

RASPUTIN—DEVIL OR SAINT

by The Princess Radziwill

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The Characteristic Feature of Rasputin's Dominance as a Holy Mystic Is That It Was Made Use of by Conspirators in the Government to Further Their Own Ends—It Was This Duplicity Which Was the Principal Harm Done by the "Monk"

It Was Not Long Before the Siberian Peasant Wearing of the Limited Field Offered His "Religious" Powers at Home and He Turned His Steps Toward Russia Proper—There He Won Many Converts to His Sect, Which Observed Objectionable Doctrines

CHAPTER II

THE beginnings of the career of Gregory Rasputin are shrouded with a veil of deep mystery. He was a native of Siberia, of a small village in the government of Tobolsk, called Pokrowskoie. Some people relate that when quite a youth he was compromised in a crime which attracted some attention at the time—the murder of a rich merchant who was traveling from Omsk to Tobolsk to acquire from an inhabitant of Tobolsk some gold diggings, of which the latter wished to dispose. This merchant was known to carry a large sum of money, and as he never reached his destination inquiries were started. At last his body was found, with the head battered by blows, hidden in a ditch by the high road, together with that of the coachman who had driven him. The murderers were never discovered, but dark rumors concerning the participation of the youth Rasputin in the deed spread all over the village.

Rasputin's Start as a "Prophet"

Whether it was the desire to put an end to them, or remorse for an action of which he knew himself to be guilty, it is difficult to say, but the fact subsists that suddenly Gricha, as he was called, developed mystical tendencies and took to attending some religious meetings at which a certain wandering pilgrim used to preach. The latter used to go from place to place in Siberia predicting the end of the world and the advent of the dreaded day of judgment when Christ would once again appear to demand from humanity an account of its various good or bad actions. For something like two years Rasputin followed him, until at last he began himself to assume the character of a lay preacher, to apply himself to the study of the Scriptures and to try to establish a sect of his own, the principles of which he exposed to his followers in these terms:

"I am possessed of the Holy Spirit, and it is only through me that one can be saved. In order to do so, one must unite oneself with me in body and soul. Everything which proceeds from me is holy and cleans one from sin."

On the strength of this theory Rasputin declared that he could do whatever he liked or wished. He surrounded himself with worshippers of both sexes, who believed that by a close union with him they could obtain their eternal salvation, together with divine forgiveness for any sins they might have committed during their previous existence.

Strange tales began to be related concerning the religious assemblies at which the new prophet presided. But, nevertheless, the whole village of Pokrowskoie, whither he had returned after his few years' wanderings, accepted his teachings and submitted to his decrees with scarcely any exceptions. These unbelievers were looked upon as the majority of the inhabitants, who had succumbed to the "monk's" power of fascination and hypnotism. It was with nothing else that Rasputin kept his "rock" subjugated. He introduced among them the cult of his own person, together with certain rites which he called "sacrifice with prayer."

According to the narratives of some people, who out of curiosity had attended these ceremonies, this is how they proceeded: In the night, as soon as the first stars had become visible in the skies, Rasputin, with the help of his disciples, dragged some wood into a deep ditch dug for the purpose and lighted a huge bonfire. On a tripod placed in the midst of this fire was put a cup full of incense and different herbs, around which people began to dance, holding themselves by the hand all the while and singing in a voice which became louder and louder as the wild exercise became more and more accelerated different hymns, which always ended with the phrase: "Forgive us our sins, O Lord, forgive us our sins."

The dance went on until people fell exhausted to the ground and groans and tears replaced the former singing. The fire died out slowly and, when the darkness had become complete, the voice of Rasputin was heard calling upon his disciples to proceed to the sacrifice which God required them to perform. Then followed a scene of general orgy.

As one can see by this tale, the strange practices introduced by the seer, about whom people were already beginning to talk, differed in no way from those generally in use among the Khlysty, and, indeed, Rasputin made no secret of his allegiance to this particular form of heresy, in which, however, he had introduced a few alterations. For instance, he did not admit that the souls of his followers could be saved by a general prayer, but only thanks to

"Around this fire people began to dance, singing in a voice which became louder and louder as the wild exercise became more and more accelerated, 'Forgive us our sins, O Lord; forgive us our sins'"



one uttered in common with him, and by a complete submission to his will. Some persons have alleged that during the early wanderings of Rasputin he had gone as far as China and Thibet, and there learned some Buddhist practices, but this is hardly probable, as in that case his instruction would have been more developed than it was. It is far more likely that during his travels he had met with exiled sectarians belonging to the different persecuted religious Russian communities, of which there exist so many in the whole Oural region, and that they initiated him into some of their rites and customs. They also made him attentive to the hypnotic powers, which he most undoubtedly possessed, teaching him how to use them for his own benefit and advantage.

Rasputin Wins Converts

Very soon Rasputin found that Pokrowskoie was not a field wide enough for his energies, and he took to traveling, together with a crowd of disciples that followed him everywhere over the eastern and central Russian provinces. There he contrived to win every day new adherents to the doctrines in which free love figured so prominently. Among the towns where he obtained the most success can be mentioned those of Kazan, Saratoff, Kieff and Samara.

Concerning his doings in Kazan, people became informed through a letter which one of his victims addressed to the bishop of that diocese, Monsignor Feofane, who had shown at the beginning of Rasputin's career a considerable interest and who had protected him with great success. In this letter, which later on found its way into the press, the following was said among other things:

Your Reverence, I absolutely fail to understand how it is possible for you continue to this day to know and see Gregory Rasputin. He is Satan in person and the things which he does are worthy of those that the Antichrist alone is supposed to perform, and prove that the latter's advent is at hand.

The writer then proceeded to explain that Rasputin had completely subjugated the mind of her two daughters, one of whom was

aged twenty, whilst the second had not yet attained her sixteenth year.

One afternoon, writes this unfortunate mother, I met in the street, coming out of a bathhouse, Rasputin, together with my two girls. One must be a mother to understand the feelings which overpowered me at this sight. I could find no words to say, but remained standing motionless and silent before them. The prophet turned to me and slowly said: "Now you may feel at peace, the day of salvation has dawned for your daughters!"

Another woman, who had also fallen under the spell of Rasputin, wrote as follows about him:

"I left my parents, to whom I was tenderly attached, to follow the prophet. One day when we were traveling together in a reserved first-class carriage, talking about the salvation of souls and the means to become a true child of God, he suddenly got up and approached me, and * * * proceeded to clean me of all my sins. Toward evening I became anxious and asked him: 'Perhaps what we have been doing today was a sin, Gregory Efimitch?' 'No, my daughter,' he replied, 'it was not a sin. Our affections are a gift from God, which we may use as freely as we like.'"

Bishop Feofane finally was obliged to recognize the evil which Rasputin was constantly doing, and he bitterly repented having been taken in by him and by his hypocrisy. He reproached himself especially for having given him a letter of recommendation to the famous Father John of Cronstadt, through whom Rasputin was to become acquainted with some of the people who were later on to pilot him in the society of St. Petersburg. The Bishop was not a clever man by any means, but he had been sincere in his admiration for Rasputin, a fact which added to the consternation that overpowered him when the truth about the famous sectarian became known to him. He assembled a kind of judicial court, composed of one bishop, one monk and three well-known and highly respected civil functionaries, and called upon the prophet to come and explain himself before this court as to the actions which were imputed to

him. Among these figured his general conduct in regard to the women who had enrolled themselves in the ranks of his disciples. But somehow the adventurer succeeded in dispelling the suspicions that had become attached to his name and conduct, and he explained in a more or less plausible manner the things which had been told about him. His leanings for feminine society, and his invariable custom of bathing himself together with women he declared to be quite innocent things, and only a proof of his desire to show that it was quite possible for human beings to rise above every kind of carnal temptation.

In spite of this episode, which would have interfered with the career of any one but Rasputin, the fame of the latter grew with every day that passed. He established himself at last in the town of Tiumen in Siberia, where he hired a whole large house for himself and some of his most favored disciples, and he began to turn his activity into another and more profitable channel. He established reception hours every day, when all his followers, admirers and friends could come to speak with him about any business they liked. Hundreds of people used to attend those receptions, among them some very influential persons curious to see and speak with the modern Peter the Hermit, who declared that he had been called by God to save Holy Russia. In some mysterious manner he acquired the reputation of having great influence in high quarters, where (this must be noticed) he was at the time yet quite unknown. Governors fearing dismissal, rapacious functionaries whose exactions had become too flagrant, as well as business men in quest of some good "geschaft," to use the German expression employed before the war among financial circles in Russia, crowded round him, waiting sometimes hours for an opportunity to speak with him, and fully believing in his capacities for obtaining what they required.

Rasputin soon became a kind of business agent and surrounded himself with a number of secretaries of both sexes, whose occupation consisted in attending to his correspondence—he could hardly read or write—and in receiving the numerous offerings which were being brought to him daily. These secretaries, among whom figured a sister of the Bishop of Saratoff, Warnawa, made an immense amount of money themselves because no one was ever admitted into the presence of Rasputin without having previously paid dearly for this favor. Very soon they established a tax in regard to the audiences granted by their master.

"Spiritual Sisters" of Rasputin

Besides this sister of Bishop Warnawa, Rasputin had another female secretary, and they both accompanied him in all his travels, calling themselves his spiritual sisters. They constituted, so to say, his bodyguard, and wherever he went, even in St. Petersburg, they never left off attending him and seeing to all his wants. They were the channel through which everything had to go, and without their consent no one was ever admitted into the presence of the "Saint," as they already had begun to call him.

Gregory Rasputin very often used to visit Tobolsk, where he was always received with great ceremony and pomp, as if he had been really the important personage he believed himself. The policeman in the streets saluted him as he passed; the carriage in which he drove was escorted or preceded by a high police functionary, and the governor asked him to dinner. The same kind of thing used to take place in other Siberian cities. In one of them the staterooms reserved at the railway station for any high authority on a visit to the place were thrown open to him. In another triumphal arches were erected in his honor, while in a third he was met by deputations in the midst of which could be seen civil functionaries and religious dignitaries.

How all this happened no one knew or could explain. In what consisted the fame of Rasputin and what he had done to deserve all these honors nobody could tell. But fame he had acquired, honors he had obtained, and where another person gifted with a smaller amount of impudence than he was possessed of would have been put into prison or sent to a madhouse, Gricha, as he was familiarly called, had it all his own way, and defied governors and judges with an equal indifference, sure that none among them would be daring enough to try to put a stop to his progress or to his avidity.

Most friendly, not to say intimate, relations were established between Rasputin and Bishop Warnawa, especially after the latter's elevation to the episcopal See of Tobolsk. The first sermon which Warnawa preached in that town he dedicated to the wife of Rasputin. One need not say that the whole clergy of the town and of the diocese trembled before Rasputin, who did not fail to exact from it large sums of money, which he extorted, thanks to the promises which he made but never meant in the least to keep.

During the course of the year 1909 complaints about Rasputin's behavior increased to a considerable extent. He was once more called before an ecclesiastical court to give explanations in regard to his general conduct. Among his judges figured again Bishop Feofane. This time Rasputin could not clear himself of the charges preferred against him, and he was invited to retire for one year into a monastery by way of penance. But Rasputin refused to submit himself to this sentence and categorically declined to do as he had been told. He gave as a reason for his disobedience to the commands of his ecclesiastical superiors that his conscience obliged him to resist because it would be impossible for his "spiritual sisters and daughters" to accompany him in his retreat and live together with him in the monastery they wished him to enter.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

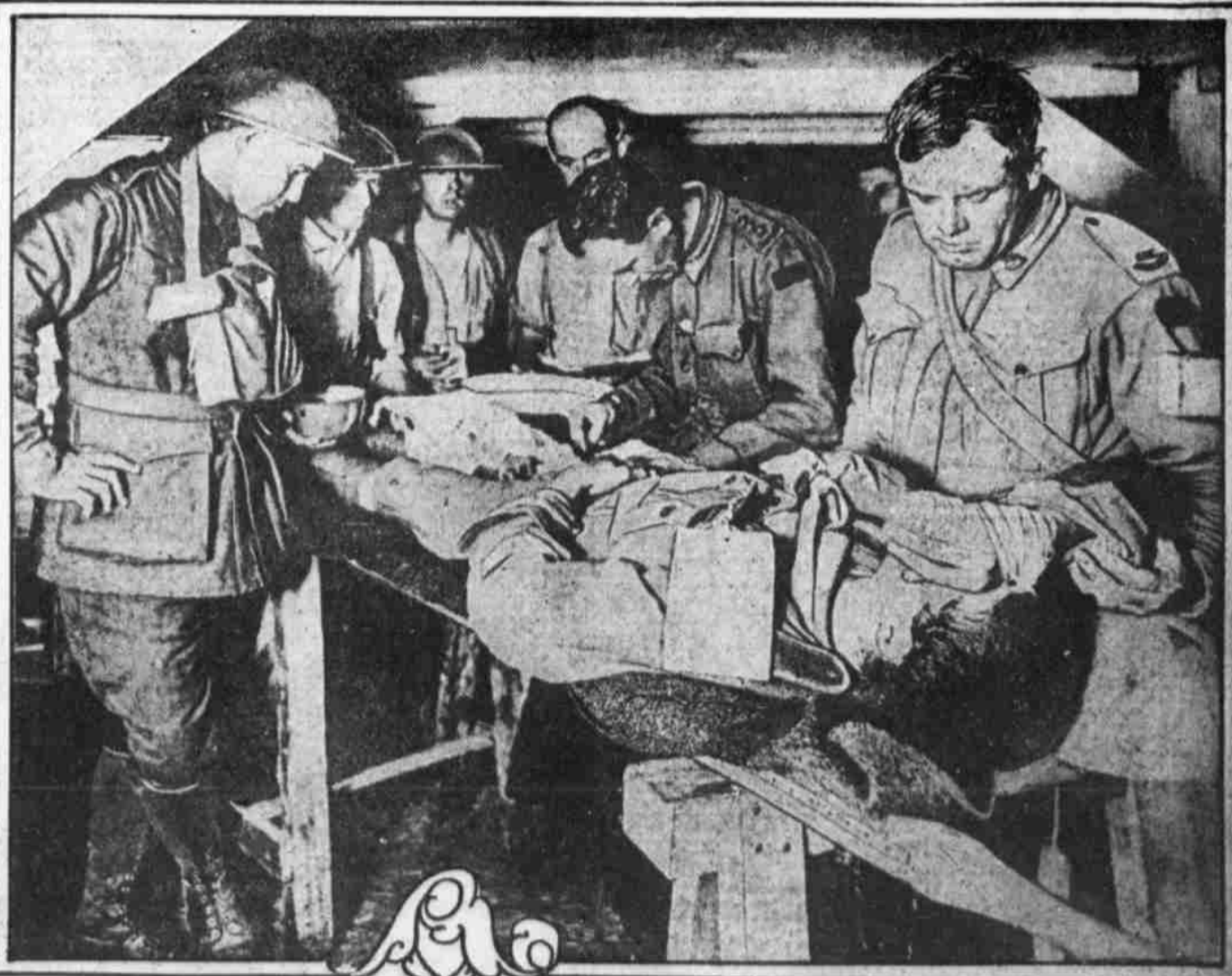
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