?" asked Her Majesty.

"He has enemies. Some men and women have leagued themselves with the object of doing him harm."

"Harm!" she echoed. "What harm can come to him when, being sent to us by God, he is immune from any harm that can befall us who are merely human? I do not understand."

Her words were in themselves sufficient to reveal how completely and implicitly the Empress of Russia believed in the pretended divinity of the blasphemous ex-convict.

"All I know, Your Majesty, is that the holy Father is unduly perturbed."

"Ah! surely he can have no apprehension?" she said. "Tell him from me that as Christ had enemies so, of course, he has. But his enemies cannot do him injury." Then rising and going across to a beautiful buhl escritoire, she added: "I will write to him. I sent him another letter by messenger only yesterday—eight letters, and not a line of response!"

For ten minutes or so, while the Empress sat writing, I chatted with Madame Vyrubova, and gave to her news of the monk.

"Tell him to return as quickly as possible," the woman said in a low, confidential voice. "If there really is a plot on foot against him he is safer in Petrograd than in Perm. Besides, being on the spot, he will be able to combat his enemies with a swift and relentless hand."

As Her Majesty was writing the telephone rang. Next moment it was plain that she was speaking with the Emperor, who was away at the headquarters of the army in Poland.

Having listened to something he told her, she said:

"The holy Father's secretary is here with me. The Father still remains at Perm. I am writing him urgently asking him to return to us. I wish you also to send a messenger to him to induce him to come back to Petrograd. You will be back here next Friday, and is it not wise to hold another séance next day, eh?"

Then she listened eagerly.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "I am glad you agree with me, Nikki. Yes, let us try and get the Father back by Saturday at latest. Good-bye."

And having rung off, she calmly finished the letter and secured it with the well-known big seal of black wax.

"Remember," she said as she gave it to me, "the Father must be here next Saturday for the séance, which the Emperor will attend. He wishes again to consult the spirit of his father Alexander. Urge the Father to return at once."

I promised to do her bidding, and, retiring, at once left the palace, and at midnight was on my way back to the far-off town on the Kama.

On the evening of the following day I drove up to the monastery and there found Rasputin at dinner with the ex-conjurer Rouchine. When I entered the cosy little room in which the pair were seated, Rasputin had removed his long robe and was seated in his shirt-sleeves like the peasant he was. I handed him the letter from the German-born Empress, whereupon he said:

"Oh! read it to me, Féodor. The woman's handwriting is always a puzzle to me."

I knew how illiterate he was and the reason of his excuse.

I tore open the envelope and quickly scanned the scribbled lines.

"No," I replied, "not now, Gregory; later."

"But I insist!" cried the Starets fiercely.

"And I refuse!" was my determined reply. "I have reasons."

Those last three words were not lost upon him, for Grichka was nothing if not the very acme of shrewdness. Not an adventurer or escroc in Europe could compare with him in elusiveness.

"Well, Féodor, if you have reasons, then I know that they are sound ones," he said. Then, turning to the "holy" conjurer, he grinned and said: "Féodor is a most excellent secretary. So discreet—too discreet, I often think."

"One cannot be too discreet in the present international crisis," I remarked. "Enemy eyes and ears are open everywhere. One can never be too careful. Russia is full of the spies of Germany."

"Quite true, Féodor—quite true!" exclaimed Rasputin, smiling within himself. "Don't you agree, friend Rouchine?"

"Entirely," replied his accomplice, who, though he was well paid to assist in working "miracles" before the peasants, never dreamed that the Starets, who handed him money with such lavish hand, was the chief agent of Germany in Russia.

Indeed, Rouchine's only son had been killed in the advance on Warsaw, hence he held the Hun in abhorrence, and I am certain that had he known Rasputin was the Kaiser's personal agent matters would have gone very differently, and in all probability the enemy plots so cleverly connived at by Alexandra Feodorovna would have been exposed in those early days of the war.

The Russian nation even to-day still reveres its Tsar. They know that he was weak but meant well, and he was Russian at heart and intent upon stemming the Teutonic tide which flowed across his border. But for "the German," Alexandra Feodorovna, not one in all our Russian millions has a word except an execration or a curse, and as accursed by Russia, as is all her breed, she will go down in history for the detestation of generations of those who will live between the Baltic and the Pacific.

Rasputin grew indignant because I crushed the woman's letter into my pocket without reading it aloud, but I knew well how to treat him, therefore I began to explain all that I had learnt from the Secret Police concerning the activities of Ivan Naglovski.

Both men listened with rapt attention.

"Then the fellow really intends evil?" asked the monk, as he laid down a chicken-bone, for he always ate with his fingers.

"I fear he does," was my reply. "But Her Majesty wonders why you should trouble. She says that you, being sent as Russia's saviour, are immune from bodily harm."

"Ah! but remember when that young fellow shot at you and grazed two of your fingers at Minsk," remarked the conjurer with a grin.

"Yes, quite so. I don't like this fellow Naglovski and his friends. I will see Kurloff."

Now, Kurloff was another treacherous bureaucrat, a creature of Rasputin's, who sat in Protopopoff's Ministry of the Interior, and who later on collected the gangs of the "Black Hundred," those hired assassins whom he clothed in police uniforms and had instructed in machine-gun practice—those renegades who played such a sinister part in the first Revolution.

I then gave the monk the urgent message from the Empress.

"Very well," he replied, "I will be back by Saturday; not because I obey the woman, but became I must see Kurloff, and I must take active steps against this Ivan Naglovski and his accursed friends."

Half-an-hour later, when alone in the bare little room allotted to me, I took out the Empress's letter to the Starets and re-read it. It was as follows:

"Holy Father,—It is with deepest concern that from your trusted Féodor I hear of the plot against you. That you can be harmed I do not believe. You, sent by God as Russia's guide to the bright future of civilisation which Germany will bring to her, cannot be harmed by mere mortal. But if there are any who dare dispute your divine right, then, with our dear Stürmer, take at once drastic steps to crush them.

"We cannot afford to allow evil tongues to speak of us; neither can we afford the vulgar scandal that some would seek to create. If you, O Father, feel apprehensive, then act boldly in the knowledge that you have your devoted daughter ever at your side and ever ready and eager to place her power as Empress in your dear hands. Therefore strike your enemies swiftly and without fear. Lips prepared to utter scandal must be, at all costs, silenced.

"Our friend Protopopoff has returned from England and tells me that Lloyd George and his friends are exerting every effort to win the war. Those British are brave, but, oh! if they knew all that we know—eh? They are in ignorance, and will remain so until Germany conquers Russia and spreads the blessing of civilisation among the people.

"Nikki is returning. A séance is to be held on Saturday. You must be back in time. He is sending a messenger to you to urge you to return to us to give us comfort in these long dark days. Anna and the girls all kiss your dear hand.—Your devoted daughter, Alix."

On the following day a middle-aged, fair-haired, rather well-dressed man, who gave the name of Nicholas Chevitch, from Okhta, a suburb of Petrograd, was brought to me by the monk who acted as janitor, and explained that he had private business with Rasputin.

I left him and, ascending to the monk's room, found him extremely anxious to meet his visitor.

"I will see him at once, Féodor. I have some secret business with him. Here is the key of a small locked box in your room. Open it and take out ten one-thousand rouble notes and bring them to me after you have brought in Chevitch."

This I did. Having admitted the visitor to Rasputin's presence, I opened the small iron box which the Starets always carried in his supposed "pilgrimages," and took out the money, leaving in it a sum of about twelve thousand roubles.

The ten thousand I carried to Rasputin, but as I opened the door I heard the fair-haired man say:

"All is prepared. The wire is laid across the river. We tested it five days ago and it works excellently."

"Good! Ah, here is my secretary Féodor!" the monk exclaimed. "He has the ten thousand roubles for you, and there will be a further ten thousand on the day your plan matures."

I wondered to what plan the Starets was referring. But being compelled to retire I remained in ignorance. The man Chevitch stayed with the monk for over an hour, and then left to return to the capital.

Later on I referred to the visit of the stranger, whereupon Rasputin laughed grimly, saying:

"You will hear some news in a day or two, my dear Féodor. Petrograd will be startled."

"How?"

"Never mind," he replied. "Wait!"

We arrived back in Petrograd on the following Friday morning, but although the Empress sent a messenger to the Gorokhovaya urging the monk to go to Peterhof at once, as she desired to consult him, he disregarded her command and did not even vouchsafe a reply. Indeed, Rasputin treated the

poor half-demented Empress with such scant courtesy that I often stood aghast.

"The woman is an idiot!" he would often exclaim to me petulantly when she was unusually persistent in her demands.

Next evening, however, we went to the palace, whither another French medium, a man named Fournier, had been summoned, having, of course, been administered palm-oil to the tune of some thousands of roubles to give a "message from the dead" in the terms required by the wire-pullers in Potsdam.

I was not present at the séance, but later that night, when Rasputin was sitting alone with me over a bottle of champagne which an "Araby" flunkey had brought him, he revealed that the "message" from the Tsar's dead father had been precise and much to the point.

"Nicholas, I speak unto thee," the spirit had said. "Though thou art brave and thine armies are brave, yet thine enemies will still encompass thee. Loss will follow upon loss. The great advance will soon become a retreat, and the hordes of William will dash forward and Poland will become German. Yet do not be afraid. Trust in the good counsel of thy wife Alexandra Feodorovna and in thy Father Rasputin, whom Heaven hath sent to thee. Believe no evil word of him, and let his enemies be swept from his path. Such is my message to thee, O my son!"

As Rasputin repeated those words with mock solemnity, he laughed grimly.

The pity of it was that Nicholas, Tsar of All the Russias, believed in those paid-for messages, uttered by those presented to him as mediums and able to call up the spirit of his lamented father.

"Poor idiot!" Rasputin remarked, first glancing to see that the door was closed. "He must have something to occupy his shallow brain. That is why the Empress arranges the sittings. But Féodor," he added, "I must see this enemy of mine, Ivan Naglovski. He is not a person to be disregarded, and it seems from what you told me he has a number of important friends. We will discuss the matter to-morrow."

He afterwards dismissed me with a wave of his dirty hand, and I retired to bed in a room at the farther end of the long softly carpeted corridor.

At noon next day we had news of a terrible disaster. Precisely at half-past eleven the city of Petrograd had been shaken to its foundations by a terrific explosion, followed by half a dozen others, which shattered windows and

blew down signs and chimneys in all parts of the city. At first everyone stood aghast as explosion followed explosion. Then it transpired that the great munition works at Okhta, across the Neva, opposite the Smolny Monastery, had suddenly blown up, and that hundreds of workers had been killed and maimed and the whole of the newly-constructed plant wrecked beyond repair.

I was just entering Rasputin's room at the palace when a flunkey told me the news.

When a moment later I informed the Starets he smiled evilly, remarking:

"Ah! Then that further ten thousand roubles is due to Nicholas Chevitch. If he calls when we return to Petrograd this afternoon, you must pay him, Féodor. He has done his work well. Russia will be crippled for munitions for some time to come."

On our return to Petrograd we found the city in the greatest state of excitement. The succession of explosions had caused the people to suspect that the disaster was not due to an accident, as the authorities were fondly declaring, but the wilful act of the enemy. Rasputin heard the rumour and piously declared his sympathy with the poor victims.

Yet we had not been back at the Gorokhovaya an hour when the man Chevitch called, and at the monk's orders I handed him the balance of his blood-money.

That same evening Hardt, the secret messenger from Berlin, arrived, having travelled by way of Abö, in Finland.

"I have a very urgent despatch for the Father," he said when he was ushered in to me, and he handed me a letter upon strong but flimsy paper, so that it could be the more easily concealed in transit.

At once I took him up to the monk, who was washing his hands in his bedroom.

"Ah, dear friend Hardt!" exclaimed the Starets, greeting him warmly. "And you are straight from Berlin! Well, how goes it, eh?"

"Excellently well," was the reply of the messenger from the Secret Service Department in the Königgrätzerstrasse. "Germany relies upon you to assist us, as we know you are doing. Count von Wedell has sent you a letter, which I have handed to your friend Féodor."

"Read it, Féodor," said the monk. "There are no secrets in it that may be hidden from our dear friend Hardt."

He spoke the truth. Hardt was the confidential messenger who passed between the Emperor William and Alexandra Feodorovna, and nowadays he was travelling to and fro to Germany always, notwithstanding that Russia was at war with her neighbour.

At Rasputin's bidding I tore open the letter, but found it to be written in cipher.

Therefore I sat down at the little desk and at once commenced to decode it. It was in the German spy-cipher, the same used all over the world by German secret agents—the most simple yet at the same time the most marvellous and complicated code that the world has ever known.

The keys to the code were in twelve sentences that one committed to memory. Hence no code-book need ever be carried. The cipher message, in its introduction, told its recipient the number of the sentences being used—a most ingenious mode of correspondence.

With the paper before me I discovered that in sentence number eight I would find the key. The sentence in question, a proverb something like "Faint heart never won fair lady," I wrote down, and then at once began to decipher the cryptic message from Berlin.

And I read out the following:

"Memorandum No. 43,286.

"From No. 70 to the Holy Father.

"If the blowing up of the Okhta Munition Works is successful, endeavour to get your friend C. [Chevitch] to do similar work at the new explosive factory at Olonetz, where a sub-inspector named Lemeneff is one of our friends. Tell this to C. and let them get into touch with each other.

"We approve of C.'s suggestion to destroy the battleship Cheliabinsk, and it is suggested that this be carried out at the same price paid for Okhta.

"From what we are informed you are in some danger from a man named Naglovski, who has shown himself far too curious concerning you of late. Steps should be taken against him.—Greetings, W."

The initial, I knew, stood for von Wedell, one of the directors at the Königgrätzerstrasse.

Rasputin heard me through, and, taking the cipher message, applied a match to it, after which Hardt, having swallowed a glass of vodka, left us.

But the monk, as a result of that message, was at once aroused to evil activity, and by means of a clever ruse invited Ivan Naglovski to dinner next day. He accepted, hoping, of course, to discover more concerning the monk, and quite unconscious that Rasputin knew of his hostile intentions. To dinner there were invited the Prime Minister, Boris Stürmer, and a sycophant of his named Sikstel. Stürmer was in uniform and Sikstel in civilian attire. Naglovski, I found, was a youngish man, who, when I introduced him, appeared highly honoured to meet at Rasputin's table the Prime Minister of Russia, while the monk went out of his way to ingratiate himself with his enemy. Naglovski and his friends had been preparing a plot either to expose or assassinate the monk, hence the head of the conspiracy was congratulating himself that the plot was unsuspected by anybody.

The dinner passed off quite merrily until, of a sudden, Stürmer, addressing his fellow-guest, said:

"News has been conveyed to the holy Father that you and your friends have formed a plot against him. Is that true?"

Naglovski started and turned pale. For a moment he was taken entirely off his guard.

"Ah!" went on Stürmer in his deep, thick voice, Rasputin having risen to go to the sideboard, "I see it is true. Now, what can you gain by endeavouring to belittle the efforts of our dear Father for the salvation of Russia? Think. Are you patriots? No. Well," he went on, "the reason the Father has invited you here to-night is to come to terms with you. For a list of your friends—a secret list that will be afterwards destroyed—the Starets will pay you twenty thousand roubles, and, further, I will give you a diplomatic appointment in one of the embassies abroad—wherever you desire."

"What!" cried the young man. "You ask me to betray my friends to that blasphemous rascal!" and he pointed his finger at Rasputin, who moved aside. "Never! I refuse! And, further, I tell you," he shouted, rising as he spoke, "I intend to expose the mock-saint and his conjuring tricks; the criminal miracle-worker who, according to secret information I have just received, was the actual instigator of the terrible disaster at Okhta. This is what my friends, when I reveal to them the truth, will expose."

As Ivan Naglovski uttered his biting condemnation Rasputin had crept up behind him, and drawing his revolver suddenly cried in a loud voice:

"Enough! You don't leave this house alive. Gregory Rasputin knows how to crush his enemies, never fear. All your friends will share your fate. Take that!"

And he fired, the bullet striking the unfortunate man in the back, where it entered a vital spot.

Two hours later the body of Ivan Naglovski was discovered on some waste ground out at Kushelevka, on the other side of the city. Though the Director of Secret Police guessed what had occurred, he pretended that it was a complete and unfathomable mystery—and a mystery it has ever remained until this present exposure.

CHAPTER XI

poison plots that failed

By the spring of 1916 Rasputin, though constantly revealing himself as a blasphemous blackguard, had become the greatest power in Russia.

His name was whispered by the awe-stricken people. All Russia, from the Empress down to the most illiterate mujik, accepted him as divine and swallowed any lie he might utter.

The weekly meetings of the "sister-disciples" were becoming more popular than ever in Petrograd society, and there were many converts to the new "religion."

One evening a reunion for recruiting purposes was held by the old Baroness Guerbel at her big house in the Potemkinskaya. The yellow-toothed, loud-speaking old lady had been persistent in her appeals to Rasputin to hold one of his meetings at her house, and he had, with ill-grace, acceded. On fully a dozen occasions the baroness, who was a close friend of old Countess Ignatieff, had interviewed me and endeavoured to enlist my services on her behalf. At last the monk had said to me:

"Well, Féodor, if the old hag is so very persistent, I suppose I had better spend an evening at her house and inspect her lady friends."

Thus it had been arranged, the "saint" little dreaming of the outcome of that fateful reunion.

It seems that Baroness Guerbel had arranged it because she wished to introduce to Rasputin a certain Madame Yatchevski—the wife of an officer who was very rich—who saw that, by Rasputin's influence, she could aspire to a position at Court.

Olga Yatchevski proved to be a pretty, fair-haired little woman of girlish figure and sweet expression, and from the moment of their introduction the unkempt monk, after crossing himself and uttering a benediction, became greatly interested in her, the result being that she became an "aspirant," and her initiation into the secrets of the cult was arranged to take place on the following Wednesday.

The meeting ended, the dozen or so neurotic women, all of them of the highest society in the capital, each bent and kissed the unwashed hand of Russia's "saviour," as was their habit, and when they had gone the monk sat

down and drank half a bottle of brandy served to him by his ugly old hostess.

Next night I happened to be out at the theatre when Rasputin, who was alone, emerged to walk round to a professional blackmailer named Ivan Scheseleff, who lived in the Rozhsky Prospekt. Suddenly he was set upon by three Cossacks—afterwards found to have been men hired by Madame Yatchevski's husband—who, hustling the "saint" into a narrow side street, gagged him, stripped him of the silk blouse embroidered by the Tsaritza's own hands, his wide velvet breeches, and his beautiful boots of patent leather.

Then they drew a knout and administered to the rascal a sound drubbing, afterwards binding him with rope and shutting him up in a neighbouring stableyard, attired only in his underwear!

His clothes they packed up in a cardboard box and delivered to Yatchevski, who, having sealed it, sent it by special messenger to Tsarskoe-Selo, where it was delivered into the Empress's own hands.

Alexandra Feodorovna, on having it opened and discovering the insult to her "holy Father," waxed furious. Meanwhile, Rasputin had been discovered, and was at home foaming at the mouth at the indignity. He, "the saviour of Russia," had been thrashed and degraded!

At two o'clock that morning he took a car to the palace, and I accompanied him. He had an interview with Her Majesty, who was attired in a rich dressing-gown of pale-blue silk, and the pair resolved upon a rigid inquiry regarding the affair.

"It is monstrous that you, our dear Father, should have such enemies about you! We will crush them!" she declared angrily. "I will see Nikki about it in the morning. To send me your clothes is a personal insult to myself. It is abominable! These people shall suffer!"

That night we remained at the palace, and next morning Protopopoff was called from Petrograd and informed by the Empress of what had occurred. Later the Minister came to the room wherein I was writing at the monk's dictation, and promised that the whole of the machinery of the Secret Police should be set in motion to discover the perpetrators of the outrage.

Rasputin knew that many of the husbands of his devotees were enraged against him; therefore he could not, at the moment, suggest any particular person who had plotted the affair, and probably the police would have failed to obtain any information had not Captain Yatchevski himself boasted in the

Officers' Club of how he had had the Tsaritza's pet "saint" stripped and thrashed.

In Petrograd the very walls had ears; therefore within three hours the "saint" knew the identity of the instigator of the outrage, and gave his name to the Empress.

"We will make an example of him," she said. "Otherwise it may be repeated. I leave it to you, dear Father, to take what reprisals you wish. In any course you adopt you will have the full authority of both Nikki and myself."

For nearly a week Rasputin was undecided as to how he should wreak vengeance upon the unfortunate Yatchevski, whose wife had by this time become one of the monk's most devoted "sisters."

On two or three occasions he went to the Minister of War and chatted with the traitor, General Soukhomlinoff.

Once he remarked to me, after a meeting of the "disciples" at our house in the Gorokhovaya:

"That captain shall pay—and pay dearly—for his insult! Think!—only think of it, Féodor—of sending my clothes to Her Majesty! What must she have thought! To me it seems that she doubts whether I can take care of myself. And am I not inspired, divine!—sent as the saviour of Russia, and immune from the attacks of mankind!"

His subtle mujik mind clearly saw the bad impression which must be produced upon the woman who was so completely beneath the thraldom of his hypnotic eyes. If he could be beaten as a charlatan, then such action of his enemies must naturally create a doubt in her mind. Hence he was scheming to exhibit his power.

The worst feature of the position was that from the Officers' Club the incident had leaked out all over Petrograd, until it had become common talk in the cafés. The story of Grichka sitting upon a dung-heap was on the lips of everybody, while a well-known member of the Duma remarked:

"A pity he was not buried in it, never to see the light of day again!"

Yatchevski was, of course, unconscious of the knowledge held by the monk. He was at the Ministry of War, head of one of its many departments, a loyal patriotic Russian, who, like our millions, believed that Soukhomlinoff was "out to win." He was ignorant of the irresistible power which the dirty "saint" could wield.

One day, to Captain Yatchevski's delight, he found himself raised in rank and appointed military commandant of the town of Kaluga, south of Moscow, with permission to take his wife to reside there. Naturally he was gratified to receive so influential an appointment. Though possessed of much money, he had hitherto not progressed very far in his official career, and this favour shown him by the Tsar, who had made the appointment, pleased him immensely.

His wife, of course, felt otherwise. She would be separated from her gay friends, the "sisters" of the monk's "religion." Besides, she saw that by entering Rasputin's cult there was a prospect of becoming on terms of personal friendship with the Empress.

Anyhow, a week later Olga Yatchevski, having bidden farewell to the monk, was forced to depart with her husband to the important town of Kaluga, and for a fortnight I heard nothing.

One morning, however, the monk received a certain General Nicholas Ganetski, of the Imperial General Staff, when, without much preamble, the officer remarked:

"The warning you gave us concerning Yatchevski has proved quite true. He has been in communication with a German agent in Riga named Klöss."

"Ah! I was quite certain of it, General," remarked the "holy" man, with a sinister grin. "I discovered it quite by accident. Well, what have you done?"

"He and his wife are both under preventive arrest, pending an Imperial order. The papers we seized are conclusive. Among them was the enemy spy code. The whole case is quite clear, and there can be no defence."

"Then there will be a court-martial?"

"Of course. I have ordered it to be held on the seventeenth, in Moscow."

"They are both clever agents of Germany," the monk remarked. "Be careful that they do not slip through your fingers."

"No fear of that, Father," replied the general. "Possession of the German code is in itself sufficient to secure them conviction and sentence."

The latter was indeed pronounced ten days later. The little fair-haired woman, who was so devoted to Rasputin, and who frantically appealed to him in vain to save her, was sentenced to imprisonment for life at Yakutsk, in Eastern Siberia, while her husband, condemned for treason, was next day shot in a barrack square behind the Kremlin in Moscow.

Truly, Gregory the Monk swept with drastic and relentless hand any enemy who crossed his path.

It was about a week after I heard of the execution of the Governor of Kaluga that I happened to be at Tsarskoe-Selo again with my evil-faced master, being busy writing in the luxurious little room allotted to him.

Madame Vyrubova had been with us, discussing the condition of health of the heir to the throne, when, after she had left, there entered quite unexpectedly the Emperor himself.

"Gregory," he said, standing by the window, attired in the rather faded navy serge suit he sometimes wore when busy in his private cabinet, "I have been told to-day that the Holy Synod are once again agitating against you. From what Stürmer has said an hour ago it appears that the Church has become jealous of your friendship with my wife and myself. I really cannot understand this. Why should it be so? As our divine guide in the war against our relentless enemies, we look to you to lead us along the path of victory. Alexandra Feodorovna has been telling me to-day some strange tales of subtle intrigue, and how the Church is uniting to endeavour to destroy your popularity with the people and your position here at our Court."

"Thou hast it in thy power to judge me by my works," was the monk's grave reply, crossing himself piously and repeating a benediction beneath his breath. "Gregory is but the servant of the Almighty God, sent unto thee to guide and direct thee and thy nation against those who seek to destroy and dismember the Empire. Cannot I have the names of those of the Church who are seeking my downfall? Surely it is but just to myself if thou wouldst furnish them to me? Personally, I entertain no hope."

"No hope!" cried the Tsar, starting. "What do you mean, Father? Explain."

"No hope of victory for Russia, surrounded as she is on all sides by those who are conspiring to do thee evil. Against thee the Church is ever plotting. As Starets—I know!"

"And the Procurator?"

"He is thy friend."

"And the Bishop Teofan? Surely he is not a traitor?"

"No. For years I have known him. Trust Teofan, but make an end of the ecclesiastical camarilla which is against thee."

"How can I? I do not know them?" was the Emperor's reply.

"I tell thee plainly that if matters are allowed to proceed, the Church, suborned by German gold as it is, will contrive to defeat our arms. Hence it behoves thee to act—and act immediately!"

The Tsar, his hands in the pockets of his jacket, stood silent.

"Because by divine grace I possess the power of healing, thy Church is jealous of me," Rasputin went on. "The Holy Synod is seeking my overthrow! Always have I acted for the benefit of mankind. But the Russian Church seeks to drive me forth. Therefore, I must bow to the inevitable—and I will depart!"

"Ah, no, Gregory! We cannot spare you, our dear Father," declared the Emperor. "This ecclesiastical interference we will tolerate no longer. You must help me. I give carte blanche to you to dismiss those of the Church who are disloyal and your enemies and mine, and replace them by those who are our friends, and in whom I can place my trust."

"In the sweeping clean of the Church thou wilt find many surprises," replied the monk, elated at the success of his clever reasoning.

"No doubt. I know that the Empress and myself are surrounded by enemies. Plots are everywhere. Is not Protopopoff continuous in his declaration that the Church is against me? I know it—alas! too well. And I leave its reformation entirely to you, dear Father."

Reformation! Within twelve hours Rasputin, who dictated to me over fifty letters, and had, in the name of the Emperor, dismissed most of the higher Church dignitaries in various parts of Russia, the new Procurator of the Holy Synod having been appointed by him only a few weeks before.

Bishop Teofan, who had commenced life as a gardener, who had been convicted as a criminal by the court of Tobolsk, and whose sister was a "disciple" at Pokrovsky, held a long conference with the "saint" lasting well into the night. Truly, they were the most precious pair of unholy scoundrels in all Europe, both being in the immediate entourage of Their Majesties, and both pretending to lead "holy" lives, though they were gloriously drunk each evening.

Nevertheless, within forty-eight hours of Rasputin's conversation with the Tsar, the Church of Russia had been swept clean of all its loyal adherents, and in their places—even in the bishoprics of Kazan, Tver and Odessa—were appointed alcoholic rascals of the same calibre as Rasputin himself.

Is it, then, any wonder that Holy Russia has fallen?

Indeed, the new bishop of Kazan was, three days after his appointment, found one night riotously drunk in one of the principal streets in the city, and, as he was wearing ordinary clothes, was arrested by the police, who did not recognise him, so that the precious prelate spent the night in a cell! Such was our dear Russia in the midst of her valiant struggle against the Hun!

My dissolute master, possessed as he was of superhuman cunning, held the Empire in the hollow of his hand. He could make or break the most powerful statesman within a single day. In that small fireproof safe of his, concealed beneath the floor of the wine-cellar at the Gorokhovaya—that safe in which were preserved so many amorous letters from neurotic women whom the monk intended later on to blackmail—was also much documentary evidence of the "saint's" vile plots, correspondence which, later on, fell into the hands of the revolutionary party, who revealed only a portion of it after Rasputin's tragic end.

Possessed of inordinate greed, the monk had a mania for amassing wealth, yet what really became of his money was to me always a mystery. Though he would have a balance of a million or so roubles at his bank to-day, yet the day after to-morrow his pass-book showed payments of mysterious sums, which would deplete his funds until often he had perhaps but a single thousand roubles.

Into what channel went all that money which he received for bribery, for creating appointments, and for suggesting that young men of good family should be given sinecures, I was never able to discover.

Personally, I believe he paid certain persons whose wives were "disciples" hush-money. But his power was such that I could never see why he should do so. Yet the mujik mind always works in a mysterious way.

The true facts concerning the desperate conspiracy against Generals Brusiloff and Korniloff have never been told, though several French writers have attempted to reveal them, and the revolutionists themselves have endeavoured to delve into the mystery. As secretary to the Starets, I am able to disclose the actual and most amazing truth.

It will be remembered by my readers that General Brusiloff, early in June, 1916, had his four armies well in hand, and made a superhuman effort to defeat the Central Powers between the Pripet and the Roumanian frontier. He was a fearless and brilliant tactician, and within two months had succeeded in capturing 7,757 officers and 350,845 men, with 805 guns—and remember that this was in face of all the obstacles that the Minister of

War, who was working with Rasputin as Germany's friend, had placed in his way.

Brusiloff had done splendidly. No Russian general has eclipsed him in this war. He performed miracles of strategy, and Berlin had very naturally become genuinely alarmed. All their negotiations with Stürmer, Protopopoff, Rasputin and others of the "Black Force" had apparently been of no avail. They had staked millions of roubles, but without much result. Our armies were advancing, and the combined German and Austrian forces were daily being entrapped into the marshes or forced back.

Even Rasputin realised the seriousness of the position, and more than once referred to it.

Early one morning, before I was up, Hardt, the secret messenger from Berlin, arrived.

After greeting me, he informed me that he had an urgent secret despatch for the Father—to be delivered only into his own hands. Therefore I at once conducted the travel-worn messenger to Rasputin's bedroom, where he delivered a crumpled letter from the belt which he wore next his skin.

"Read it to me, Féodor," said the "saint," sitting up in bed and rubbing his eyes after a drunken sleep.

Opening it, I found it to be in a code in what was known as "Sentence number seven"—words which, truth to tell, spelt an ancient Russian proverb, which translated into English means: "Actions befit men; words befit women."

Taking a pencil, I sat down, and after ten minutes or so, during which time the monk chatted with Hardt, I succeeded in deciphering the message, which ran as follows:

"T. F. 6,823—88.

"Memorandum from 'No. 70.' Secret and Private.

"Further to the memorandum F. G. 2,734—22, it is deemed of greatest and most immediate importance that the Pripet offensive should at once cease. You will recollect that in your reply you made a promise that the offensive was to be turned into a defeat within fourteen days. But this has not been done, and a certain Personage [the Kaiser] is greatly dissatisfied.

"The advance must not continue, and we send you further secret instructions, herewith enclosed. Lose no time in carrying them out.

"We hope you have not overlooked the instructions contained in F. G. 2,734—22, especially regarding the destruction of the munition factories at Vologda and Bologoye. It is a pity you have allowed K. [Kartzoff, who blew up the explosive works at Viborg, where four hundred lives were lost] to be shot. He was extremely useful. The woman Raevesky, who was his assistant, was not in love with him, as you reported. She would have assisted him further if allowed her liberty. We wonder you were not more correctly informed. Payment of 500,000 roubles will be made to your bank on the 18th from Melnitzzki and Company of Nijni Novgorod. S."

Enclosed was a sheet of pale yellow paper, upon which had been typed in Russian the following:

"Secret Instructions.—(1) You are to double the promised payment to Nicholas Meder and Irene Feischer for the blowing up of the works at Vologda and Bologoye, on condition that the affair is carried out within fourteen days of the receipt of this. If not, arrange with your friend P. [Protopopoff] to have both arrested with incriminating papers upon them. They may become dangerous to us unless implicated.

"(2) As you have failed to carry out the plans against Generals Brusiloff and Korniloff, then you must adopt other means against both generals, and thus ensure a lull upon the frontier. We note that the attempt made by Brusiloff's body-servant, Ivan Sawvitch, has unfortunately failed.

"The bearer of this will hand you a small packet. It contains two tubes of white powder. Peter Tchernine, who has succeeded Sawvitch as the general's servant, is to be trusted. You will send the tube marked No. 1 to him in secret at General Headquarters, with orders to mix the contents with the powdered sugar which the general is in the habit of taking with stewed fruit. The slightest trace of the powder will result in death from a cause which it will be impossible for the doctors to identify.

"(3) A young dancer at the Bouffes named Nada Tsourikoff, living in the Garnovskaya, will call upon you for the tube marked No. 2. She is a close friend of General Korniloff, and is about to join him at headquarters at our orders. She has already her instructions as to the use of the tube. The two deaths will be entirely different, therefore doctors will never suspect.

"At all hazards the offensive must be ended. Greetings.

"S."

After I had read the instructions Hardt produced a box of Swedish safety matches, which he emptied upon the table, and among them we saw two

tiny tubes of glass hermetically sealed, one containing a white chalk-like powder and numbered "1," while the other was half filled with pale green powder and marked "2." These he handed to the monk, saying:

"I will use your telephone, if I may? I have to ask the young woman Nada Tsourikoff to call here to see you."

The monk having granted permission, Hardt, passing into the study, was soon speaking with the popular young dancer of the Bouffes.

"You will call here at noon, eh?" he asked, to which she gave a response in the affirmative.

Punctually at twelve I was informed that a young lady, who refused her name, desired to have an urgent interview with the Starets, and on going to the waiting-room, wherein so many of the fair sex sat daily in patience for the Father to receive them, I found a tall, willowy, dark-haired and exceedingly handsome girl, who, after inquiring if I were Féodor Rajevski, told me that her name was Tsourikoff and that she had been sent to see the Father.

Without delay I introduced her to the "holy" man, who stood with his hands crossed over his breast in his most pious attitude.

"My daughter, you have, I believe, been sent to me by our mutual friend," he said. "You wish for something? Here it is," and he produced a small oblong cardboard box such as jewellers use for men's scarf-pins. Opening it, he showed her the tiny tube reposing in pink cotton wool. "It is a little present for somebody, eh?" he asked with a sinister laugh.

"Perhaps," replied the girl as she took it and placed it carefully in the black silk vanity-bag she was carrying.

"You have already received instructions through another channel?" inquired Rasputin.

"I have, O Father," was her reply.

"Then be extremely careful of it. Let not a grain of it touch you," he said. "I am ordered to tell you that."

She promised to exercise the greatest care.

"And when you have fulfilled your mission come to me again," he said, fixing her with his sinister, hypnotic eyes, beneath the cold intense gaze of which I saw that she was trembling. "Remember that!—perform what is expected of

you fearlessly, but with complete discretion, and instantly on your return to Petrograd call here and report to me."

The girl promised, and then, kissing the dirty paw which the monk held out to her, she withdrew.

"Good-looking—extremely good-looking, Féodor," the monk remarked as soon as she had gone. "She might be very useful to me in the near future." Then after a pause he added: "Ring up His Excellency the Minister of War and ask where Brusiloff is at the present moment."

I did so, and after a short wait found myself talking to General Soukhomlinoff, who told me that the Russian commander was that day at headquarters at Minsk.

When I told the monk, he said: "You must go there at once, Féodor, and carry the little tube to the Cossack Peter Tchernine, who is now Brusiloff's body-servant."

"I!" I gasped, startled at the suggestion that I should be chosen to convey death to our gallant commander.

"Yes. And pray why not? Someone whom I can trust must act as messenger. And I trust you above all men, Féodor."

For a moment I hesitated.

Then I thanked him for his expression of confidence, but he at once noticed the reluctance which I had endeavoured to conceal.

"Surely, Féodor, you are not hesitating to perform this service for the Fatherland? Think of all the sacrifices we are making to bring the benefit of German civilisation into Russia," added the pious scoundrel.

"I will go—certainly I will go," I said. "But I cannot leave to-day. I shall require papers from the Ministry ere I can travel."

"His Excellency the General will order them to be furnished to you," he said. "I will see to it at once."

And five minutes later he went out to seek the Minister.

I was horrified at my position, compelled as I was to convey the means of death to the hands of the German spy Tchernine, who had been placed as servant to the Russian commander. I saw that I must leave Petrograd for Minsk that night; therefore I set about preparing for my adventurous

journey. Indeed, shortly before midnight I left the Gorokhovaya with the box of Swedish matches in my inner pocket.

The journey from Petrograd due south to Polotzk, where I had to change, proved an interminable one and occupied nearly two days, so congested was the line by military traffic and ambulance trains. At last on arrival there I joined a troop-train with reinforcements going to Minsk, where I duly alighted, to discover that General Brusiloff's headquarters were out at a village called Gorodok, about five miles distant, in the direction of Vilna. The evening was bitterly cold, and as I drove along I became filled with ineffable disgust of Rasputin and the disgraceful camarilla who were slowly but surely hurling the nation to its doom.

Had I refused to undertake that devilish mission, the monk would have instantly suspected me of double dealing, and sooner or later I should have met with an untimely end, as, alas! so many others had done. So completely had he placed me beneath his thumb that I was compelled to act as he dictated, in order to save my own life, for, as I have already explained, the "holy" man held the lives of those who displeased him very cheaply.

At headquarters, which proved to be a veritable hive of military activity, I posed to a sergeant as Tchernine's brother, and begged that I might see him. It was nearly dark as I stood with the man, who had roughly demanded my business there.

"I fear you will not be able to see him," he replied. "The Emperor has just arrived on a visit to headquarters, and he is with the general, and your brother is in attendance upon them."

Tchernine, a spy of Germany, was actually in attendance upon the Emperor, and hence could listen to the conversation between His Majesty and the army commander!

"But I have come all the way from Petrograd," I whined. "I have a message to give my brother from his wife, whom I fear is dying."

This moved the honest sergeant, who, calling one of his men, told him to go to Tchernine and tell him he was wanted immediately.

"Only for a few moments," I said. "I will not keep him from his duty more than two or three minutes—just to give him the message."

I waited alone in a small, bare hut for nearly half an hour, when the man returned with Brusiloff's servant.

"Ah, dear brother Peter!" I cried, rushing forward and embracing him ere he could express astonishment. "So I have found you at last—at last!"

As I expected, the man who had accompanied him, not wishing to be present at the meeting, turned and left us alone.

The instant he had gone I pressed the box of matches into his hand, whispering:

"Take this. It has been sent to you from our friends in Berlin. Inside is a tube of white powder, which you will mix with the powdered sugar which General Brusiloff takes with fruit. It is highly dangerous, so be very careful how you handle it. Death will occur quickly, but the doctors will never discover the reason. It has already been used with effect by our friends among the Allies."

"I understand," was the spy's grim reply. "Tell our friends that I will put it into the sugar to-night, and both His Majesty and the general shall have some. How fortunate, eh?" he grinned.

I held my breath. It had never crossed my mind that Nicholas was to dine with the general.

"No," I said. "Keep it till to-morrow, so that the general has it alone. It is intended for him. Those are the instructions."

"I shall not," was his reply as he placed the box in his pocket. "If one has it, so shall the other. The German advance will be made all the more easy by the removal of both of them. I——"

Footsteps sounded outside, and the sergeant appeared an instant later; hence we were compelled to separate after exchanging farewells as good brothers would.

Back to Minsk I drove rapidly, and two hours later was in an ambulance train on my way to Petrograd, full of wonder as to what was happening at Gorodok.

Peter Tchernine, spy of Germany, had no doubt mixed the contents of that tiny tube with the powdered sugar served to the general and his Imperial guest.

Standing alone at the end of a long ambulance carriage, I leaned out of the window, breathing the fresh air of the open plain. We were running beside a lake, the water of which came up close to the rails. Here was my opportunity.

I took a tin matchbox from my pocket and flung it as far as I could into the water.

Then I returned to my seat, my heart lighter, for at last I had saved the life of our dear general, and also that of His Majesty, for, truth to tell, what I had given Peter Tchernine was only a little tube of French chalk made up to resemble that brought so secretly from Berlin.

On reporting to Rasputin next day, he rubbed his hands with delight. I, of course, did not tell him of the Emperor's peril.

Next day he, however, came to me in a state of high indignation.

"The fool Tchernine has blundered, just as Sawvitch did!" he cried. "Brusiloff still lives and is continuing the offensive. Did he not promise to use the tube?"

"He certainly did," I assured the monk. "He was filled with satisfaction that he would be able thus to help the Fatherland."

"In any case he has failed!" said the "holy" man. "Not only that, but the plot against Korniloff has also failed. What shall I reply to Berlin? What will they say?"

"Has the girl Nada Tsourikoff failed us, then?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes," he replied in a hard, deep tone. "The little fool apparently had no courage. It failed her at the last moment—or——"

"Or what?"

"Or somebody knew the truth and threatened exposure."

"Why?"

"Because she was found dead yesterday morning at the Grand Hotel at Dvinsk, having broken the tube and taken some of its contents in her tea. A pity, too, Féodor, for she might have been so very useful." Then he added: "Bah! it is always the same with women, their courage fails them at the last moment! No. It is men—men like yourself, Féodor—that we want. The failure at Minsk is, however, very strange. We must inquire into Tchernine's actions and report fully to the Königgrätzerstrasse. Otherwise I shall once again be blamed. Surely I did my best—and so did you!"

CHAPTER XII

rasputin and the kaiser

The secret visit of Rasputin to Berlin and his second audience with the Kaiser were stoutly denied at the time, but as I accompanied the "saint" upon his adventurous journey I am in a position to know the exact facts.

He, dressed as a Dutch pastor, and calling himself Pastor van Meuwen, and I, calling myself Koster, arrived at a small quiet hotel called the Westfälischer-Hof, in the Neustadische-strasse, on the north of the Linden. We had travelled by way of Helsingfors, Stockholm, and Hamburg, Rasputin being bearer of letters from the Tsaritza to the Kaiser and Kaiserin, assuring them of her continued good wishes and her efforts to secure a German conquest.

Hardly had we been in the rather dismal hotel an hour when a waiter introduced into our private sitting-room, where I stood alone, a tall, dark, middle-aged man, who clicked his heels as he bowed elegantly before me.

Smiling, and without uttering a word, my visitor handed me half of a plain visiting-card that had been roughly torn across, after I had scribbled my signature across the back. From my cigarette-case I took the other half, and placing them together, ascertained that they fitted. The torn portion that the Baron von Hausen—for that was his name, I learnt—had handed to me had been conveyed to Berlin by Hardt a month before, in order that we might repose confidence in any person who called upon us and bore it as the credential of the Königgrätzerstrasse.

My visitor was a pleasant, shrewd-eyed man, well dressed and wearing a fine diamond in his black cravat, who, when he had seated himself at my invitation, glanced to see if the door was closed, and then exclaimed:

"Well, Herr Koster, I trust that the Father and yourself have had a comfortable journey."

"Quite," I replied. "But, of course, it is a very roundabout route."

"I expected you two days ago," said the baron, who at that moment rose at the entry of Rasputin and greeted him.

The appearance of the monk in Berlin was very different from the figure he presented in Petrograd. His hair and beard had been trimmed, he had washed, and in his clerical garb he looked a typical Dutch pastor.

I introduced the pair, whereupon the baron said:

"His Majesty the Emperor wishes you to come to Potsdam at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon. You are to meet the Chancellor."

To this the monk agreed, saying in his halting German:

"It is not the first time I have been received by His Majesty. I shall bring Féodor."

"As you wish. But I question if His Majesty will allow him to be present at the audience."

"In that case, Baron, tell His Majesty that I shall not come," remarked the "saint" bluntly. "His Majesty the Tsar permits the presence of my secretary, therefore why should your Emperor object? Give him that message," he said, adding: "I have little time to spare here in Berlin, and am returning to Petrograd almost at once."

The Baron von Hausen demurred, but Rasputin insisted on his message being given to the Kaiser.

Then, when our visitor had left, the monk helped himself to a stiff glass of brandy, and laughing said:

"The only way to treat these Germans is with dignity, Féodor. I want you to note all he says and translate the most important into Russian for me. Why does Bethmann-Hollweg want to be present, I wonder?"

"To advise the Kaiser, no doubt."

"About what? I will deal with His Majesty himself, and nobody else," he snapped.

Even while we were discussing the situation another caller came, a German, also dressed as a pastor, who gave the name of Schwass. In a moment Rasputin, recognising him, locked the door and, turning quickly, asked in Russian:

"Well, how do things go? You are not suspected?"

"Not in the least," was the reply of the man, who had been an agent of the Russian Secret Police, and who was now a spy living in Berlin under a clerical guise.

"You have a letter for me, I believe, Father, from the Minister Protopopoff, have you not?" he asked.

I unlocked the small attaché case and from among a number of other letters which we had brought from Russia was one in a plain envelope addressed to the Pastor Wilhelm Schwass.

The spy tore it open, read it through carefully three times, and then placed it in the fire and watched until it was consumed. What the instructions were we knew not. They were evidently unwelcome, for the man's face went grey, and scarcely uttering another word he turned and left us.

After dinner, which we took together in our sitting-room, we went out for a walk in the Linden. Rasputin was eager to go to one or other of the variety entertainments, but I dissuaded him from such an action, he being in clerical attire.

"If you go you may arouse the curiosity of some stupid policeman, and inquiries might be made concerning us. No, while in Berlin it will be necessary for you to remain very quiet," I urged. "Remember, the baron and certain of his friends are watching us."

So we idled along to the Café Bauer, where we spent an hour watching the gay crowd, among whom were a number of convalescent officers with those in the capital on leave from Flanders. Berlin life seemed quite unchanged, and the war had not by any means checked the spirit of gaiety in its "night life." There had been a successful attack upon the British that day, and the "victory" over the hated English was upon everyone's lips.

For another hour we wandered, noting the merriment and confidence in conquest on every hand.

"Truly," declared Rasputin, "these Germans spread reports of their own distress for propaganda purposes. Ah, they are indeed a great people, with a great leader!"

I differed from him, for I have never had a liking for Germans. At heart Rasputin had, I knew, no great liking either. He admired them and assisted them because he was a born adventurer, and as the tool of the Kaiser was well paid for his services, while at the same time he had succeeded in placing himself in the position of autocrat over the Tsar himself.

After an expensive supper at a small place near the Rosenthal Thor, where two scantily-clad girls danced while the patrons ate, we retraced our steps to the Neustadische-strasse.

On re-entering the hotel the hall-porter gave me a message asking me to ring up Herr Weghinger at No. 2862, Potsdam.

This I did from our sitting-room, asking for Herr Weghinger.

"Yes," came the voice. "Are you Herr Koster?"

I replied in the affirmative, recognising the voice of Baron von Hausen, who said:

"Will you please tell your friend that I have arranged for your visit here, and that you will be welcomed. Be outside the French Embassy at three o'clock, when a yellow car will drive up. Enter it, and you will be brought here. I shall await you." And then he wished me good night.

The wire over which I had spoken was, I knew, one of the private ones to the Neues Palais at Potsdam.

Rasputin had again triumphed. When I told him he laughed coarsely, remarking:

"People are too apt to regard this Kaiser fellow as lord of the world. He will never work his will upon Gregory. Nicholas tried, and failed. Let William try, and he will discover that at least one man is his equal—and more!"

On the following day at three o'clock we both stood upon the kerb in the Pariser Platz, opposite the closed French Embassy, when suddenly from the Sommerstrasse a big yellow car approached us and drew up. The driver, who had evidently been given our descriptions, got down, saluted, and opened the door for us. Then a minute later we were on our way out of Berlin on the Potsdam road. The papers that day had reported that the Emperor was in Brussels, but such misleading statements are permissible in war.

When we had come down the hill to the Havel and passed over the Glienicke Bridge, we sped through the pleasant town of Potsdam, until at last we entered the great Sanssouci Park, driving past the fountains straight up the tree-lined Hauptweg till we pulled up before the private door of the palace, that used by the Imperial family.

The baron, in uniform and all smiles, was there to meet us, as he had promised.

"I had a difficulty with the Emperor," he whispered to me. "But as the Father insists, His Majesty has given way."

Rasputin overheard his words, and I saw upon his bearded lips a sinister smile.

Through rooms with painted ceilings we were conducted, through the Shell Salon—the walls of which were inlaid with shells, the friezes being of minerals and precious stones—across the Marble Room, and then along an endless, thickly carpeted corridor, which reminded me of one at Peterhof leading to the Empress's private apartments, until the baron saluted a sentry, passed him, and a little farther on knocked discreetly at a polished mahogany door, that of the Kaiser's private workroom.

A moment later we were ushered into a rather small room, plainly furnished, very much like an office. In a chair by the fire sat the grey-bearded Chancellor smoking a cigar, and standing with his back to the English grate was the Emperor William, looking grey and worn, dressed in a drab suit of tweeds.

"Ah, Gregory!" exclaimed His Majesty, who took no notice of my unimportant self, "I do not forget our last meeting. Well, you have done well—excellent work for our Fatherland!" And he introduced the monk to the Imperial Chancellor, who, I thought, greeted the charlatan somewhat contemptuously.

Now, Rasputin, wearing clothes to which he was unaccustomed, and devoid of his gold chain and jewelled cross, which he had so constantly fingered when he granted audiences to those who wished to bask in his smiles—which, of course, always meant great pecuniary advantage or official advancement—seemed at the first moment ill at ease.

"I have done the bidding of my Imperial sister," was his reply. "I have for thee letters from her, also letters for thy wife," and from the pocket of his clerical coat he drew four letters, rather crumpled.

The Emperor hastily scanned the two which Alexandra Feodorovna had addressed to himself, and I noticed a smile of satisfaction flit across his grey, mobile features.

Then, placing them upon his littered writing-table, he gave us seats, and around the fire we sat to talk.

Truly, that council of treachery was an historic one, and cost the lives of many innocent non-combatant women and children.

The Kaiser began by chaffing Rasputin as to his disguise, saying with a laugh:

"Really, you might pass unsuspected anywhere, Father! The baron has been telling me that you are at this moment the very reverend Pastor van

Meuwen, from Utrecht. My police have no knowledge that you are Russian and an enemy. But there, you are clever, and your services to me are worthy far greater reward than you have yet received. Now tell me," he added, "how is Stürmer? I sometimes wonder whether he is acting straight or crooked. Only the other day he telegraphed to Downing Street that you Russians would never agree to a separate peace to isolate Britain. This is most annoying."

"Thou art misled, as is all the world," replied the monk with a meaning smile. "That telegram was sent to London only after many conferences, in which Alexandra Feodorovna took part with Nicholas, Stürmer, Fredericks, and Protopopoff. The British Press was growing dubious as to our determination in winning the war, hence Stürmer's assurance to bamboozle the world was highly necessary."

"That relieves us of much anxiety," remarked Bethmann-Hollweg, chewing the end of his cigar. "We were beginning to fear that Stürmer might be leaning towards England."

Rasputin made a gesture in the negative.

"Stürmer is ever a good friend of the Fatherland," was his slow reply, his eyes fixed upon the Emperor.

"There must be famine in Russia," declared the Kaiser impatiently. "Your friend Protopopoff has not yet created it, as he promised when he saw me. Famine will bring Russia quickly to her knees, as it will eventually bring Britain. Our U-boats are doing marvels. Happily we warned the British, therefore we are contravening no convention."

"Soon our friends in London who have sworn never to sheathe the sword until we are wiped from the face of the earth will begin to squeal," remarked the Imperial Chancellor with a laugh. "And especially if we can carry out Professor Hoheisel's plan and create a pestilence. It must be tried in Russia first, and then in England," Bethmann-Hollweg went on. "The bacteria of anthrax, glanders, and bubonic plague must be sown in various parts of Russia, Gregory. Before you leave Berlin the plan will be explained to you."

"The plan by which we sought to propagate cholera by sending infected fruit to various charitable institutions broke down because the delivery of the fruit was delayed, and it arrived at its destination in an uneatable condition," replied Rasputin. "No one would touch it, hence all our plans were upset."

"The distribution of presents to charitable institutions must be repeated," declared the Chancellor, to which the Emperor agreed. "To-morrow you will be told our wishes in that direction," the Chancellor went on.

"Yes," exclaimed the Emperor, "this military offensive must stop, and at once, if we are successfully to invade England. As soon as Russia makes peace our hands will be free to strike a staggering blow at John Bull. Not till then."

"As soon as we bring Russia to her senses then we shall begin to twist the tail of the British lion," said the Chancellor. "All our plans are complete. As soon as there is quiet on the Russian front we can, within forty-eight hours, if we wish, put six army corps into East Anglia between the Tyne and the Blackwater," he added boastfully.

"Hindenburg will lead them into London one day, never fear," declared the Emperor in the most earnest confidence.

I sat in silence, listening to this strange talk of what was to happen to England when Russia was crushed.

"The charges against Soukhomlinoff ought never to have been made," the Emperor went on, addressing the monk. "I understood from your report to Steinhauer that you were arranging that the Tsar should hush up the inquiry?"

"The Emperor gave orders to that effect, in consequence of the advice of the Empress, but the charges were so very grave that Stürmer urged him to cancel his orders lest the public should suspect him of any intention of suppressing a scandal."

It was true that the charges against the Minister of War were astounding. A high official in the Ministry, named Kartzoff, had betrayed his chief, whereupon Colonel Tugen Baranovsky, late Chief of the Mobilisation Department of the Russian General Staff, had declared that the mobilisation plans drafted by the general were full of wilful errors, while rifles, machine-guns, and field and heavy guns were all lacking. Allegations had been made by General Petrovsky, later Chief of the Fortifications Department, to the effect that the general had only twice visited the artillery administration during the whole time he held his portfolio as Minister, while Colonel Balvinkine, one of the heads of the Artillery Administration, had asserted that Soukhomlinoff had insisted upon important contracts for machine-guns being given to the Rickerts factory at a cost of two thousand roubles each, while the Toula factory could turn out excellent machine-guns at nine hundred roubles.

Such were the charges whispered loudly from end to end of Russia.

"It would be best for that fellow Kartzoff to disappear," declared the Kaiser. "His mouth should be closed, as he may become an awkward witness. Tell Protopopoff from me that it would be judicious to send him to some unknown destination, and that I shall expect to hear early news that he is missing."

"I will carry out thine order," said Rasputin gravely. "I agree with thee that Kartzoff is highly dangerous. Besides, he is a friend of my worst enemy, Purishkevitch, the member of the Duma who has been agitating against the events at the front."

Rasputin, by the way, did not fail to give Protopopoff the Kaiser's message, and three days after our return to Petrograd Kartzoff was enticed away from there by means of a forged telegram, a week later his body being found in a wood near Kislovodsk, in the North Caucasus, while two other witnesses against the Minister of War were arrested, and died later in the island fortress of Schlüsselburg.

The Kaiser seemed unusually cordial towards the monk, much more so than on the occasion when they met in Silesia. The Chancellor seemed to be watching the "holy" man, taking note of his every gesture and every remark.

The Kaiser agreed entirely with his Chancellor's views, and was insistent upon the creation of a pestilence in Russia.

"Cholera or plague could work more for our ends in Russia in a month than we can effect by military force in a whole year," he declared as he lit a cigarette, afterwards tossing the match carelessly into the fire. "What are the views of Alexandra Feodorovna?"

"The same as thine own," the monk replied. "Unfortunately all our efforts failed. A man named Tsourikoff by some means obtained knowledge of what was intended. Her Majesty heard of it, hence I had him removed two days later. He was met by a certain dancer, and had supper with her at Pivato's, in the Morskaya. An hour after they parted Tsourikoff died mysteriously."

"The dancer was a friend of yours, eh? Perhaps a sister-disciple?" remarked the Emperor with a meaning grin.

"Thou hast guessed aright," answered the monk. "But after that we did not dare to carry the infection further."

"It must be done. I have some ideas. The baron will explain them to you to-morrow, and I shall expect you to carry them out," said the great War Lord. "In Russia there must be revolt and disease, in England invasion, and in France—well, we know how we shall conquer both France and Italy," he added, smiling mysteriously.

He spoke as one who believed that he held the destinies of Europe in the hollow of his hand.

"Middle Europe will conquer the world, of that I have no doubt. All is in God's hands," agreed the "saint" in bad German, crossing himself with a mock piety which seemed to amuse both the Emperor and his Chancellor.

"Listen to-morrow to Hoheisel's scheme, which I have approved," said the Emperor, passing to his visitor another cigarette from the heavy golden box. "The professor will call on you with the baron and explain. Act boldly, dear friend Gregory, for recollect that you have behind you the whole resources of Prussia and the good will of myself."

The monk, who had only on the previous day declared that he would subject the Kaiser to his influence, had fallen so completely beneath the thrall of the German Emperor's curious hypnotism that he sat ready and eager to do his bidding.

"The letters you have brought to me from Tsarskoe-Selo are satisfactory so far as they go, but there is still much to be done," said the Kaiser. "Tell the Empress that I will reply to her by courier, but that she is to continue her efforts, and that you both have my full and complete support. The prosecution of Soukhomlinoff must be at once suppressed, and those hostile statements in the Duma from time to time directed against us must be made a penal offence punishable by deportation. Kartzoff must go, and Purishkevitch, who is so constantly speaking in the Duma against yourself and others, should be suppressed without delay. Perhaps he will come to a sudden end!" suggested the Emperor. "At least we can hope so."

Next day at noon the baron brought to us a short, stout, yellow-haired man in gold spectacles, the famous German bacteriologist, Professor Hoheisel, of the Friedrichshain Hospital.

With the door locked, we all four sat down while the deep-voiced scientist unfolded his plan for the devastating of certain populous areas in Russia by the dissemination of a newly discovered and highly infectious disease.

"The disease was discovered a year ago by Gerhold, at the Alt-Moabit, and is closely allied to bubonic plague. It is more highly infectious than anthrax or

smallpox, and inevitably proves fatal," the professor said, seated at the head of the small table. "Curiously enough, infants seem to be immune up to six years of age. Now, my proposal, to which both the Emperor and the Chancellor have agreed, is that the cultures which I have prepared, and of which a large quantity is already in Stockholm ready to be utilised, should be introduced into a consignment of meat extract and tinned beef which has come from South America, and which is being held back by a certain firm in Stockholm friendly to ourselves."

"How do you propose to infect it?" asked the monk, the devilish plot appealing at once to his cunning and unscrupulous mind.

"By puncturing the tins and introducing the culture by means of a hypodermic syringe, and closing up the hole with a spot of solder. The bottles will be treated by puncturing the corks with the needle and closing the hole with melted resin."

"I might say," added the baron, "that the cargo has been purchased by our friends, Messrs. Juel and Ehrensvard, who are awaiting instructions before re-shipping it. When the meat is prepared it will be your work, Father, to see that it is distributed in the two cities in which we want to experiment, namely, Nijni-Novgorod and Vologda."

"They are doomed cities, eh?" I remarked.

"We intend them to be so," the professor said. "When once the disease is released it will spread everywhere, and no precautions can be taken because, up to the present, it is known to only half-a-dozen of us in Berlin, and we have no knowledge how to treat it successfully."

Rasputin was silent.

"It will certainly be far more dangerous than cholera or plague—dangerous to ourselves, I mean," he remarked.

"Of course the epidemic must not be allowed to break out in Petrograd or in any of the army centres—at least, not at present. We must first watch the effect in Vologda and Nijni."

"Well," said the monk, "what do you wish me to do?"

"You are returning by way of Stockholm," replied the baron. "His Majesty wishes the professor to accompany you, and in the warehouse of the firm I have named you will see the canned goods and bottles. The professor will show you that the tins have been repainted and are labelled with the mark

of a well-known firm, so that there can be no suspicion of them. Only the paint is a much brighter blue than that usually employed. The reason of this is that they can easily be identified by any in the secret, and prevented from being opened in any area save those two towns I have named."

"When do you leave?" asked the deep-voiced demon in human form.

"On Friday next. I have still a number of persons to see."

"Then I shall be ready to travel with you, Father," declared the professor; and then, after taking some brandy and soda-water, the conference ended.

The devilish ingenuity of the whole scheme appalled me. The sowing of cholera germs by means of infected fruit had happily failed, but now Germany intended to strike a blow at the civil population of Russia upon a scale more gigantic than I had ever imagined.

Next day, a man who gave the name of Emil Döllen brought Rasputin a letter, which I opened.

It was, I found, a code message which had been received at the great German wireless station at Nauen, having been dispatched from Petrograd, ostensibly to the warship Petropavlovsk in the Baltic, as Rasputin had arranged before he left Russia.

When I decoded it, I found it to be from the Minister Protopopoff, containing certain further instructions, as well as a message from the Tsaritza—which necessitated the monk having a second audience with the Kaiser.

In reply—while the secret messenger Döllen retired for an hour—I sat down and wrote, at the monk's dictation, a long dispatch, in which he made brief allusion as to the proposed dissemination of disease, and stating his intention to remain some days in Stockholm.

"All is well," he dictated. "The Emperor William sends his best greetings and acknowledgments of your dispatch of the 3rd inst. It has been found necessary to recall the troops who have been held ready at Hamburg and Bremen for the invasion of Britain. The German General Staff have, after due consideration, decided that an invasion before Russia is crushed might meet with disaster, hence they are turning their attention to submarine and aerial attacks upon Britain in order to crush her. I have learnt from a conversation with the Kaiser that London is to be destroyed by a succession of fleets of super-aeroplanes launching newly devised explosive and poison-gas bombs of a terribly destructive character. Urge S. [Stürmer] to disclaim at once all knowledge of the Rickert contracts. The action taken against

General S. is again ordered to be dropped. See the Emperor and persuade him. Blessings upon you.

"Gregory."

Then I proceeded to put it into the special code which Rasputin and Protopopoff alone used, and when Döllen called it was ready for transmission from Nauen back to the Russian battleship, to which I had addressed it, to be "picked up" by the wireless station in Petrograd.

The "holy Father" greatly enjoyed himself in a quiet way in Berlin. Indeed, he purchased a ready-made suit of clothes, and, attired in them, he went out on two occasions and did not return till dawn, and then half intoxicated. On the second occasion the baron called and remonstrated with him, pointing out that he was running great risk.

"We have been watching you in order to avoid any unwelcome inquiries by the police. But if you continue we can accept no further responsibility," he said. "You see, you pose as Dutch without being able to speak a word of the language!"

After that Rasputin became more discreet, but I was nevertheless glad when one night we met Professor Hoheisel at the station and left for Hamburg, duly arriving at Stockholm two days later, where we lost no time in visiting the premises of Juel and Ehrensvard.

Indeed, Mr. Juel, the head of the Hun firm which was doing a large export business between Sweden and Germany, called upon us at the Grand Hotel within an hour of our arrival, and together we all went to a narrow street off the Fjellgatan, not far from the Saltsjöbanans station, where we found a great warehouse filled to overflowing with tins of corned beef and cases containing bottles of beef extract, which had come from America, destined for Germany, but which had been held up to be diverted to Russia after being treated with disease germs.

We were shown stacks upon stacks of tins of one pound, two pounds and six pounds of beef, all bearing a well-known label, but all painted a peculiar blue for identification purposes. In the store we were met by four German laboratory assistants of the fat professor, ready to commence work upon the tins.

"I will show you what we shall do," said Hoheisel. "The manipulation of the tins is quite easy."

He conducted us to a small room on the top floor, which I at once saw was fitted as a laboratory, and which contained microscopes, incubators, stands of test-tubes, and all the other apparatus appertaining to the bacteriologist.

One of his assistants had carried up four small tins of beef, with a couple of bottles of beef extract. These he placed on the table, and as we stood around he took a small bradawl, and having punctured the tin at the large end close to the rim, he took from one of the incubators a test-tube full of a cloudy brown liquid gelatine. Then filling a hypodermic syringe—upon which was an extra long needle—he thrust it into the contents of the tin and injected the virus into the meat.

Afterwards, with a small soldering-iron he closed the puncture.

"That tin, infected as it is, is sufficient to cause an epidemic which might result in thousands of deaths," declared the Hun professor proudly.

His assistant then took a bottle of beef extract, which in Russia is popular with all classes in preparing their cabbage soup, and refilling the syringe, plunged the needle through the cork, afterwards placing a spot of melted resin upon the puncture.

"You see how simple it is!" laughed the professor, addressing the "saint." "All that now remains is for a firm in Petrograd to buy the consignment and arrange for it to be sold to wholesale dealers in Vologda and Nijni. This we expect you to arrange."

"I certainly will," replied Rasputin promptly. "Truly, the idea is a most ingenious one—a disease which is as yet unknown!"

We remained in Stockholm for four days longer. The professor and his assistants were working strenuously, we knew, preparing death for the population of those two Russian towns.

One afternoon, after he had lunched with us at the hotel, he said:

"If our experiment is successful, then we mean to repeat it from South America to England. It is therefore most important that news of the epidemic does not reach the ears of the Allies. You will point out that to the Minister Protopopoff. When the plague breaks out the censorship must be of the strictest."

Rasputin nodded. He quite understood. He hated the British just as heartily as did the Tsaritza.

A week later we were back at Tsarskoe-Selo, and the monk—who pretended to have been on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Tver—made to the Empress a full report of his journey to Potsdam. He also told her of the diabolical plot to sweep off the population of Vologda and Nijni as an experiment, in order to see how Hun "science" could win the war.

Protopopoff came to Rasputin's house half-a-dozen times within the next three days, and it was arranged that a firm of importers, Illine and Stroukoff, of Petrograd, should handle the consignment of preserved meat. Both partners in the firm were in the pay of the Ministry of the Interior, hence it was not difficult to arrange that the whole cargo should be sent to Vologda and Nijni to relieve there the growing shortage of meat.

I strove to combat the clever plot, but was, alas! unable to do so. Every precaution was taken against possible failure. The cargo arrived, and was at once sent on by rail to its destination, payment being made for it through ordinary channels, and nobody suspecting. Food was welcomed indeed in Russia in those days of 1916.

In the stress of exciting events that followed I forgot the affair for several weeks. One night, however, Rasputin, on returning from Peterhof, where the Court was at that moment, received Protopopoff, and the pair sat down to drink together.

Suddenly His Excellency exclaimed, with a laugh:

"Your mission to Berlin has borne fruit, my dear Gregory! For the past four days I have been receiving terrible reports from Vologda, and worse from Nijni-Novgorod. The inhabitants have been seized by a mysterious and terribly fatal disease. A medical commission left Petrograd yesterday to study it."

"Let them study it!" laughed Rasputin. "They will discover no mode of treatment."

"Both towns are rapidly becoming decimated. There have been over thirty thousand deaths, and the mortality is daily increasing."

"As I expected," remarked the monk. "The professor knows what he is doing. Later on we shall be sending the infection into England and cause our John Bull friends a surprise."

"But the position is terribly serious," said His Excellency.

"No doubt. Berlin is watching the result. One day they may deem it wise to infect our army. But that must be left to their discretion."

Truly the result of that devilish plot was most awful. In the three months that followed—though not a word leaked out to the Allies, so careful were Protopopoff and the camarilla to suppress all the facts—more than half the population of the two cities died from a disease which to this day is a complete mystery, and its bacilli known only to German bacteriologists.

CHAPTER XIII

the "perfume of death"

"I am much grieved to hear of the disaster at Obukhov. The accident to Colonel Zinovief is most deplorable. Please place a wreath upon his grave from me. Pray always for us.

"Alix."

This was the text of a telegram addressed to Rasputin from the Empress, which I opened when it was placed in my hands. It had been sent from Bakhtchisaray, the Oriental town in the Crimea, where Alexandra Feodorovna had gone to visit the military hospitals, it being necessary for her to pose before Russia as sympathetic to the wounded.

The disaster to which she referred had taken place at the great steel works at Obukhov, the outrage having been committed by two German secret agents named Lachkarioff and Filimonoff, who had visited Rasputin and from whose hand they had received German money. Nearly five hundred lives had been lost, as the foundry had been in close proximity to an explosives factory, where Colonel Zinovief, the director, had been blown to atoms.

It was late at night, and the monk, who was in a state of semi-intoxication, on hearing of the wish of Her Majesty, remarked:

"Ah! a clever woman, Féodor—very clever. She never misses an opportunity to show her sympathy with the people. Oh! yes—order the wreath to-morrow from Solovioff in the Nevski—a fine large one." Then laughing, he added: "The people, when they see it, will never suspect that Alexandra Feodorovna knew of the pending disaster eight days ago. But," he added suddenly, after a pause, "is it not time, Féodor, that I saw another vision?"

I laughed. I knew how, during the week that had elapsed since our return from the secret visit to Potsdam, he was constantly holding reunions of his sister-disciples, many fresh "converts" being admitted to the new religion.

Both Lachkarioff and Filimonoff, authors of the terrible disaster at Obukhov, had been furnished with passports by Protopopoff, and were already well on their way to Sweden, but the catastrophe was the signal for a terrible period of unrest throughout Russia, and in the fortnight that followed, rumours, purposely started by German agents and the secret police under Protopopoff, assumed most alarming proportions.

All was the creation of Rasputin's evil brain. With the Emperor and Empress absent in the South, he had, with the connivance of "No. 70, Berlin," determined to undermine the moral of the whole nation by disseminating false reports and arranging for disaster after disaster.

In the "saint's" study in the Gorokhovaya there was arranged the terrible railway "accident" which occurred near Smolensk, in which a crowded troop train collided with an ambulance train, the wreckage being run into by a second troop train, all three trains eventually taking fire and burning. The exact loss of life will never be known.

Another outrage was the destruction of the big railway bridge over the River Tvertza, not far from Kava, thus blocking the Petrograd-Moscow line, while a train conveying high explosives made in England a few days later blew up while passing the station of Odozerskaja, completely wrecking the line between Archangel and Petrograd and killing nearly three hundred people.

Each of these outrages was arranged in my presence, and I was compelled to assist in counting the money which was afterwards given by the monk to their perpetrators as price of their perfidy.

"We must create unrest," Rasputin declared one night to His Excellency the Minister Protopopoff, as the precious pair sat together. "We must prepare Russia for disaster."

Hence it was that they arranged for a series of most alarming false rumours to be circulated throughout the length and breadth of the Empire.

Indeed, on the day following, I heard in a bank where I had business that all Moscow was involved in a great revolution, that the Moscow police were on strike, and that the troops had refused to fire upon the populace. Everyone stood aghast at the news. But the truth was that the telegraphs and telephones between Moscow and Petrograd had been wilfully cut in three places by agents of Protopopoff, and while those alarming rumours were current in Petrograd, similar rumours were rife in Moscow that revolution had broken out in the capital.

Rasputin and his friends in the course of a few days created a veritable whirlwind of false reports, hoping by that means to shatter or stifle all manifestations of patriotic feeling, and prepare Russia for a separate peace.

Meanwhile he had contrived, as the Kaiser ordered, to prevent the offensive being resumed in Poland; and yet so cleverly did he effect all this that General Brusiloff, who was at the south-west front, actually gave an interview to a British journalist, declaring that the war was already won,

"though it was merely speculation to estimate how much longer will be required before the enemy are convinced that the cause for the sake of which they have drenched Europe in blood is irretrievably lost."

The cold white light of later events has indeed revealed the black hearts of Rasputin and his friends, for while all this was in progress Stürmer, though so active in the betrayal of his country, boldly made a speech deploring the fact that anyone credited the sinister rumours which his fellow-conspirators had started, and to save his face he warned the working-classes to remain patient and prosecute the war with vigour.

I recollect well the day he had made that speech—the day on which the Labour group of the Central War Industrial Committee issued its declaration. There was a reunion of the sister-disciples, at which three new members were admitted to the cult, all society women under thirty, and all good-looking. Their names were Baroness Térénine, whose husband had been Governor of Yaroslav; Countess Chidlovski, one of the acknowledged society beauties of Petrograd, who had of late had an "affair" with an Italian tenor named Baccelli; and Anna, the pretty young daughter of a woman named Friede, who was also a "disciple."

There was a large attendance, and Rasputin exhibited more than the usual mock piety. In his jumbled jargon, which he called a sermon—that mixture of quotations from the "Lives of Saints" mingled with horrible obscenities—he had referred to the terrible rumours.

"These, I fear, my dear sisters, are, alas! too true," he declared. "Being in the position of knowing much, I beg of you all to pray ceaselessly, and let these three who to-day join our holy circle take upon themselves the duty of obtaining fresh converts, and thus ensure to themselves the blessing of him who stands here before you—the saviour of Russia."

Then he paused, and all the kneeling women crossed themselves, piously murmuring, as was part of the creed:

"God's will be done! God's will be done! Truly, our Father Gregory is holy! Truly, the sacrifice which each and all of us make is made to God!"

The three newly-admitted aspirants, dressed in very flimsy black in the mode which the monk imposed upon them, knelt before the Father and kissed his hands, while from his lips fell those awful blasphemies, which, amazing as it was, hypnotised, neurotic society women believed to be the truth.

Afterwards Rasputin gave them all tea and cake, he being personally waited upon by the three neophytes. Then, half-an-hour after the last one had departed—for the three had remained behind with him for further private instruction and conversation, as was usual—the Prime Minister Stürmer was announced.

"I have made the speech you suggested," he declared to the monk as he sank into a chair. "Phew! what a smell of perfume, my dear Gregory!" he laughed. "Your sister-disciples have left it behind them. Open the window, Féodor," he exclaimed, turning to me. "Let us have some fresh air."

The monk then explained that while Stürmer had made that public declaration he had told the women that the situation was grave, well knowing that they, in turn, would tell their husbands, and the rumours would quickly be propagated.

"I have had another reassuring telegram from Downing Street," Stürmer remarked, with a grin. "I dare not publish it, otherwise it would upset our friends in Berlin."

"As I have told you, the Kaiser forbids the publication of any of our reassurances from France or England—especially from the English, whom he hates so deeply. What, I wonder, will be the fate of the English when he is able to send an army of invasion across the North Sea?"

"If he is ever able. I doubt it," remarked the traitorous Premier of Russia.

"He certainly intends doing so," said Rasputin. "And when he does I should be sorry to be in Britain. They will treat the civilians worse than they did the Belgians."

"Yes; he intended being in Paris two years ago," replied the goat-bearded débauché in uniform.

"It is time I saw another vision," said the monk presently. "I shall see one to-night most probably—one concerning our defeat."

"Do," urged Stürmer. "You have not had a vision for quite a long time. It impresses all classes, and we can make so much use of it when dealing with Nicholas. He believes as thoroughly in your visions as in the spirit-voice of the dead Alexander."

Next day the whole world of Petrograd was startled.

To Grichka the Blessed Virgin had once again revealed herself, just as she had done years ago to the peasant girl at Lourdes.

The Procurator of the Holy Synod called to see him at noon to inquire of him personally, and ascertain what he had seen. Rasputin, with his hands crossed over his breast, turned his dark eyes heavenward, and said:

"It is true that last night, just after midnight, as I was praying in my room, Our Lady appeared unto me in a cloud of shining light. She was clothed in bright blue, and in her hands she bore a bunch of lilies. Behind her I saw a picture of a great battlefield, where our soldiers were retreating in disorder, being shot down in hundreds by the machine-guns of the enemy—and worse—and worse!" And the charlatan hid his face in his hands as though to shut out the horror of the recollection.

"What else?" asked the head of the Russian Church. "Tell me, O Father."

"It is too terrible—the public must not know——" he gasped, as though in fear. "I saw our Emperor killed on the field of battle; he was struck in the head by a piece of shell from one of the German long-range guns, and half his face was blown away. Ugh!" And he shuddered. "The sight of it was terrible. My blood ran cold. Nicholas, our Emperor, dead! I saw Brusiloff, too, lying shot, with a dozen other generals. Then the scene changed, and I saw the burial of the Emperor with all pomp, and his widow Alexandra Feodorovna following the coffin."

"And then?"

"Then Our Lady opened her lips, and I heard her voice," went on the "holy" liar. "She spake to me slowly and solemnly, saying: 'O Gregory, what thou hast witnessed is decreed to take place within forty days from to-day! These scenes will be enacted upon Russian soil—and worse. The people of Petrograd, Moscow and Warsaw will be put to the sword by the enemy, who have right and justice upon their side. Russia has fallen away from God, and is now accursed.' I shrieked at those fateful words. But she repeated them, adding: 'Thou, O Gregory, canst still save Russia if thou wilt raise thy voice in warning. Peace must be effected. Let those who are in alliance with Russia fight on if they will, but let Russia remain holy for the sake of its innocent people and its great Imperial house. Warn His Majesty at once, warn his Ministers, to cut themselves adrift from those nations which are seeking to profit by their alliance with Russia. Compel them to make peace with the Emperor William. If this is not concluded within forty days, then God's wrath will fall upon this land. Thou art sent by God as His apostle, therefore take heed and take instant action!' And a second later she had faded out, and there was nothing but darkness."

I could see how greatly our visitor was impressed.

"The Emperor should surely know," he said, astounded.

"Yes, but we must not alarm the public too greatly," Rasputin replied.

"Already it is on everyone's lips," exclaimed the other. "The wildest stories are afloat concerning the Blessed Virgin's appearance to you. We certainly must have peace with Germany. That is what everyone is saying, except members of the Duma and the war party."

Thus, by pretending to have seen a vision at an hour when, truth to tell, he had been snoring in a drunken sleep, half Russia grew alarmed, including the Emperor and Empress, who both hurried back to Tsarskoe-Selo, where Rasputin repeated with much embellishment what he had told the Procurator of the Holy Synod.

Just at the moment Rasputin was engaged upon a piece of outrageous blackmailing, which I think ought to be recorded against him.

The facts were briefly as follow. The German agent Lachkarioff, who with his accomplice had blown up the Obukhov steel works and was now safe in Sweden, had, while in Petrograd, made the acquaintance of a certain Madame Doukhovski, the young wife of the President of the Superior Tribunal at Kharkof. She was a giddy little woman, and the monk had plotted with old Countess Ignatieff to entice her to join the cult, but she had always refused. Lachkarioff was a good-looking, well-dressed man, who posed as a commercial magnate of Riga, and she, I suppose, fell beneath his charm. At any rate, for a long time the pair were inseparable.

One day the German agent, who was an exceedingly wily person, came to Rasputin and told him that he had induced the young lady of Kharkof to reveal to him certain secrets concerning the dealings of Soukhomlinoff and the supply of machine-guns for the Army—facts which had been presented in strictest confidence by one of the War Minister's enemies to the President of the Kharkof tribunal.

Rasputin smiled in triumph when he heard the exact details which Madame Doukhovski had divulged.

"Sit down yonder, my friend, and put that into writing, and sign it," said the monk, indicating the table by the window.

"You will not punish her for her indiscretion, I hope," remarked the man, who was at the moment plotting that series of terrible disasters.

"Not in the least," Rasputin assured him. "Your friend is my friend. But when such statements are made I like to have them on record. If Soukhomlinoff comes up for trial—which I very much doubt—then the memorandum may be of use to prove what silly and baseless gossip has been in circulation."

In consequence of this assurance, Lachkarioff wrote down what had been told him by the judge's wife, a document which the "saint" preserved with much care—until the Obukhov catastrophe had taken place and its author was out of Russia. Then he wrote to Madame Doukhovski and asked her to call upon him upon an urgent matter concerning her husband.

In surprise, and perhaps a little anxious, she kept the appointment one afternoon, and I ushered her into the monk's room.

He rose, and, addressing her roughly, said:

"So you have obeyed me, woman! And it is best for you that you have done so. Hitherto you have held me in contempt and refused all invitations to visit me. Why?"

"Because I am not a believer," was her open, straightforward answer.

"Then you will believe me ere I have done," he declared, with an evil grin, stroking his ragged beard, and fixing his eyes upon her.

"You insult me," she cried angrily. "Why should you speak to me like this?"

"Because you have been an associate of Felix Lachkarioff—a traitor and a spy," he declared in that deep, hard voice of his. "Oh! you cannot deny it. Your husband has no knowledge that you were an intimate friend of the man who has fled from Russia after causing that frightful disaster at Obukhov. Is not that so?"

The handsome, dark-haired woman whom the spy had so grossly betrayed turned pale, and sat utterly staggered that her secret was out. She had never dreamed that the handsome, polite man who had one day been presented to her in the lounge of the Hôtel d'Europe was a German agent, that he was engaged in committing outrages on behalf of the enemy, or that he was friendly with the monk.

"Your husband does not know that spy? Answer me?" demanded Rasputin roughly.

"I have told my husband nothing," was her faltering reply.

"That is not surprising, Madame," laughed the "saint," leaning back in the chair where he had seated himself, "especially when you have told that spy certain secrets of our Government, which you obtained by examining the dossiers which have been passing through your husband's hands."

"What do you mean?" she cried, starting up in indignation.

"Ah, no," he said; "it is useless to pretend ignorance, Madame. Read this!"

And he handed her a copy of what the German agent had written, saying: "I have the original, which I am passing to the authorities, so that they may take what action they deem best against you as a traitor and against your husband for negligence!"

The unfortunate woman, when she scanned the statement, went pale to the lips, fully realising the extreme seriousness of the nature of her offence, now that her admirer was known to be a spy of Germany.

"But you won't do that?" she gasped. "Think, Father, what it would mean both to my husband and myself! Think!" she cried hoarsely.

"You have revealed the contents of certain highly confidential documents to the Germans," the monk said. "You do not deny it. You, Madame Doukhovski, are a traitor to Russia, and evidence of your treachery is contained in that confession of a German spy whom you assisted and whom you——"

"I looked at the dossiers on my husband's table because Monsieur Lachkarioff asked me to do so," she declared. "He told me he was a friend of Soukhomlinoff, and that he was doing all he could to assist in clearing him of the charges levelled against him. I believed him, alas!—I was foolish enough to believe that he spoke the truth. And now he has betrayed me!"

"I suppose you were infatuated by the man," laughed the monk scornfully. "If you were so weak, then you must pay the penalty."

"And that is—what?" she asked breathlessly, and pale as death.

"Exposure," replied the charlatan who was the head of the traitorous camarilla around the throne. "Our dear land is in serious peril to-day, therefore those who attempt to betray her should be held up as examples to others."

"But you will not—you'll not let anyone know of my indiscretion!" she begged.

"That certainly is my intention," was his hard reply. "This statement was made to me by your lover, and it is but right that it should be investigated, so that we may know the extent of the harm that you have done."

The frantic, despairing woman, bursting into tears, threw herself at the feet of the "miracle worker," begging hard for mercy.

"Think!" she cried. "Think what it will mean to my husband and myself. He will probably be placed under arrest and lose his post, while I—I would rather die than face such exposure."

"Ah! my dear Madame," said Rasputin tauntingly. "Life is very sweet, you know."

"But you must not do this!" she shrieked loudly. "Promise me, Father, that you will not! Promise me—do!"

Rasputin drew his hand roughly from her, for she had seized it as she implored him to show her mercy.

"There may be some extenuating circumstances in your case—but I doubt it," he said.

"There are!" she declared. "I grew to love the man. I was blind, mad, infatuated—but now I hate him! Would that I could kill the man who wrought such disaster in our land! Would that I could kill him with my own hand!"

Rasputin drew a long breath. The wish she expressed had suddenly aroused within his inventive brain a means of executing a sharp and bitter revenge.

"Perhaps one day, ere long, you may be afforded opportunity," he said in a changed voice. "If so, I will call you here again and explain what I mean."

"Ah! Then I may hope for your pity and indulgence, eh?" she cried quickly, but still in deep anxiety.

Yet Rasputin would not commit himself, for he was playing a very deep and intricate game.

When the erring woman had gone the monk filled his glass with brandy, some of that choice old cognac which the Empress sent him regularly, and turning to me, said:

"Féodor, the man Doukhovski is wealthy, I understand. Protopopoff has been making inquiry, and finds that he is owner of a large estate near

Ryazhsk, and that from an uncle quite recently he inherited nearly a million roubles. He only retains his office because he does not regard it as patriotic to retire while the war is in progress. What will he think of his wife's betrayal when he knows of it?"

"But you will not inform him," I exclaimed.

"Not if Madame is reasonable. She is wealthy in her own right," replied the monk. "If women err they must be compelled to pay the price," he went on in a hard voice. "Felix Lachkarioff evidently deceived her very cleverly. But there—he is one of the most expert agents that the Königgrätzerstrasse possesses, and is so essentially a ladies' man."

After a pause Rasputin, lighting a cigarette, laughed lightly to himself, and said:

"The report furnished to me yesterday shows that Madame was one of the Plechkoffs of Lublin, and her balance at the Azov Bank is a very considerable one. The price of my silence is the money she has there. And I shall obtain it, Féodor—you will see," he added with confidence.

So ruthlessly did he treat the unfortunate woman that, by dint of threats to place the original of that statement of Lachkarioff before the Minister Protopopoff, he had before a week had passed every rouble she possessed.

I was present on the night when she came to him to make the offer, the negotiations having been opened and carried on by a man named Zouieff, one of the several professional blackmailers whom Rasputin employed from time to time under the guise of "lawyers." She was beside herself in terror and despair, and carried with her a cheque-book.

The interview was a strikingly dramatic one. She penitent, submissive, and full of hatred of the spy under whose influence she had fallen; the monk cold, brutal, and unforgiving.

"Yes," he said at last, when she offered him a monetary consideration in exchange for his silence. "But I am not content with a few paltry roubles. I am collecting for my new monastery at Kertch, and what you give will atone to God for your crime."

Within ten minutes she had written out a cheque for the whole of her private fortune, while at the monk's dictation I wrote out a declaration that his allegations were false, a document which he signed and handed to her, together with Lachkarioff's original statement.

Even then Rasputin's cunning was not at its limit.

Lachkarioff's usefulness to Germany in Russia was at an end. He was in Gothenburg, and being a close friend of an English journalist there, it was feared lest he should allow himself to be interviewed, and reveal something of the truth concerning the subterranean working of Germany in Petrograd.

"The man's lips ought to be closed," Steinhauer had written to Rasputin only a week before. "Can you suggest any way? While he lives he will be a menace to us all. Filimonoff is safe in an asylum in Copenhagen, though I believe he is perfectly sane. Only it is best that no risk should be run."

Here were means ready to hand to close the mouth of Felix Lachkarioff, for the woman whom he had betrayed was furiously vengeful.

"You said the other day that you would be ready to strike a blow at that enemy of Russia who has so grossly misled you," Rasputin said to her in a deep, earnest voice, as she sat in his room. "Would not such a course be deeply patriotic? Why not, as expiation of your sin, travel to Gothenburg and avenge those hundreds of poor people who were his victims at Obukhov? I can give into your hand the means," he added, looking her straight in the face.

"What means?" she asked.

He crossed to his writing-table, and, unlocking a drawer with a key upon his chain, he took out a tiny bottle of extremely expensive Parisian perfume, a pale-green liquid, which he handed to her.

"It looks like scent," he remarked, with a grin, "but it contains something else—something so potent that a single drop introduced into food or drink will produce death within an hour, the symptoms being exactly those of heart disease. That is what deaths resulting from it are always declared to be. So there is no risk. Meet him, be friendly, dine with him for the sake of old days in Petrograd, and before you leave him he will be doomed," added Rasputin, in a low whisper. "He surely deserves it after deceiving you as he has done!"

"He certainly does," she declared fiercely, unable to overlook how he had betrayed her. "And I will do it!" she added, taking up the little bottle. "Russia shall be avenged."

"Excellent, my dear sister. You will indeed be rewarded," declared Rasputin, crossing himself. "When you return to Petrograd, give me back that precious little bottle of perfume, which I call the Perfume of Death."

That the woman did not fail to carry out her promise was certain, for within a fortnight we heard in a secret dispatch that Hardt brought us from Berlin that the agent Lachkarioff had died suddenly from heart disease after dining with a Russian lady friend at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm.

Truly, the grip in which Germany held Russia and its Government was an iron one, and death most assuredly came to those whom Berlin feared, or who were in any way obnoxious to the German war party.

Ten days later a small packet was left at the house, addressed to the monk. When I opened it I found the little Parisian perfume bottle.

One morning, a week later, I went with Rasputin to the Ministry of the Interior, where we were ushered into the small, elegant private room of "Satan-in-a-silk-hat" Protopopoff, who greeted us cordially. But as soon as the door was closed, and he had invited us to be seated, he rose, turned the key, and, facing us, gravely said:

"Gregory, I fear something serious is about to happen. Late last night I received an urgent visit from the Under-director of Secret Police of Moscow, who had come post-haste to tell me that there has been a secret meeting between Miliukoff and the Grand Dukes Serge and Dmitri in that city, and it has been decided that at the reopening of the Duma Miliukoff will rise and publicly expose us."

"What?" shrieked the monk, starting. "Is that what is intended?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes. He apparently knows the authors of the outrage at Obukhov and our association with them. It is believed that he actually holds documentary evidence of the money which we passed through the Volga-Kama Bank, in Tula."

"But this must be prevented at all hazards," declared Rasputin. "We cannot allow him to denounce us. Not that anybody will believe him. But it is not policy at this moment. Public opinion is highly inflamed."

"I agree. Of course, nobody will believe him. Yet he is dangerous, and if he denounces us in the Duma it will come as a bombshell. I called upon Anna Vyrubova early this morning, and she has gone to the palace," said Protopopoff.

Rasputin remained silent, his hand stroking his ragged beard, a habit of his when working out some scheme more devilish than others.

"Miliukoff will be supported by Purishkevitch, without a doubt," His Excellency the Minister went on. "Both are equally dangerous."

The "saint" grunted and knit his brows, for he saw himself in a very perilous position. In three days' time the Duma would re-open, and Miliukoff would probably bring forth certain documentary evidence of the treachery of Stürmer, Fredericks, Soukhomlinoff, Anna Vyrubova, and a dozen others who formed the camarilla which was working for Russia's downfall.

"The Duma must be prevented from opening," Rasputin declared at last. "The Emperor must rescind the order and further postpone it."

"The Duma has been prohibited from meeting for over five months. It can, I agree, wait still further. His Majesty must find some excuse, or——"

"I know what is passing in your mind, friend," interrupted the monk. "Yes, I will urge Nicholas further to prohibit it, and thus give us time to suppress our enemies."

"Action must be taken at once," said the Minister. "I had a telephone message from the secret police in Moscow to say that Miliukoff left for Petrograd at nine o'clock this morning. The Grand Dukes have gone south."

Two hours later, on our return to the Gorokhovaya, an Imperial courier arrived in hot haste from Tsarskoe-Selo with a sealed note for the monk, enclosed in two envelopes.

These I tore open, and, signing the outer envelope as assurance of safe receipt, handed it to the courier, who left. Afterwards I read the message to Rasputin, it being as follows:

"Holy Father,—Anna has just told me of Miliukoff's intention in the Duma. The Emperor must further adjourn its re-assembling. I have telegraphed to him urging him to do this. If not, let us adopt Noyo's suggestion to pay the agents J. and B. ten thousand roubles to remove him. I would willingly pay a hundred thousand roubles to close his mouth for ever. This must be done. Suggest it to P. [Protopopoff]. Surely the same means could be used as with T. and L. and the end be quite natural and peaceful! You could supply the means as before. But I urge on you not to delay a moment. All depends upon Miliukoff's removal. If he reveals to the Duma what he knows, then everything must be lost. I kiss your dear hands. With Olga I ask your blessing.—Your dutiful daughter, "A."

It was thus evident that the Empress knew of what Rasputin gleefully called "The Perfume of Death." Ah! in how many cases, I wonder, was it used by

the mock "saint" to stifle the truth and to sweep his enemies of both sexes from his path? Such a letter as this I have here given seems utterly incredible in this twentieth century, yet those who knew underground Russia immediately before the downfall of the Romanoffs will express no surprise.

At once we went to Tsarskoe-Selo with all haste, and Rasputin had a long conference in private with the Empress and Anna, the outcome of which was that Alexandra Feodorovna dispatched an urgent message in cipher to the Tsar, who was still absent at South-West Headquarters.

We remained at the palace all that day. At six o'clock Anna Vyrubova entered the room, where I sat writing some letters, and inquired for the monk.

"He was here a quarter of an hour ago," I replied.

"Then find him at once and give him this. It is most urgent," said the high-priestess of the cult of the "sister-disciples," handing me a sealed envelope.

Ten minutes later I found Rasputin walking alone on the terrace, impatient and thoughtful, and opened the envelope. Within was a message in Their Majesties' private cipher, which had been deciphered by the Empress's own hand, and which read:

"Tell our dear Father [Rasputin] that to postpone the Duma would, I fear, create an unfavourable impression, and I judge impossible. Protopopoff has asked my authority to arrest Miliukoff upon some technical charge, but I do not consider such a course good policy. I agree that to-day's situation is grave, and agree also that at the last moment some means should be taken to prevent him from speaking.

"Nikki."

The monk at once flew to the Empress's side, where Stürmer was being received in audience. Again the situation was eagerly discussed. That night, when we returned to Petrograd, although it was nearly midnight, Protopopoff was summoned by telephone, and when the pair met I learnt what had been arranged at the Palace.

The Empress's wishes were to be carried out. The patriot Miliukoff was to be "removed."

CHAPTER XIV

miliukoff's exposure

Matters were now growing daily more desperate in Russia. Suspense, unrest, and suspicion were rife everywhere, while the deluded people were kept quiet by promises of a great offensive in the near future.

The Minister Protopopoff, wearing his gorgeous uniform, his breast covered with decorations—the man whom Great Britain regarded as so extremely friendly—had just paid a visit to the British Embassy, and on his way home called upon Rasputin.

"It is just as we heard from Moscow," he said to the monk anxiously. "Miliukoff intends to denounce you at the opening of the Duma. He has been in communication with both the French and British Embassies, and as far as I can learn both are in entire agreement with him."

"Then I must save myself," Rasputin declared, stroking his matted beard thoughtfully.

"The British never dream that I have been assisting you in your schemes with Alexandra Feodorovna. That is why they are so friendly with me at the Embassy. Indeed, only yesterday the French Ambassador handed me the latest report upon the output of munitions in France, and the details of their long-range gun. These I copied, and Hardt has left with them for Berlin."

"Truly, we have fooled the Allies exquisitely," laughed the Black Monk. "But if I am denounced, you also will be discovered as my associate, as well as Stürmer, Fredericks, and our other friends."

"That is why the Empress urges you to resort to the 'perfume,'" said the much-decorated traitor.

"Yes, but how?" asked Rasputin. "There is no time."

"There is sufficient."

"What do you suggest?" asked the monk.

"You know little Xenie, who married the Councillor of State, Kalatcheff, last year? She is one of your 'sisters,' is she not?"

The "saint" nodded.

"Well, according to a secret report made to me, she has conceived a violent hatred of Miliukoff, who was once a friend of her husband, and who still admires her. Miliukoff visits her home sometimes, and one day quite recently while in her salon he denounced you. She has been going about declaring him to be your bitterest enemy. If so, could she not invite him to take tea with her—and then?"

"An excellent idea!" cried Rasputin. "Xenie Kalatcheff warned me against Miliukoff some time ago, I recollect. I will see her and sound her upon the subject." Then, turning to me, he asked me to inquire over the telephone if Madame Kalatcheff was at home.

Five minutes later I informed the monk that the lady was at home, and was ready to speak with him if he wished.

At once Rasputin went to the instrument, and, after greeting her gaily, asked if she could possibly come round to see him "on a very urgent affair," to which she at once acceded.

"I had better not see her, so I shall get off," said His Excellency. "Be careful how you treat her. Recollect, her mind may have been poisoned against you by Miliukoff. These members of the Duma are often very clever and cunning."

"Leave the matter in my hands," said the "saint," with a grin. "I will soon ascertain her exact attitude, and act accordingly. First, we must remove Miliukoff, and next Purishkevitch—who is equally our enemy."

About twenty minutes later I ushered into the monk's presence a pretty, handsomely-dressed woman of about twenty-eight, who often attended our reunions, and who was one of the best-known society women in Petrograd.

I was about to turn and leave when Rasputin said:

"You can remain, Féodor. The matter upon which I have to speak with our sister here concerns you as well as myself."

Then, when the wife of the Councillor of State was seated, Rasputin carefully approached the subject of Miliukoff.

"It has been whispered to me that he is my bitter enemy, and that he is about to speak against me in the Duma," he said. "I believe your husband and he are friendly. Do you happen to know if there is any truth in this rumour?"

"Yes, Father, I do," was madame's instant reply. "I warned you of him three weeks ago, but you did not heed. I also told Anna Vyrubova, but her reply was that you, being divine, would be perfectly able to take care of yourself."

"So I am. But it is against God's holy law that human tongues should utter lies against me," he said, cleverly impressing upon her the fact that if Miliukoff were suppressed it would be no crime, but an act of duty.

"To me, in my own house, he has declared his intention of denouncing you—and also our dear Anna and the Empress."

The monk was silent. While she was seated he stood before her with folded arms, looking straight at her. Suddenly, fixing her with those remarkable eyes of his, he asked in a deep, hard voice:

"Xenie, will you permit this man to besmirch the name of him whom God hath sent to you?"

"I don't understand!" she cried, surprised at his attitude. "How can I prevent it?"

"It lies in your hands," declared the mock saint. "You are his friend—and also mine. He visits your house—what more easy—than——"

"Than what?"

"Than you should invite him to take tea with you to-morrow—to discuss myself. He knows that you are a 'disciple,' I suppose?"

"Yes, he has somehow learnt it—but my husband is in ignorance, and he has promised not to reveal the truth to him."

"If he knows of our friendship he might tell your husband. He is unprincipled, and probably will do so. That is why I suggest you should ask him to tea."

As he spoke he crossed to the writing-table, and, opening a drawer with the key upon his chain, he took out the tiny bottle of exquisite Parisian perfume.

"What is that you have there?" she asked, with curiosity, noticing the little bottle. "Scent?"

"Yes," he said, with a mysterious grin. "It is, my dear sister, the Perfume of Death."

"The Perfume of Death?" she echoed. "I don't understand!"

"Then I will tell you, Xenie," he replied, his great hypnotic eyes again fixed upon her. "I do not use perfume myself, but others sometimes, on rare occasions, use this. It is unsuspicious, and can be left upon a lady's dressing-table. A drop used upon a handkerchief emits a most delicate odour, like jasmine, but a single drop in a cup of tea means death. For two hours the doomed person feels no effect. But suddenly he or she becomes faint, and succumbs to heart disease."

"Ah, I see!" she gasped, half-starting from her chair, her face ashen grey. "I—I realise what you intend, Father! I—I——"

And she sank back again in her chair, breathless and aghast, without concluding her sentence.

"No!" she shrieked suddenly. "No; I could not be a poisoner—a murderess! Anything but that!"

"Not for the sake of the one sent by God as saviour of our dear Russia?" he asked reproachfully, in a low, intense tone. "That man Miliukoff is God's enemy—and ours. In your hand lies the means of removing him in secret, without the least suspicion."

And slowly the crafty, insinuating criminal took her inert hand, and pressed the little bottle into its soft palm.

"One drop placed upon the lemon which he takes in his tea will be sufficient," he whispered. "Only be extremely careful of it yourself, and return the bottle to me afterwards. It is best in my safe keeping."

"No! I can't!" cried the wretched woman over whom Rasputin had now once again cast his inexplicable spell.

"But you shall, Xenie! I, your holy Father, command you to render this assistance to your land. None shall ever know. Féodor, who knows all my innermost secrets, will remain dumb. The world cannot suspect, because no toxicologist has ever discovered the existence of the perfume, nor are they able to discern that death has not resulted from heart disease."

"But I should be a murderess!" gasped the unhappy woman beneath that fateful thraldom.

"No. You will be fulfilling a duty—a sin imposed upon you in order that, by committing it, you shall purify yourself for a holy life in future," he said, referring to one of the principles of his erotic "religion."

She began to waver, and instantly I saw that Rasputin had won—as he won always with women—and that the patriot Miliukoff had been sentenced to death.

"Go!" he commanded at last. "Go, and do my bidding. Return to-morrow night, and tell me of your—success!"

Then he bowed out the reluctant but fascinated young woman, who in her silver chain-bag carried the small bottle of perfume.

That night Rasputin, after drinking half a bottle of brandy, retired to bed, declaring that women were only created to be the servants of men. Then I sat down, and taking a sheet of plain and very common writing-paper, I typed upon it a warning to the man who, at the Empress's suggestion, was to be so ruthlessly "removed." The words I typed were:

"You will be invited to tea to-morrow by Xenie Kalatcheff. Do not accept. There is a plot to cause your death. This warning is from—A Friend."

I typed an envelope with Monsieur Miliukoff's address, and then, slipping to the door quietly, I stole out and dropped it in the letter-box at the corner of the Kazanskaya.

That I had saved the deputy's life I knew next afternoon when Madame Kalatcheff sent round a hurried note to Rasputin, explaining that, though she had invited him to her house, he had rather curtly refused the invitation.

At this the monk telephoned her to come round, and once again she sat in his room explaining that she had sent Miliukoff a note urging him to see her at four o'clock, as she wished to make some revelations concerning the monk that might be useful to him when speaking in the Duma. The reply, which she produced, was certainly couched in most indignant terms.

"Can he suspect, do you think, Féodor?" he asked, turning to me.

"How can he?" I asked. "Perhaps, knowing madame to be a 'disciple,' he doubts the genuineness of her promised disclosures."

"Perhaps so," Xenie said. "But what can I do if he suspects me? Nothing that I can see."

The pair sat anxiously discussing the situation for the next half-hour, until at last the State Councillor's wife, handing back the little bottle of perfume to the monk, rose and left.

I was secretly much gratified that I had been able to save the Deputy's life, yet Rasputin continued to discuss other plans with me, repeating:

"The fellow must die. Alexandra Feodorovna has willed it. While he lives he will always be a constant menace. He must die! He shall die!"

Our national hymn, "Boje Tzaria khrani" ("God save the Tsar"), was being sung at the moment in the streets, because news of a victory in Poland had just been given out to the public.

Already the foundation stone of the revolution had been laid, and M. Miliukoff, with purely patriotic motives, had assisted in cementing it. The Senatorial revision which was ordained to inquire into General Soukhomlinoff's treachery had, owing to Miliukoff's activity, ordered a search at the amorous old fellow's private abode early in the spring, with the result that he found himself incarcerated in the fortress of Peter and Paul. When the general was arrested, madame his wife—an adventuress named Gaskevitch, who had commenced life as a typist in a solicitor's office, and who was many years his junior—had a terrible attack of hysteria, for things had taken for her a most unexpected turn. The woman had been implicated in intrigue and treachery ever since. After copying some secret papers for a man in Kiev, she had blackmailed him, obtained a big sum of money, and then married a man named Boulovitch, a prosperous landed proprietor. By thus entering the higher circle of society in Kiev, she got to know General Soukhomlinoff, its Governor-General, who connived with her to obtain a divorce from Boulovitch, so that she subsequently married the bald-headed old Don Juan a few months after his appointment as War Minister.

Madame and Rasputin were ever hand-in-glove. From the moment the general was arrested she had worked with singular energy and adroitness to retrieve her husband's fallen fortune, and in doing so she assisted to lay the beginning of the first Revolution. She enlisted the sympathy of Rasputin, Anna Vyrubova and the Empress, all of whom were gravely apprehensive as to what might come out at the general's trial. She even threw herself at the feet of Alexandra Feodorovna, imploring her to intercede with the Emperor so as to save her calumniated and injured husband. And at last she succeeded.

The inquiries were suspended, the newspapers were silent regarding the scandal, and suddenly it became known that, "owing to the general's mental state," it had been decided, on the advice of a board of well-known medical specialists, to liberate him!

This astounding news passed from mouth to mouth, and Miliukoff, the patriotic fire-brand, declared everywhere that it was Rasputin's work. The news produced the most sinister impression upon the people, especially on those connected with the Army. The man who had been the primary cause of Russia's reverses was to escape punishment! It was, indeed, this insensate act of folly on the part of the Tsar which had undermined the people's trust in their Emperor, and gave Rasputin's enemies—and more especially Miliukoff—opportunity for his bitter denunciation.

On the afternoon of the day before the opening of the Duma, Rasputin received another letter from the Empress, in cipher, as follows:

"Dear Father,—Nikki still refuses to postpone the Duma, though I have done all I can to induce him to do so. Come to us at once and try to force him to our views. Not a moment should be lost. I have just heard that Miliukoff is still active, so conclude that what you told me has failed.

"P. [Protopopoff] has told me an hour ago that Skoropadski [a German agent living in Petrograd as a jeweller in the Nevski] has betrayed us all, and has placed some most incriminating documents in the hands of Miliukoff, who has, in turn, shown them to Purishkevitch. They will be produced in the Duma to-morrow. The police traced Skoropadski to Riga, but they have failed to arrest him, and he has, alas! escaped to Sweden.

"Holy Father, do not delay a moment in coming to your daughter to comfort her in this her blackest hour! Miliukoff must be prevented from denouncing you. I cannot conceive how your arrangement with Madame Kalatcheff has failed. The perfume has never failed before. Alix is constantly asking for you, and Olga kisses your dear hand. Seek the Emperor at once before coming to me, or he may suspect us to be in collusion. I have quarrelled with him, because by his obstinacy he will ruin us all. How I wish that Miliukoff would be stricken down! Do not delay. Come!—Your devoted daughter,

"A."

Well I knew that the German-born Empress was sitting alone in the palace breathlessly anxious as to what disclosures were forthcoming. She was not blind to her increasing unpopularity and to the unkind things said openly of her. Somebody had just started a rumour that there was a secret wireless plant at the palace, by which she could communicate direct with Potsdam. Indeed, so many people believed this that, after the Tsar's abdication, every nook, corner and garret of Tsarskoe-Selo was searched, but without success. Stürmer, Fredericks, Protopopoff, the poison-monger Badmayev, Anna Vyrubova, and half-a-dozen others, who formed the dark and sinister

forces that were rapidly hurling Russia to her doom, were that day as anxious and terrified as the Empress herself. Well they knew that if Miliukoff, armed with those incriminating documents—the exact nature of which they knew not—spoke the truth in the Legislature, then a storm of indignation would sweep over them in such a manner that they could never withstand it.

Rasputin, thus summoned, went at once to the palace, and I accompanied him. He proceeded straight to the Emperor's private room, while I waited in a room adjoining.

I heard their voices raised. The Emperor's was raised in protest; that of the monk in angry threats.

"If thou wilt not postpone the Duma, then the peril will be upon thine own head!" I heard Rasputin shout. "Why allow these revolutionary deputies to criticise thy policy and undermine thy popularity with the nation? It is folly! Such policy is suicidal, and if thou wilt persist I shall withdraw and return to my home, well knowing that to-morrow the day of Russia's doom will dawn."

"The people are clamouring for the reopening of the Duma," replied the Emperor weakly. "I can do nothing else but submit."

"I have had a vision," declared the monk. "Last night there was revealed unto me the dire result of thy folly. I saw thee, the victim of thy nation's anger, dethroned, degraded and imprisoned."

But even that lie failed to induce the Tsar to alter his decision, and naturally so, for he was afraid of the dark cloud which he saw rising, and which he believed to be due to the long adjournment of the Duma. Hence he was afraid to take the monk's advice.

Again I heard both men's voices raised in hot argument.

"I am Emperor!" cried the Tsar at last, angrily, in a high, shrill tone, "and I refuse to be thus dictated to!"

Next second there was a loud crash of glass, and I heard Rasputin shout:

"Thou refuseth to listen to good counsel! As I have smashed that bowl, so will the people, I tell thee, rise and smash the House of Romanoff!"

With those words he turned, and a moment later rejoined me, his face flushed with anger, and his knotted fingers clenched.

He went straight to the Empress and told her of his failure to move Nicholas from his decision.

"But surely this man Miliukoff must be prevented from speaking!" cried the unhappy woman, who saw all her deep-laid schemes crumbling rapidly away, and herself branded as a traitress. "Father, you must work yet another miracle. He must be seized by a sudden illness—an accident must happen to him, or—or something!"

Rasputin shook his head dubiously, declaring that there was no time to arrange a second attempt.

"Have you put it to Protopopoff?" she asked. "He might suggest some means, now that the woman Kalatcheff has failed us. If not—he will speak—and we are lost! Think, Father, what it all means! There is already public unrest created by the rumours that we have unfortunately spread of pending disaster, and if they are followed by such charges supported by documents, then revolution is inevitable!"

I saw that the Tsaritza, now that every means to secure Miliukoff's silence had failed, was terrified lest she be exhibited in her own true traitorous colours.

Back we went to Petrograd, where we called at Protopopoff's house, and where still another attempt against Miliukoff's life was plotted.

By telephone an ex-agent of Secret Police named Stefanovitch, who had done much work as an agent-provocateur for the camarilla, was called, and a price was at once arranged for the murder of the Deputy.

He was to be shot at and killed outside the Tauris Palace, just before two o'clock, as he was entering the Duma. He would probably be walking round to the Chamber from his house with his bosom friend M. Purishkevitch.

"You will surely know somebody to whom the affair can be entrusted, Ivan," said the Minister of the Interior. "If arrested, he will be allowed ample opportunity to escape. Naturally he would not come up for trial. I would see to that. So you can give him my personal assurance."

"I should suggest a woman," said the man Stefanovitch. "I know one who would not hesitate to act as we wish. Her name is Marie Grozdoff, a Polish Jewess. I can trust her. She has done something similar for us before."

"And the price?"

"The price will be all right," replied the provocating agent, with a business-like air.

"Then we entrust the affair to you, Ivan," said His Excellency. "You will receive for yourself ten thousand roubles if Miliukoff dies."

And the man went forth to find the woman, who, for money, would not hesitate to commit murder.

That night proved a sleepless one for us all. I tried to warn Miliukoff again by sending him an anonymous letter, which I posted in secret after the monk had retired. But my great fear was lest the letter would not reach his hand in time. Probably it would not be delivered till the midday post—and if so, he would not see it till after the opening of the Duma!

Next morning passed anxiously. Protopopoff had told us over the telephone that Stefanovitch had seen the woman Grozdoff, and that all was arranged.

I went early to the Duma, and sat among the crowd in the public gallery, while Rasputin remained at home, and the Empress at the palace, with Anna near the telephone, she having arranged for brief reports of the proceedings to be telephoned to her at intervals of a quarter of an hour each during the sitting.

M. Michael Rodzianko, the President, gravely took his seat on the stroke of two, and the House was crowded. The diplomatic boxes were filled to overflowing, the British, French, Italian and United States Ambassadors, together with the Ministers of most of the neutral countries, being present.

The usual prayer was offered, but neither M. Miliukoff nor M. Purishkevitch was in his place!

Had the attempt been successful? I held my breath and wondered. I had been listening for a shot, but heard nothing.

Suddenly my heart gave a bound. A pleasant-looking, grey-haired man, in gold-rimmed spectacles, and carrying a big bundle of papers, had entered by the back way, and was walking to his seat. It was M. Miliukoff! He had had my anonymous letter, and had come in by the back way, being followed by his bearded, bald-headed friend. Once again had I been able to warn him of danger.

The Government was now dancing upon a volcano.

The sitting opened, the President Rodzianko made a speech in which he criticised severely the policy of the Stürmer Government, and everyone

realised the seriousness of the situation now that the President of the Duma came out against the Prime Minister.

"The Government must learn from us what the country needs," said Rodzianko fiercely. "The Government must not follow a path different from the people. With the confidence of the nation it must head the social forces in the march toward victory over the enemy, along the path that harmonises with the aspirations of the people. There is no other path to be followed."

Then the President went on to declare that, though there was no discord among the Allies, yet there was no trick that the enemy would not play with the treacherous object of wrecking their alliance. "Russia will not betray her friends," he declared, "and I say she, with contempt, refuses any consideration of a separate peace."

The speech was greeted with thunderous outbursts of applause, while Stürmer, who was present, rose and left after its conclusion.

Then, when the applause and cheering of the Ambassadors of the Allies had died down; Paul Miliukoff, the brilliant leader of the Constitutional Democrats, rose gravely and began to speak.

That speech, which the camarilla had vainly striven strenuously to suppress, proved historic, and was mainly the cause of Stürmer's overthrow. Boldly and relentlessly he showed his hearers the favour with which the Teutons regarded Stürmer and the consternation caused in the Allied camp by his activities. Reading extracts from German and Austrian newspapers, he brought out the fact that the Central Powers regarded Stürmer as a member "of those circles which look on the war against Germany without particular enthusiasm"; that Stürmer's appointment to the Foreign Ministry was greeted in the Teutonic countries as the beginning of a new era in Russian politics, while the dismissal of Sazonov produced in the Entente countries an effect "such as would have been produced by a pogrom."

The crowning sensation, however, was what he revealed concerning Stürmer's connection with the blackmailing operations of his private secretary, Manasevitch-Manuiloff, who, a few weeks before, had been arrested on a charge of bribery. The secretary told the directors of a Petrograd bank that proceedings were being instituted against them by the Ministry of the Interior for alleged trading with the enemy, and offered to suppress the affair "through influential friends" for a large consideration.

The representatives of the bank had special reasons to get even with the "dark forces," and especially Protopopoff, since the retired Minister of the Interior, A. N. Khvostov, was a brother of the bank's president. Khvostov

owed his dismissal to a plot to kill Rasputin, which was investigated by Manuiloff. The directors of the bank, therefore, accepted the fellow's offer, handing him over a large sum of money in marked notes.

Later Manuiloff was arrested by the military authorities with the bribe in his possession. His release, however, followed soon, and the name of Manuiloff was on everybody's lips. Miliukoff, in his speech, said, regarding Manuiloff's liberation:

"Why was this gentleman arrested? That has been known long ago, and I shall be saying nothing new if I tell you what you already know, namely, that he was arrested for extorting bribes, and that he was liberated because—that is also no secret—he told the examining magistrates that he shared the bribes with the President of the Council of Ministers."

Thus was Boris Stürmer denounced as a traitor and blackmailer!

But worse was to follow. M. Miliukoff vehemently condemned the Empress for her support of the plan, originated in Germany, of a speedy and separate peace, regardless of circumstances, conditions, or national honour. He quoted further passages from German newspapers, in which "die Friedens-partei der jungen Tzarin" (the Peace Party of the young Tsaritza) was freely discussed. He was very outspoken in referring to the "dark forces" which surrounded the Throne and had lately assumed such overwhelming dimensions, and he openly declared "that man, the monk Gregory Rasputin, the ex-horse-stealer and pet saint of Alexandra Feodorovna, is, gentlemen, nothing more than an erotic charlatan, who is the catspaw of the Kaiser!"

The effect of this was electrical. The House sat staggered.

"Yes, gentlemen," he went on, striking the bundle of papers which lay upon the desk before him, "I have here documentary evidence of the traitorous actions of this camarilla, who are attempting to lead Russia to her doom—papers which shall be revealed to you all in due course. It is said that the Prime Minister has already left the Chamber to make a personal report to His Majesty of the President's speech. All I trust is that the words I have just uttered will also reach the Emperor's ears, and that he will trouble himself to examine the irrefutable evidence of Rasputin's diabolical work at the Palace and in the Ministries, and the crafty machinations of the 'black forces' in our midst."

The Manuiloff disclosures were sufficiently dramatic, but this outspoken exposure of Rasputin, the more bitter, perhaps, because of my warnings of the two attempts to assassinate him, caused the House to gasp.

The very name of Rasputin had only been breathed in whispers, and his cult was referred to vaguely as something mysterious connected with the occult. But in that speech, to which I sat and listened, Miliukoff hit straight from the shoulder, and called a spade a spade. One of his phrases was, "Russia can never win so long as this convicted criminal and seducer of women is allowed to work his amazing power upon the rulers of the Empire. Remove him!" he went on. "Let him be placed safely within the walls of Peter and Paul, together with his 'sisters,' and with all his brother-traitors, and then there will be no more suggestion of a separate peace. Remove his evil influence!" shouted the fine orator, his voice ringing through the Chamber. "I say, remove him from the Imperial circle, or Russia is doomed!"

I left the Duma by that long stone staircase with a feeling that at last the power behind the Throne, nay, the very Throne itself, was broken.

I sped to Rasputin's house, and with pretended regret related all that had occurred.

Hearing it, he sprang to the telephone, declaring in a hoarse voice: "The Censor must prohibit every word of it from publication. I will demand this of Nicholas!"

And a few moments later he was speaking with the Emperor, urging that an order to the Censor be immediately issued—a suggestion that was at once carried out.

Meanwhile a dramatic scene was being enacted in the Empress's boudoir, for that day proved the beginning of the end of the holy Father's career, as well as that of Alexandra Feodorovna, Empress of Russia.

CHAPTER XV

the traitor denounced

The Empress, on hearing what had happened in the Duma, had a fit of hysterics. Nicholas was present while the Court physician administered restoratives. Then, without a word, he turned, and, leaving his wife in the care of the traitress Anna Vyrubova, he left for General Headquarters.

When Rasputin was informed by telephone of the Emperor's departure he became furious.

"He fears to meet Stürmer!" he cried to me. "He is leaving him in the lurch."

And this he did, for the next day the fate of Russia trembled in the balance, while the Black Monk went about to the Ministers in frantic haste, hoping and plotting to turn public opinion again in his favour. The charlatan, who could work miracles, and was the Heaven-sent saviour of Russia, had been exposed as a mere impostor. Stürmer's position had also become desperate under the concerted attacks of the Duma. A meeting of the Cabinet was held, at which the monk was present. Stürmer, with Protopopoff's support, proposed to dissolve the Duma. Some members opposed the suggestion, whereupon Stürmer resolved to execute it upon his own initiative.

In Rasputin's room, and in my presence, he drew up a document to that effect, but to make it law it required the Tsar's consent, and Nicholas was far away. It was Stürmer or the Duma.

Alexandra Feodorovna and Rasputin were both working with Stürmer to dissolve the people's representatives, and again prevent them from reassembling.

As Rasputin put it to me clearly that night:

"Féodor, this is a great crisis. The Duma and Stürmer are incompatible. The victory of the latter will mean revolution. The triumph of the Duma will indicate the winning of the battle by the democracy. To achieve his purpose, Stürmer needs an audience with the Tsar, and he must have it. Alexandra Feodorovna seems to be failing us, for Nicholas has hidden himself, hoping that the storm will blow over."

Stürmer strained every effort to obtain audience with the Emperor, but he was elusive, and for days no one knew where he was. An audience would mean the dissolution of the Duma, and this Nicholas feared would bring revolution.

As is well known, by a record published by an American journalist, there suddenly appeared in the Duma the Ministers of War and Marine, General Shuvaiev and Admiral Grigorovitch. They announced that they had a statement to make. The representatives of the people held their breath in suspense. The War Minister mounted the tribune, and paid a tribute to the people's efforts in the cause of national defence, requesting the Duma's and the country's future co-operation in the work of equipping the army. The Minister of Marine reiterated General Shuvaiev's demand for co-operation between the Government and the Duma. The latter, perhaps, never witnessed such a scene as that which followed the two Ministers' speeches. There was a great ovation, after which Miliukoff rose and said:

"The War and Marine Ministers have declared themselves on the side of the Duma and the people. We, on our part, have said that the Duma is with the army and the people."

This sealed the fate of Boris Stürmer. The people had achieved their first victory over the "dark forces," and Stürmer, driven out, came one night to us, and, pacing the room, tore his beard and cursed both the Emperor and Empress.

Then, turning upon Rasputin, he cried with a sneer:

"And you, the holy Father and our divine guide, have been powerless to save us! Where are your miraculous powers? Only in your own imagination, I am beginning to think."

These words led to a serious quarrel and bitter recriminations, for the Empress, to save herself, had dropped Stürmer, so that Protopopoff had become instantly the favourite at Court, and, indeed, dictator.

Two weeks went by, weeks of the tensest scenes in the contest between the democracy and the conspirators, of whom Rasputin and the Empress were the head. Protopopoff defied the new Premier, Alexander Trepov, a hide-bound bureaucrat, as well as the Duma, and it was then that the crisis was reached.

Each day we went regularly to Tsarskoe-Selo, and there another plot was quickly hatched. While the public were daily expecting the downfall of Protopopoff as a natural outcome of Stürmer's denunciation and degradation, they were one day suddenly staggered by the news that the retired Premier was about to be appointed Ambassador to a neutral country.

Everywhere I went I heard the most sinister dissatisfaction. The people knew what was meant, namely, that the Germanophile Stürmer was to negotiate a

premature peace, and this within three weeks of his downfall! The whole Empire was agog at the news, yet Rasputin remained calm and silent, believing that his clever plot would be successful.

Certainly it might have been had not the Duma continued its concerted attack on the "dark forces," demanding a responsible Ministry. Even half of the Extreme Right, the most rabid monarchical faction in the Duma, joined the Opposition, a fact which, when told to the Empress, sent her again into hysterics.

I remember that day well. Hardt had arrived hot-foot from Berlin, and brought the monk a dispatch which, when deciphered, read as follows:

"Memorandum from No. 70. A.43,286.

"November 8th, 1916.

"The attitude of the Duma is creating much alarm for your personal safety. As you have failed to suppress Miliukoff, endeavour at once to remove his chief supporter Purishkevitch. Inform A. [Anna Vyrubova] that Korniloff has revealed to P. her duplicity in the Zarudni affair, and P. has in his possession certain documents incriminating her. These should be secured at all hazards. [G. Zarudni, active in political law cases, and who was, after the Revolution, appointed Minister of Justice in the Kerensky Cabinet.] P. intends to make use of these in the Duma. It is suggested, therefore, that the woman X. [Xenie Kalatcheff] be again given the perfume, with instructions from yourself. If not, employ the girl Olga Bauer. She posed as a domestic servant in the Princess Tchekmareff affair, and was successful. Why not utilise her again?

"Inform Her Majesty that Stürmer must come back to power very shortly. But this is impossible while Miliukoff and Purishkevitch have the ear of the people. Not a second should be lost in suppressing them. We have heard with satisfaction of the removal of the woman Marya Ustryaloff and the man Paul Krizhitsky. Both knew too much, and, though they served us faithfully, were not further required. [When the sphere of usefulness of German secret agents ends they generally meet with untimely deaths.]

"Also inform Her Majesty that she and her daughters should exhibit a keener interest in the wounded in order to win back public favour. You, too, should perform another miracle.

"We hear with regret that, though the allegations made by Miliukoff were suppressed by the Censor, typewritten copies of the speech are being widely distributed everywhere. If you do not act with a firm hand, this will upset all

our plans. The moment is critical, and all depends upon your own drastic actions.—Greeting,

"S." [Steinhauer].

That same evening the bearded blackguard communicated to the Tsaritza and the elegant morphineuse Anna Vyrubova the contents of the secret dispatch.

Both Empress and lady-in-waiting, in their rich evening gowns, came to the fine apartments which were allotted to the monk in the palace, and as they were seated I read over the message.

"Yes," declared Her Majesty when I had finished; "I quite agree that the girl Olga Bauer should receive instructions. Order Protopopoff to make inquiry into the best means by which she can approach Purishkevitch. The fellow must be prevented from implicating our dear Anna in the Zarudni affair."

"Yes," said Madame Vyrubova in alarm; "it would ruin not only myself, but the Empress also."

"I will do thy bidding," Rasputin responded, standing with his hands behind his back, his great cross suspended from his neck scintillating beneath the light.

"The girl Bauer, posing as a domestic servant, managed to ingratiate herself with Prince Tchekmareff, and gave the perfume to her mistress with success," remarked Anna. "And there was not the slightest suspicion. Xenie Kalatcheff failed, therefore I am not in favour of her being employed again."

"True, Olga is a girl of great daring, and her lover has long been in the German service," Rasputin remarked. "I will see her to-morrow." Then, turning to me, he said: "Féodor, write to her and ask her to call on me to-morrow evening at eight. Send the letter by special messenger."

This I did, and next evening the girl Bauer called. She was slim, very pretty, and dressed as she was, as a girl of the people, none would suspect her of having committed several secret murders at Rasputin's instructions.

"Olga," he said, when she was shown into his room, "really you are growing prettier each day! I envy Ivan Ivanovitch, for he has good taste."

"You flatter me, Father," said the girl, blushing.

"I speak the truth," declared the monk, twisting the end of his beard in his fingers and fixing his strange eyes upon hers. "But," he went on, "I asked

you here because I want you to help our cause once again—with the perfume."

She grew serious in an instant.

"Who is obnoxious?" she asked quickly, in a hard voice.

"Purishkevitch," declared the monk. "The man has somewhere in his house certain incriminating papers regarding Madame Vyrubova. These, however, do not concern you. When the Deputy is dead I will have the police search the house at once, and the papers when found will be handed to me. You must repeat the rôle you played in Prince Tchekmareff's household."

With these words he rose and took from a drawer he unlocked a small bottle containing a piece of cotton-wool, saying:

"This wool has been soaked in the perfume and dried, so that it is more easily carried and less suspicious than in liquid form. Just place a little water on the wool and squeeze it out, when you have the perfume ready to hand."

The pretty girl took the little wide-mouthed bottle and held it against the light.

"The Deputy will be difficult to approach," she said. "He is not a fast-living man, like some with whom I have dealt."

"He will not be able to resist a pretty face like yours," Rasputin said confidently.

"Well," she said at last, "I will try, Father. Give me your blessing."

And she went upon her knees, while the erotic blackguard placed his dirty hands upon her head, and, raising his eyes to Heaven, pretended to place upon her his benediction.

Afterwards, before she left us, she told us that she knew that the Deputy had a young man-servant named Protzenko, and it would be her object to first attract his attention and become on intimate terms with him, by which means she would be enabled to visit the servants' quarters of Purishkevitch's house.

"Excellent—if you do not think that you could obtain a place there as servant."

"That would be difficult, for I happen to know that all the servants have been there for years, and that there is no vacancy."

"Well, Olga, act just as you like," the monk said. "Only remove him, and then telephone instantly to me, so that the police can search immediately."

Of the girl Bauer we heard nothing for a fortnight. Time after time I felt impelled to warn the doomed man, but I feared lest Rasputin should suspect me of treachery, the other plots having failed. One night, while at the palace, I was informed by a flunkey that someone wished to speak with the monk on the public telephone, therefore I went to the instrument.

The voice I heard was that of Olga Bauer, who, when she recognised me, said:

"Tell the Father that his wishes were carried out half an hour ago. You know what I mean—eh?"

"Yes," I replied. "I know—I will tell him at once." And then I rang off.

Returning to Rasputin's handsome room I repeated the message, whereupon he sprang up with eager delight, and ringing up Protopopoff at his house in Petrograd, told him to order an immediate police search of Purishkevitch's house, as had already been arranged.

After that I had some business with the Master of the Imperial Household in the opposite wing of the palace, and it was not till half-an-hour later that I re-entered the "saint's" room.

I found Rasputin foaming with rage and stamping up and down the room in fury.

"I told the Empress and Anna the good news, now to find that it is false!" he cried. "The police made a domiciliary visit only to be greeted by Purishkevitch himself. Think of it!"

"Then the fellow is not dead!" I gasped in amazement.

"No. He is still alive. His valet Protzenko died an hour ago. That fool of a girl has blundered!"

As he uttered these words the door opened and the Empress appeared, looking pale and desperate.

"Father," she said, "this is a very serious contretemps for us all. How do we not know that the girl Bauer purposely removed the valet in place of his

master? The visit of the police will arouse the suspicion of our enemy, and he may trace the crime to his valet's female acquaintance. What then?"

"I had never thought of that!" replied the monk, halting erect before her. "She might, in that case, betray us! Truly thou hast spoken words of wisdom!"

"Yes. In the girl I discern a possible enemy—and in this crisis we should take no risks."

"I agree. I will take steps. If she has betrayed us, then she shall be tried for the murder of Princess Tchekmareff. Whatever allegations she makes against me will not be allowed to transpire at the trial."

"Or get Nikki to sign an order for her banishment to Siberia as an exile," suggested the scheming Empress.

"Ah! my daughter, thou art always wise. An excellent plan! I will first make inquiries, and then ask for the Emperor's signature."

Though matters had assumed the most serious aspect in those last days of November, Rasputin, bent upon revenge and full of chagrin at being unable to obtain possession of those incriminating letters of the high priestess of his disgraceful cult, Madame Vyrubova, was busy making inquiries, and among those he questioned was Ivan Ivanovitch, a bookbinder in Petrograd, who was Olga's lover, and who regarded the monk with considerable disfavour, a fact of which Rasputin was unaware.

The young man, in consequence of the nature of the questions put to him by the monk, guessed what was in his mind, and that same day told Olga that Rasputin disbelieved her story how the valet had drunk the glass of kümmel that had been poured out for his master, and that, full of chagrin, he was plotting a revenge.

Of this we knew nothing till afterwards. But on the same night as Ivan Ivanovitch revealed the truth to her Olga called upon Rasputin, and I admitted her.

"I wish to see the Father," she said, in a deep, earnest voice.

"I will go and see if he will receive you," I answered, and I left her in the ante-room.

Rasputin ordered her to be shown in, whereupon, as soon as she crossed the threshold, she drew a revolver, and, dashing toward him, fired. The

bullet missed, and she fired again, also without effect, before I could rush up and seize her. She struggled with me with a strength born of madness.

"What does this mean, woman?" asked the monk, standing with his arms folded, while I held her wrists, the weapon having fallen upon the polished floor during our wild struggle.

"It means that I intend to rid the world of a base blackguard and betrayer of women!" she said. "I have been in your toils and done your dirty work, and now, because I have failed, you intend to denounce me, and so close my lips. But they will never be closed. The evidence which Purishkevitch holds is complete. I have seen it. Protzenko discovered me tampering with his master's papers, so I first assured him it was out of curiosity, and then I gave him a little of the perfume."

We both stood aghast at learning the truth.

"It surprises you!" she shrieked, still in my grip. "But you may be more surprised when you know that I have become a friend and partisan of the Deputy, and that with Ivan I have united to hasten the downfall of you—the Black Monk of Petrograd!"

"Silence, woman!" thundered Rasputin, casting an evil glance at her. "Hold her, Féodor. I will lock the door!"

Then, picking up the revolver, he strode to the door, which he locked and took the key. Passing to the telephone, he was soon speaking with Protopopoff, whom he ordered to send police officers to conduct the girl Bauer to the fortress of Peter and Paul.

"And I also order you to arrest the girl's lover, Ivan Ivanovitch, as a dangerous political. You know his address," he said to the Minister.

"Now you can release her!" he added, turning to me. "And write at my dictation."

The girl stood staggered at hearing Rasputin's orders to the Minister of the Interior.

"No, no!" she shrieked. "Forgive me! forgive me, Father! I—I was mad—mad! Ivan urged me to do this—to kill you!"

"Write as I tell you, Féodor," Rasputin ordered.

Then, as I sat at the table, he dictated the following lines:

"It is by our order that the woman Olga Alexandrovna Bauer, native of Orel, shall be deported without trial to Yakutsk, in Eastern Siberia, and there sent to penal servitude for life. And further, that Ivan Ivanovitch shall be confined for life in the Fortress of Schlüsselburg. Given at our Palace of Tsarskoe-Selo, December 1st, 1916."

"The Emperor will sign that to-morrow," he added.

The unfortunate girl, shrieking loudly, threw herself at the feet of the monk, imploring forgiveness.

"No, my pretty one!" he replied. "You would open your lips if I gave you the chance. But you will not have it. You are my enemy, and the enemies of Gregory Rasputin never prevail for long, for he takes good care of that!"

She had a fit of hysterics, but quickly came to consciousness again, only to find herself in the hands of six grey-coated police officers, who roughly bundled her out into the hall, shrieking and cursing the blasphemous blackguard who was the real ruler of the Empire.

An hour after the girl Bauer had been taken away a secret messenger from Berlin brought us another dispatch in cipher, which, when I decoded it, read:

"Memorandum from No. 70. 68,428. G.

"Instructions from the Emperor William are to the effect that Germany will deliver a peace offer to Russia on December 12th. Inform Her Majesty of this, and tell her to use all her influence with the Emperor and all the Ministers towards an acceptance.

"Instructions to our friend P. [Protopopoff] are to continue his destructive activities. He must muzzle the Press more closely, hold up all food, and continue provocative work in all quarters. It is only by producing extreme suffering that you can bring about an uprising for peace. Code now changed to No. 5.—Greetings,

"S."

Duly the German offer of peace was made on December 12th, and Russia was tottering to her doom. The offer, engineered by the "black forces," gave opportunity to the Duma to express its pent-up feelings. Both Miliukoff and his friend who had so narrowly escaped the "perfume" declared publicly that the camarilla favoured the acceptance of the offer.

Of the truth of this I can myself vouch, for Alexandra Feodorovna had, since her holy Father had received the secret dispatch, spared no effort to induce the Emperor and the Cabinet to accept the olive branch.

Nicholas refused. Whatever may be said of him, I know personally that on many occasions he proved his loyalty to the Allies against the evil counsels of Stürmer and the others.

The nation, however, had to be pacified, so the Tsar called the newly-appointed Foreign Minister, Petrovsky, who represented the best type of bureaucrat, and instructed him how to act. In consequence, three days after the Teuton proposal was made, he announced Russia's rejection of a "premature peace." Immediately after the Foreign Minister's declaration, the Duma passed a resolution, which contained the following declaration:

"Having heard the statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Duma unanimously favours a categorical refusal by the Allied Governments to enter, under present conditions, into any peace negotiations whatever."

Truly, public opinion was becoming more than ever inflamed.

Yet "Satan in a silk hat," seated in the Ministry of the Interior, was working his evil machinations upon the nation to create the greatest possible suffering and unrest, as his taskmaster in Berlin had ordered. And in this he had an able assistant in the unwashed "saint," who a few days before, in collusion with his friend the ex-conjurer, had in a low quarter of Petrograd performed a trick which all believed to be a "miracle."

One of Protopopoff's schemes, which he successfully carried out, was that of sowing discontent among the masses by spreading mysterious leaflets calling for rebellion on the issue of peace. By this he attempted to disrupt the organic life of the country and of the army. With Rasputin he was plotting to create a clamour which would justify the Government in opening separate peace negotiations and throwing the Allies overboard.

Unfortunately for him, however, the unions of zemstvos and of towns remained patriotic. So he prohibited their meetings in order to cause demonstrations and riots.

To all pleas and the warnings of those who saw the handwriting on the wall the Emperor remained deaf.

One afternoon, while I was with Rasputin in his apartments at the palace, the Empress entered, flushed and excited.

"Father! I have had such a blow. What do you think has happened?" she gasped. "Nicholas [the Grand Duke] has just had the audacity to read before Nikki and myself a statement which was outrageous. I snatched it from his hand and tore it up! Oh! it is infamous that I should be thus treated!"

"What has happened?" asked the monk, in his slow, deliberate way. "Do not distress thyself, my sister." And he made the sign of the cross.

"He has declared that you, our dear Father, have become the ruler of Russia; that Protopopoff was appointed through you, and that about you is centred a clique of enemy spies and charlatans, and he actually urged Nikki to protect Olga and myself from you! When he had finished his statement, fearing that he had gone too far, Nicholas said, 'Now call your Cossacks and have me killed and buried in your garden.' Nikki merely smiled."

"He would hear nothing against thee, I hope," said Rasputin anxiously.

"Nothing. Nikki assured him that I had nothing to do with politics, and dismissed the allegations by declaring that he entirely disbelieved them."

"Excellent!" exclaimed the monk; but afterwards, when he sat in the room, he remained silent and thoughtful for a long time.

At last he exclaimed aloud to me:

"Miliukoff must be removed. While he lives we are all in danger. We must try another method."

Matters had now reached a most desperate crisis, for on the following day Vladimir Purishkevitch, who had opposed the Government so strenuously in spite of his monarchical affiliations, came to see the Tsar to warn him also of the evil forces about him. But His Majesty took no heed. Therefore, two days later, he delivered from the tribune of the Duma some terrible allegations against the camarilla.

Meanwhile Rasputin had been active, and, with Stürmer's aid, had got hold of a man named Dubrovin, the leader of "the Black Hundred" and a close associate of the "dark forces." This man had, in turn, induced a man named Prohozhi, a member of the organisation, to accept a sum of money in return for the assassination of Miliukoff by means of a bomb.

All was arranged for the night of December 20th, and Rasputin sat with the Empress eagerly awaiting news that the deed had been accomplished. Instead of that, however, Protopopoff rang up from his house in Petrograd to say that Prohozhi had, on reflection, hesitated to harm Miliukoff, and

moreover had revealed to young Prince Felix Youssoupoff and several others the whole of the conspiracy!

When told of this the Empress fainted. She saw that all was now lost. Indeed, on the following day Miliukoff rose in the Duma and made a second and more powerful attack upon the camarilla, singling out Protopopoff as one of the worst offenders. Again he held in his hand his famous bundle of documents, evidence of the treachery of the "dark forces," and in a magnificent speech he defied the Government, and urged the people to judge matters for themselves in the light which those documents would cast upon events. In that latest denunciation of Rasputin and his friends there was a ring that resounded through Europe.

The Tsar had again left for the front, while the Empress, nervous and trembling, held Rasputin and Anna ever at her side. The precious trio which had wrecked Russia were now seriously perturbed at the ugly state of public opinion. A dark storm-cloud had arisen, but Rasputin, with his boldness and contempt for the people, assured the Empress that there was no cause for anxiety, and that all would be well.

The séances of the sister-disciples in Petrograd had been suspended, for the monk remained at the palace, and scarcely ever left it. Protopopoff came daily to consult with the Empress, with her mock-pious favourite and the treacherous pro-German Fredericks, for yet another fresh plot was being formed against those who were so antagonistic to the Government, a plot which was to be worked by unscrupulous agents-provocateurs, with the object of placing among their effects incriminating correspondence relating to a widespread conspiracy (which did not exist) to overthrow the monarchy and suppress the House of Romanoff. The idea, having originated in Rasputin's fertile brain, had been taken up with frantic haste, for each member of the "dark forces" had decided that "something must be done," and that the situation had become most perilous for them all.

In those snowy December days, the people at last realised that they were being tricked, and that the German-born Empress was striving, with her sycophants and with the "holy" rascal, for a separate peace. Secret meetings were being held everywhere in Petrograd, the police were making indiscriminate arrests, and Schlüsselburg was already overflowing with its human victims whom Rasputin had indicated, for a hostile word from him meant imprisonment or death. He was, indeed, Tsar of All the Russias.

Such was the breathless state of things at Tsarskoe-Selo in the last days of December.

Then came the final dramatic coup.

Of its exact details I have no knowledge. I give—as I have given all through this narrative of fact—only what I know to be actual truth.

On December 29th, at eleven o'clock, I left the palace to take a message to Protopopoff, and to interview the much-travelled Hardt, who was coming to Petrograd from Stockholm with his usual fortnightly dispatch from Berlin. I returned to the Palace about eight o'clock in the evening, when I received a message through one of the silk-stockinged servants, whose duty it was to wait upon "his holiness," to the effect that the monk had gone suddenly to Petrograd upon urgent business, and would return on the morrow.

Naturally, I accepted the message, ate my dinner, read the paper, and after a chat with Madame Vyrubova, who lived in the adjoining apartments, I retired to bed.

Next day I returned to the Gorokhovaya, but the monk had not come back. Countess Ignatieff called upon him, but I had to express my ignorance as to his whereabouts. I told her that he might possibly have gone upon another pilgrimage.

Late that night I went back to the palace, where I found Madame Vyrubova much perturbed.

"It is strange, Féodor!" she exclaimed. "He never leaves Petrograd without first informing me."

I set her mind at rest by suggesting that, as affairs were so critical, he was probably with Stürmer and Protopopoff plotting further manœuvres.

Next night, however, a thrill went through the Court, as well as through the Russian people, by the six-word announcement in the Exchange newspapers, which coldly said:

"Gregory Rasputin has ceased to exist."

I read the statement aghast. I saw Anna Vyrubova, who was beside herself with grief and anxiety, and for a moment I spoke with the distracted Empress. Then I left with all haste for the capital.

On arrival I learnt at the Ministry of the Interior that a policeman on night duty along the Moika Canal had heard shots and cries coming from a house belonging to the young Prince Felix Youssoupoff, who had married a cousin of the Tsar, and who was well known in London, where he passed each "season." In the house were the Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovitch, ex-Minister

of the Interior Kvostov, Deputy Purishkevitch, and others. When the policeman went to ask what had happened, he received no explanation.

A little later two motor-cars drove up to the door. In one of the cars a large bundle was placed. It was the body of Rasputin. Beside this bundle a man took his seat and ordered the chauffeur to drive to an island at the mouth of the Neva. Traces of blood were left in the garden. There were also marks of blood on the ice of the frozen Neva, where the car had stopped. Near these marks was a freshly made hole, and close to the hole lay a pair of blood-stained rubber shoes.

Alexandra Feodorovna, frantic and bewildered, informed the Emperor by telegraph, and by the time he had returned the monk's body had been recovered from the river. I was present at the Mass served by the Petrograd Metropolitan Pitirim, an evil-liver of Rasputin's creation, after which I went with the body, which was conveyed to Tsarskoe-Selo. There, at the burial, Protopopoff was one of the chief mourners, and he, together with General Voyeykoff, Fredericks, and the Emperor himself, carried the silver coffin containing the remains of one of the worst rascals in Christendom, while the Tsaritza, Anna, and the whole Court followed in deep mourning.

Such a scandal roused the ire of the people to fever heat, but it freed me of my hateful compact, and I cut myself adrift for ever from the fascinating Madame Vyrubova and her vicious circle.

Perhaps, in concluding this volume of strange and amazing reminiscences, which I have written with the sole purpose of revealing the truth to Europe, I cannot do better than summarise the career of Rasputin as Alexander Yablonovski, one of our ablest Russian critics, has done. He declared that the part of the Black Monk in history was an era in itself.

Practically the entire historic rôle of Rasputin consisted of the fact that he united all Russia in a general hatred for the dark, irresponsible forces.

The Imperial Duma, the Imperial Council, the united nobility, the social organisations, the Press—all were permeated by the same conviction, namely, that it was high time to remove from the Russian political arena the Government gamblers.

More than that, Rasputin became even a matter of concern to Europe. The foreign Press printed articles about him. The foreign ambassadors cabled long reports in code to their Governments in connection with him. But, of course, to Europe he was more of a sad anecdote than an historical fact. To Russia, on the other hand, he was not only a fact, he was an era.

Russia has experienced immeasurable humiliation on account of him. But this humiliation has fused the Empire into a single body, creating citizens out of human pulp.

Russians all their lives have fought the irresponsible bureaucracy. Her literature, Press, science, parties, all, according to their resources, plucked the roots of this rotten plant. But how big were the results of their half-century of labour?

And then a Siberian mujik appeared, and against his own will he cut the arteries of the dark force, he stamped it in the mud, spitting at the very principle, the very idea, of autocratic bureaucracy.

Rasputin was killed for the purpose of cleansing Russia of the dark forces. Yet, alas! his evil influence lived to bear fruit in Germany's favour even after the Revolution and the downfall of the Romanoffs.

No more sinister or astounding figure has ever appeared in all history, and the memory of no one is more bitterly hated in Russia than that of Gregory the ne'er-do-well, the erotic scoundrel and assassin, who held the fate of the Russian Empire within the hollow of his hand.