

RASPUTIN—DEVIL OR SAINT

by The Princess Radziwill

DAY, OCTOBER 23, 1917

Rasputin is that he was not murdered sooner, universally detested all over Russia, that it was in alive so long a time after it had been found the scene by other than violent means."

German Intrigue, Ever Present Throughout the World, Has Linked Rasputin's Name With the Fairest and Highest of Russia's Court Circles—But These Rumors Are False, the Princess Radziwill Insists

The "Black Monk" Appeared on the Scene at a Psychological Moment When the Russian People Had Drifted Away From the Church and Were Ready for Any Strong Appeal to the Mystical Side of Their Character

As a rule the general public knows very little concerning these sects, but I shall quote here a passage out of a book on Russia by Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, which is considered to this day as a standard work in regard to its subject. "Among the 'Khlysty,'" he writes, "there are men and women who take upon themselves the calling of teachers and prophets, and in this character they lead a strict, ascetic life, refrain from the most ordinary and innocent pleasures, exhaust themselves by long fasting and wild ecstatic religious exercises and abhor marriage. Under the excitement caused by their supposed holiness and inspiration, they call themselves not only teachers and prophets, but also Saviours, Redeemers, Christs, Mothers of God. Generally speaking, they call themselves simply gods and pray to each other as to real gods and living Christs and Madonnas. When several of these teachers come together at a meeting they dispute with each other in a vain, boasting way as to which of them possesses most grace and power. In this rivalry they sometimes give each other the most lusty blows on the ear, and he who bears the blows the most patiently, turning the other cheek to the smiter, acquires the reputation of having the most holiness.

"Another sect belonging to the same category and which indeed claims close kindred with it is the Jumpers, among whom the erotic element is disagreeably prominent. Here is a description of their religious meetings, which are held during summer in a forest and during winter in some outhouse or barn. After due preparation prayers are read by the chief teacher, dressed in a white robe and standing in the midst of the congregation. At first he reads in an ordinary tone of voice and then passes gradually into a merry chant. When he remarks that the chanting has sufficiently acted on the hearers he begins to jump. The hearers, singing likewise, follow his example. Their ever-increasing excitement finds expression in the highest possible jumps. This they continue as long as they can—men and women alike yelling like enraged savages. When all are thoroughly exhausted the leader declares that he hears the angels singing, and then begins a scene which cannot be here described."

I have quoted this passage in full because it may give to the reader who is not versed in the details of Russian existence and Russian psychology the key to the circumstances that helped Rasputin to absorb for such a considerable number of years the attention of the public in Russia, and which, in fact, made him possible as a great ruler, though not governing, force in the country. In some ways he had appealed to the two great features of the human character in general and of the Russian character in particular—mysticism and influence of the senses. It is not so surprising as it might seem at first sight that he contrived to ascend to a position which no one who knew him at first ever supposed he would or could attain.

At the same time I must, in giving a brief sketch of the career of this extraordinary individual, protest against the many calumnies which have associated him with names which I will not mention here out of respect and feelings of patriotism. It is sufficiently painful to have to say so, but German calumny, which spares no one, has used its poisoned arrows also where Rasputin came to be discussed. It has tried to travesty maternal love and anxiety into something quite different, and it has attempted to sully what it could not touch. There have been many sad episodes in this whole story of Rasputin, but some of the people who have been mentioned in connection with them were completely innocent of the things for which they have been reproached. Finally, the indignation which these vile and unfounded accusations roused in the hearts of the true friends and servants of the people led to the drama which removed forever from the surface of Russian society the sectarian who unfortunately had contrived to glide into its midst.

Rasputin a Master of Corruption

The one extraordinary thing about Rasputin is that he was not murdered sooner. He was so entirely despised and so universally detested all over Russia that it was really a miracle that he could remain alive so long a time after it had been found impossible to remove him from the scene of the world by other than violent means. It was a recognized fact that he had had a hand in all kind of dirty money matters and that no business of a financial character connected with military expenditure could be brought to a close without his being mixed in it. About this, however, I shall speak later on in trying to explain how the Rasputin legend spread and how it was exploited by all kind of individuals of a shady character, who used his name for purposes of their own. The scandal connected with the shameless manner in which he became associated with innumerable transactions more or less disreputable was so enormous that unfortunately it extended to people and to names that should never have been mentioned together with him.

It must never be forgotten, and I cannot repeat this sufficiently, that Rasputin was a common peasant of the worst class of the Russian moujiks, devoid of every kind of education, without any manners and in his outward appearance more disgusting

than anything else. It would be impossible to explain the influence which he undoubtedly contrived to acquire upon some persons belonging to the highest social circles if one did not take into account this mysticism and superstition which lie at the bottom of the Slav nature and the tendency which the Russian character has to accept as a manifestation of the power of the divinity all things that touch upon the marvelous or the unexplainable. Rasputin in a certain sense appeared on the scene of Russian social life at the very moment when his teachings could become acceptable, at the time when Russian society had been shaken to its deepest depths by the revolution which had followed upon the Japanese war and when it was looking everywhere for a safe harbor in which to find a refuge.

At the beginning of his career and when he was introduced into the most select circles of the Russian capital, thanks to the caprices and the fancies of two or three fanatic orthodox ladies who had imagined that they had found in him a second Savonarola and that his sermons and teachings could provoke a renewal of religious fervor, people laughed at him and at his feminine disciples, and made all kinds of jokes, good and bad, about him and them. But this sort of thing did not last a long time and Rasputin, who, though devoid of every kind of culture, had a good deal of the cunning, which is one of the distinctive features of the Russian peasant, was the first to

who made... at last Rasputin himself deemed it advisable... his native village of Pokrowskoie, in Siberia. A few days after his departure the little Grand Duke fell seriously ill and his mother became persuaded that this was a punishment for her having allowed the vagrant preacher to be sent away. Rasputin was recalled, and after this no one ever spoke again of his being removed anywhere. From that time all kind of adventurers began to lay siege to him and to do their utmost to gain an introduction.

Rasputin and the "Fair Ladies"

Russia was still the land where a court favorite was all-powerful, and Rasputin was held as such, especially by those who had some personal interest in representing him as the successor to Menschikoff under Peter the Great, Biren under the Empress Anne and Orloff under Catherine II. He acquired a far greater influence outside Tzarskoie Selo than he ever enjoyed in the imperial residence itself, and he made the best of it, boasting of a position which in reality he did not possess. The innumerable state functionaries, who in Russia unfortunately always have the last word to say everywhere and in everything and whose rapacity is proverbial, hastened to put themselves at the service of Rasputin and to grant him everything which he asked, in the hope that in return he would make himself useful to them.



Rasputin (in the center with his hand on his chest) surrounded by a group of admirers in a fashionable Petrograd home.

guess all the possibilities which this sudden "engouement" of influential people for his person opened out before him and to what use it could be put for both his ambition and his inordinate love of money. He began by exacting a considerable salary for all the prayers which he was supposed to say at the request of his worshippers, and of all the ladies, fair or unfair, who had canonized him in their enthusiasm for all the wonderful things which he was continually telling them. He was eloquent in a way and at the beginning of his wonderful thaumaturgic existence had not yet adopted the attitude which he was to assume later on—of an idol, whom every one had to adore.

He was preaching the necessity to repent of one's sins, to make due penance for them after a particular manner, which he described as being the most agreeable to God, and to pray constantly and with unusual fervor for the salvation of orthodox Russia. He contrived most cleverly to play upon the chord of patriotism which is always so developed in Russians, and to speak to them of the welfare of their beloved fatherland whenever he thought it advantageous to his personal interests to do so. He succeeded in inspiring in his adepts a faith in his own person and in his power to save their souls akin to the one which is to be met in England and in America among the sect that preach mental heading. A few hysterical ladies, who were addicted to neuralgia or headaches, suddenly found themselves better after having conversed or prayed with him, and they spread his fame outside the small circle which had adopted him at the beginning of his career. One fine day a personal friend of the reigning Empress, Madame W., introduced him at Tzarskoie Selo, under the pretext of praying for the health of the small heir to the Russian throne, who was occasioning some anxiety to his parents. It was from that day that he became a personage.

His success at court was due to the superstitious dread with which he contrived to inspire the Empress in regard to her son. She was constantly trembling for him, and being very religiously inclined, with strong leanings toward mysticism, she allowed herself to be persuaded more by the people who surrounded her than by Rasputin himself. She believed that the monk, of whose holiness she was absolutely persuaded, could by his prayers alone obtain the protection of the Almighty for her beloved child. An accidental occurrence contributed to strengthen her in this conviction. There were persons who were of the opinion that the presence of Rasputin at Tzarskoie Selo was not advantageous for many reasons. Among them was Mr. Stolypine, then Minister of the Interior, and he it was

A kind of bargaining established itself between people desirous of making a career and Rasputin, eager to enrich himself no matter by what means. He began by playing the intermediary in different financial transactions against a substantial consideration, and at last he thought himself entitled to give his attention to matters of state. This was the saddest side of his remarkable career as a pseudo-Cagliostro. He had a good deal of natural intelligence, and while being the first to laugh at fair ladies who clustered around him, he understood at once that he could make use of them. This he did not fail to do. He adopted toward them the manners of a stern master, and treated them like his humble slaves. At last he ended by leading the existence of a man of pleasure, denying himself nothing, especially his fondness for liquor of every kind. At that time there was no prohibition in Russia and, like all Russian peasants, Rasputin was very fond of vodka, to which he never missed adding a substantial quantity of champagne whenever he found the opportunity.

I shall abstain from touching upon the delicate point of the orgies to which it is related that Rasputin was in the habit of addicting himself, the more so because I do not really believe these ever took place in those higher circles of society where it was said they regularly occurred. That strange things may have happened among the common people, who in far greater numbers than it has ever been known used to attend the religious meetings which he held, I shall not deny. It must always be remembered that Rasputin belonged to the religious sect of the Khlysty, of whose assemblies we have read the description, and it is quite likely, and even probable, that the assemblies of these sectarians at which he presided were not different from the others to which these heretics crowded. But I feel absolutely convinced that as regards the relations of the adventurer with the numerous ladies of society silly enough to believe in him and in his gifts of prophecy, these consisted only of superstitious reverence on one side and exploitation of human stupidity on the other.

I must once more insist on the point that the apparition of Rasputin in Russian society had nothing wonderful about it, and that the only strange thing is that such a fuss was made. Before his time people belonging to the highest social circles had become afflicted with religious manias of one kind or another out of that natural longing for something to believe in and to worship which lies hidden at the bottom of the character of every Russian who has the leisure, or the craving, to examine seriously the difficult

RASPUTIN AND THE RUSSIAN CHARACTER

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and complicated problems of a future life and of the faith one ought to follow and to believe in.

In 1817 there was discovered in the very heart of St. Petersburg, holding its meetings in an imperial residence (the Michael Palace), a religious sect of most pronounced mystical tendencies, presided over by a lady belonging to the best circles of the capital—the widow of a colonel, Madame Tatarinoff. In her apartments used to gather officers, State functionaries, women and girls of good family and excellent education who, with slight variations, practiced all the religious rites of the Khlystys. One of the Ministers of Alexander I, Prince Galitzyn, was suspected of having honored these assemblies with his presence. Thanks to a letter which accidentally fell into the hands of the police, the Government became aware of what was going on, and Madame Tatarinoff, this Russian Madame Guyon, exiated in exile in a distant province of Siberia the ecstasies which she had practiced and which she had allowed others to practice under her roof. Some of her disciples were prosecuted, but the greater number escaped scot free. The authorities did not care to increase the scandal which this affair had aroused in the capital.

Uplifting the Cab Drivers

Much later, in 1878, after the Russo-Turkish war, which, like the Japanese affair, had been followed by a strong revolutionary movement in the country that culminated in the assassination of the Czar, Alexander II, another prophet, this time of foreign origin, appeared on the social horizon of St. Petersburg society, where he made a considerable number of converts. This was the famous Lord Radstock, whose doctrines were taken up by a gentleman who up to that time had been known as one of the gayest among the gay, a colonel in the Guards—Mr. Basil Paschkoff. He was enormously rich, and put all his vast fortune at the service of the religious craze which had seized him. He used his best efforts to convert to the doctrine of salvation through faith only not alone his friends and relatives, but also the poorer classes of the population of the capital, devoting in particular his attention to the cab drivers. All these people used to meet at his house, where they mingled with persons of the highest rank and standing, such as Count Korff, and a former Minister, Count Alexis Bobrinsky. Later on the whole Tchertkoff family, to which belonged the famous friend of Count Leo Tolstoy, associated itself with them, and, indeed, displayed the greatest fanaticism in regard to its participation in the doctrines of the new sect.

The Paschkowites, as they came to be called, had nothing at all in common with the Khlystys. Their morals were absolutely unimpeachable, and what they preached was simply the necessity to conform one's existence to the teachings of the Gospel, which they explained and commented upon, each person according to his own light. They were Protestants in a certain sense, inasmuch as their views were distinctly Protestant ones. But they had much more in common with the nonconformists than the real followers of Luther or of Calvin. They were a kind of refined Salvation Army, if this expression can be forgiven me; though they never acquired the importance, nor did the good which the latter has done, perhaps because they could never make any practical application of the principles and of the ideas which animated them. But at one time the Paschkowist craze was just as strong as the Rasputin one became later on, and Lord Radstock and Mr. Paschkoff were considered just as much prophets among their own particular circle as was Rasputin among the fanatical ladies who had taken him up.

These crises of religious mania are regular occurrences in Russian higher social circles when unusually grave circumstances arrive to shake their equanimity. Seen from this particular point of view, the apparition of Rasputin and the importance which his personality acquired in the life of the Russian upper classes present nothing very wonderful. Before him other so-called prophets had kept the attention of the public riveted upon their doings and their actions. What distinguished his short passage was the fact that it was made the occasion by the natural enemies of the empire, consisting of the discontented at home and of the Germans outside the frontier, to discredit the dynasty as well as those whose life was spent in its immediate vicinity and to present this figure of the vagrant half-moon and half-lunatic. He preached a new revelation to those foolish enough to listen to him, representing himself as of almost gigantic importance, who could at his will and fancy direct the course of public affairs and lead them wherever he wanted.

My object in this study will be to show Rasputin for what he really was, and in retracing the different vicissitudes of his strange career not to give way to the many exaggerations, which, in familiarizing people abroad with his person and with his name, have made out of him something quite wonderful, and almost equal in power with the Czar himself. It is time to do away with such legends and to bring Rasputin back to his proper level—a very able and cunning, half-cultured peasant, who owed his successes only to the fanaticism of the few, and to the interest which many had in dissimulating themselves behind him, in order to bring their personal wishes to a successful end. It is not Rasputin who performed most of the actions put to his credit. It was those who influenced him, who pushed him forward and who, thanks to him, became both rich and powerful. He has disappeared. I wish we could be as sure that they have disappeared along with him.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)

JEFFERSON HOSPITAL UNIT, No. 30, MOBILIZES FOR DUTY AT SECOND REGIMENT ARMORY



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