

FRANCES WELCH

RASPUTIN

A SHORT LIFE



‘Frances Welch combines historical insight with a novelistic flair for character’
Evening Standard



RASPUTIN
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FRANCES WELCH

To my brother Nick





The wisest men follow their own directions
And listen to no prophet guiding them.
None but the fools believe in oracles,
Forsaking their own judgement. Those who know,
Know that such men can only come to grief.

Euripides – *Iphigenia In Tauris*

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'I Feel My End Is Near'

On Grigory Rasputin's last day alive the snow fell heavily upon St Petersburg. The sky at dawn had been dotted with what the Tsarina called picturesquely 'wee pink clouds'. But the weather had then closed in, with severe frosts sending temperatures plummeting below freezing.

Rasputin's daughter Maria claimed that no living Russian could remember a harsher winter than that of 1916. The 18-year-old Maria found herself confined to her father's flat, where the fusty rooms steamed with fetid warmth and the pervasive smell was of cabbage and hot sheep's cheese.

The streets outside usually pullulated with her father's followers, the so-called 'Rasputinki'. Up to 400 had been known to gather before sunrise, waiting as long as three days to see him.

Grigory Rasputin's name was by this time known the length and breadth of Russia: he was the Siberian peasant 'Holy Man' who had inveigled his way into the heart of the splendid pre-Revolutionary Court. His mysterious rise had made him an object of hatred, fear and reverence.

His claims as a Holy Man, ridiculed and dismissed by some, were accepted, without question, by many who believed he had been sent by God. Devotees came in search of curious keepsakes: burnt rusks in scented hankies or soiled linen, limp with sweat. The most fervent took Rasputin's fingernail clippings, to be sewn into hemlines, despite one St Petersburg restaurant manager testifying that the Man of God's hands were 'grimy, with bitten, blackened nails'.

It was known that Grigory Rasputin had the ears of 'the Tsars', as he called the Tsar and Tsarina. He also had a reputation for being free with rudimentary petitions along the lines of 'fix it, G'. So alongside the devotees would be favour-seekers, filing through the lobby and up to the third floor bearing lavish gifts: wine, carpets and even huge fish. Flowers were a favourite: 'Idiots bring fresh flowers every day. They know I love them,' Rasputin would swagger ungraciously.

Some of the 'Rasputinki' arrived with wads of money, others were penniless and in need. Unable to count, Rasputin would bark: 'Come on, fork it over,' before grabbing wads and redistributing them at random. One widow, who had lost sons in the war, was awarded 23,000 roubles. But most were not so lucky, despite Rasputin's regular, grand address to the queue: 'I will help you all!'

On December 16, however, Maria Rasputin peered out of the window and noted that Gorokhovaya Street was empty.

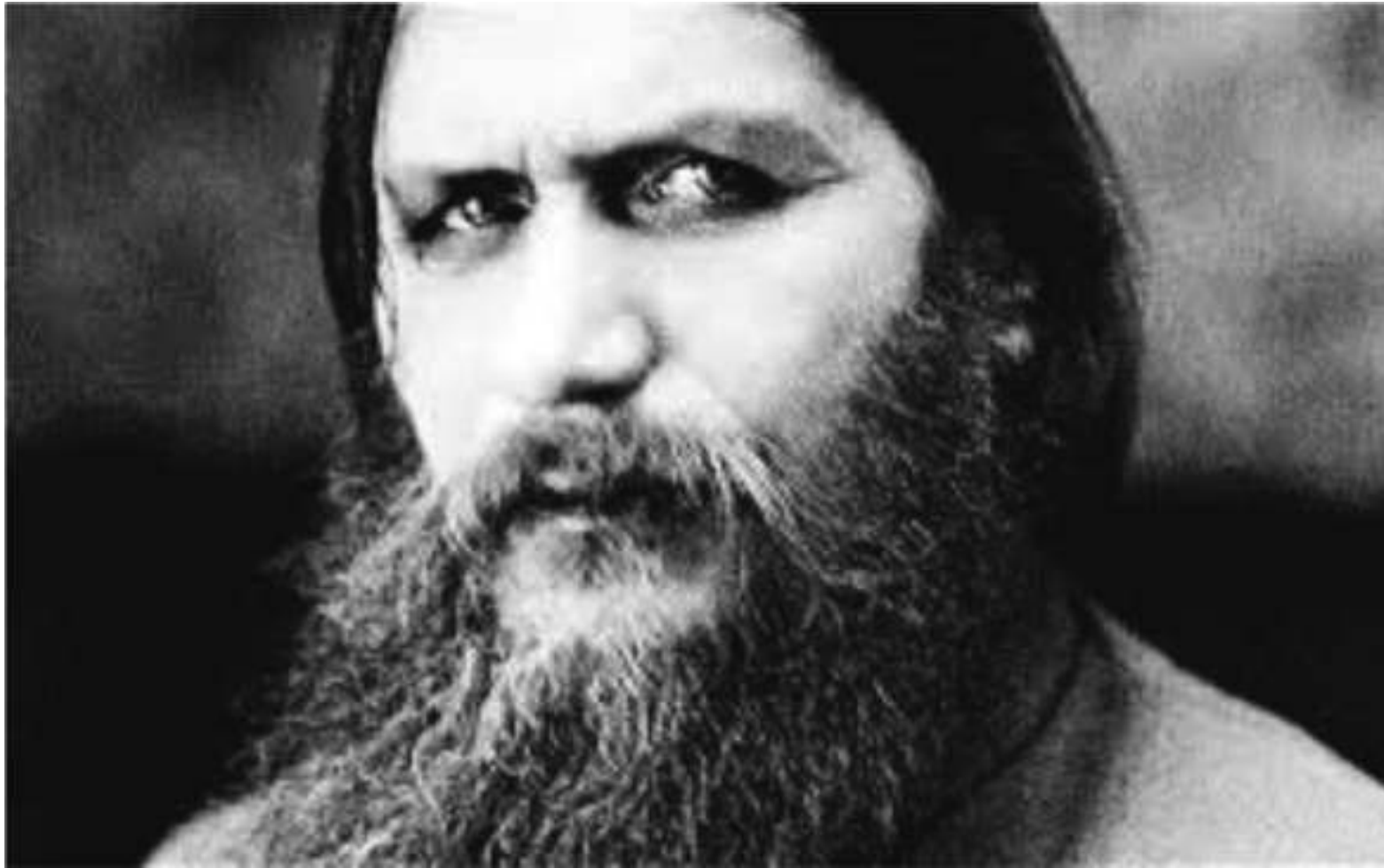
In fact, there had been odd bursts of activity through the day, beginning with the drunken return of her father in the early hours. Rasputin was an uninhibited drinker and, within the preceding few days, had pulled off a restaurant's door bell and smashed a pane of glass in the door of his flat. His police security guards described him on such raucous returns variously as: 'very drunk', 'completely drunk', 'dead drunk' and 'overcome with drink'. Maria had challenged her father about his drinking, but he was unabashed: 'Why shouldn't I drink? I am a man, like the others.' He considered wine 'God's own remedy.'

The Tsarina Alexandra, ever supportive of the man she referred to fondly either as 'our Friend' or 'Gr', made only one reference to Rasputin's weakness, once describing him as 'very gay after dinner in the vestry, but not tipsy'.

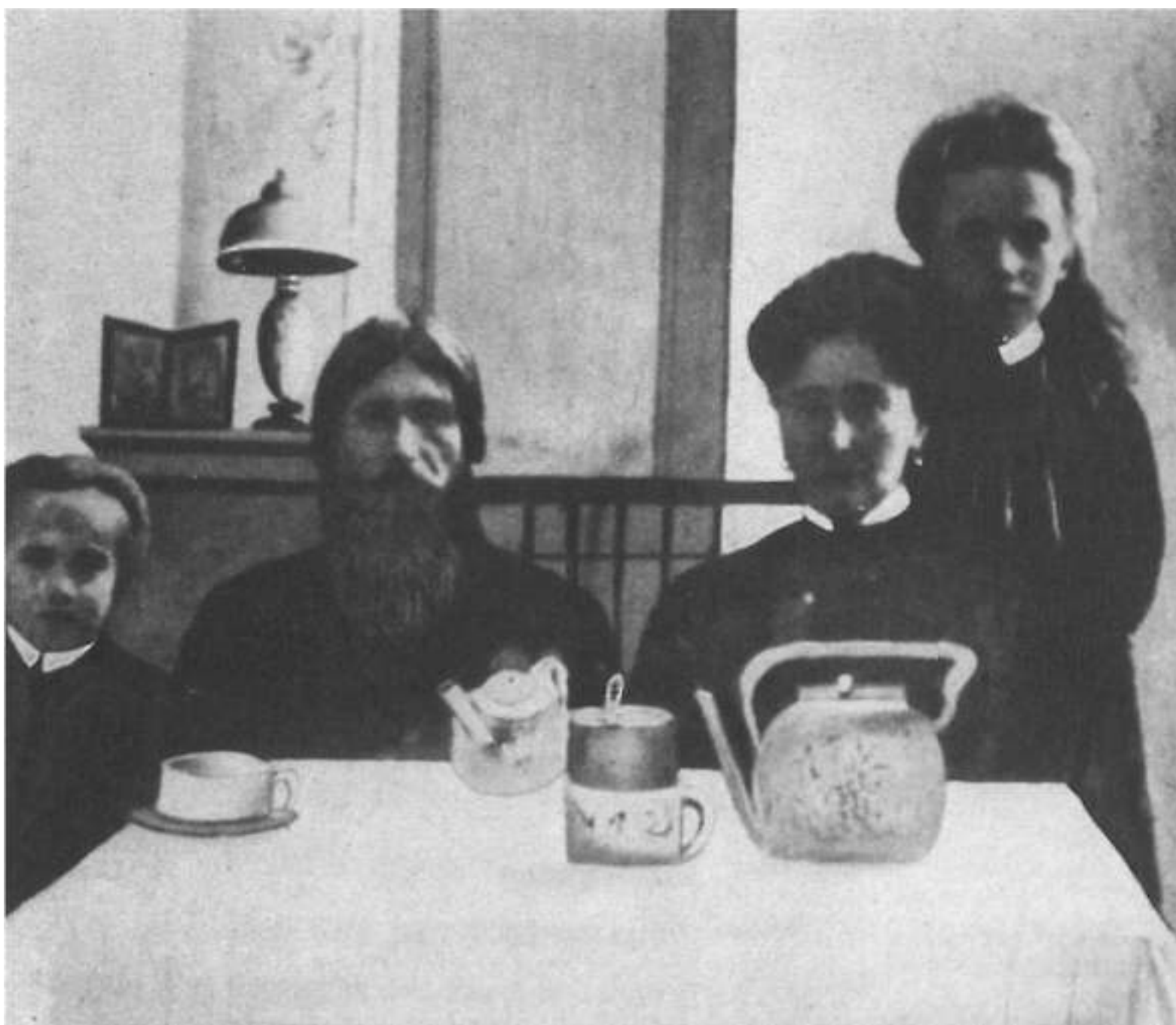
Shortly after this particular return, the Man of God, known for his fakir-like shunning of sleep, was back on the street. A brief lie-down had set him up for his next trip, to his beloved 'banya', the bath-house, where he would have his genitals soaped by one of the 'little ladies', as he called his

women followers. Before succumbing to the soaping he would shout, confusingly: ‘Demons of lechery, get thee hence!’ When his daughter remonstrated with him about women, he was equally unabashed. ‘If Christ could speak with Mary Magdalene...’, he would say, or, more graphically: ‘It doesn’t matter if you fornicate a little.’

These rousing sessions at the bath-house would be followed by brisk walks to the nearest church during which he slapped his upper arms and rebuked Satan. At church, he would enjoy a well-earned prayer. As he said repeatedly: ‘Without sin there is no repentance.’



Grigory Rasputin



At tea with the Tsarina and two of the Grand Duchesses



In recent weeks Rasputin's movements had been more erratic than usual. He had grown wary of leaving Number 64. His privileged position at Court had made him enemies, and his innate primitive paranoia had been fuelled by real threats. Within the last two and a half years at least ten attempts had been made on his life; he had been targeted and nearly hit by sledges, set upon by officers with sabres and stabbed, almost fatally, by a woman. In another incident, during the summer of 1915, a second woman had been leaving the flat when Rasputin had identified her, too, as a would-be assassin. Upon his command – 'Drop what you have in your muff!' – a gun had clattered to the floor.

A month earlier, filled with morbid dread, he had written to his wife in Siberia, bidding farewell to his family. On parting from his son at the beginning of November, he had pronounced: 'Goodbye. I will never see you again'. He had informed Maria gloomily: 'I see a sort of black cloud over our

St Petersburg house' and written her a letter, with the instruction: 'Don't open it until I'm dead.' When Tsar Nicholas had asked for a blessing at their last meeting, a fortnight before, Rasputin had replied: 'It is you who should be blessing me.'

However, two days previously, on December 14, Rasputin had successfully ventured out to two of St Petersburg's grandest cathedrals. The Tsarina, whom he had seen four days earlier, described the outing ecstatically to her husband. As a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, she had grown up speaking English and the Imperial couple communicated in English. But her writing style remained idiosyncratic: 'Our Friend never goes out since ages, except to come here, but yesterday he walked in the streets with Munia [Maria Golovin, one of his most faithful and distinguished supporters] to the Kazan and St Isaacs & not one disagreeable look, people all quiet.'

On this last morning, the devoted Munia was with him again. She had braved blizzards to bring messages, including news of a successful petition: the dropping of a charge against Rasputin's secretary. The Tsarina had written peremptorily to her husband: 'I beg you to write "discontinue the case" & send it to the Minister of Justice... Otherwise... there can be disagreeable talks.'

Over a full ten hours (midday to 10.00pm) Munia carried out chores for the man she called Father Grigory. In his egalitarian household, princesses and countesses might be found peeling potatoes and dishing out jellied fish, while servants relaxed at table. Munia, whose mother had been a maid to two empresses, helped other followers with their overshoes.

According to Munia, Rasputin seemed happier than he had been for a while, but still enigmatic. 'He was excited and said "Today I'm going", though he wouldn't say where.' His good spirits remained, even after another visitor, an elderly woman, had quizzed him about the future of Russia and he had issued one of his gloomy but curiously accurate prophecies: 'Little mother, I feel my end is near. They'll kill me, and then the throne won't last three months.' Such confidences would have been unusual; he preferred to keep older women at bay, snapping: 'Get away, you old carcass!' or 'I have no use for old goats!'

The freezing weather may have reduced the number of visitors. It did nothing to silence the telephone, which rang throughout the day. He had been woken that morning by a call from the Tsarina's closest friend, Anna Vyrubova. Rasputin received such routine calls from Anna or the Tsarina, or both, on a daily basis. There was nothing unusual about this last one.

According to the son of one of the Tsar's doctors, telephone calls from the Tsarina would be heralded by the 'lugubrious voice' of a male operator: 'You are called from the apartments of Her Imperial Majesty.' With no specific name mentioned, the receiver of the call would be obliged, unsettlingly, to guess who was on the line. The main telephone at the Alexander Palace was in the Tsarina's mauve boudoir, wired up under a portrait of Marie Antoinette.

Rasputin had become an unexpected fan of the telephone. He would jump to, answering in himself and greeting the caller in a raspy voice, with a rich Siberian accent: 'Here is Grishka.' In the peasant tradition, he usually referred to himself in the third person. He performed startling telephone cures. Once, when told that the sickly Tsarevich Alexis had an earache, he called the boy to the line: 'Your ear doesn't hurt. Grishka is telling you... Sleep right now.' Fifteen minutes later the Palace rang to say the Tsarevich had fallen asleep.

In the last few weeks, however, the telephone had become a menace. His surprisingly long number – 646-46 – was widely known and he had begun to receive calls cursing him. His responses were of the 'eye for an eye' variety. One caller said: 'Your days are numbered,' to which he snapped back: 'As for you, you will shortly die like a dog.' The day before his death, he received a call from a woman: 'Can you tell me where the funeral service for Rasputin will take place?' He

replied: 'You'll be buried first!' On his last morning he was thrown, though only momentarily, by yet another anonymous call threatening his life.

During a brief lull in the snowfall that afternoon, he received a visit from the Tsarina's friend Anna Vyrubova. She had come to ask his opinion about a pain in Alexis's leg. His reply was sanguine: 'It is not serious. Just keep the doctors away from him and he will be all right.' He offered a further, less accurate, prediction: 'Grishka can tell you this much. Throughout the rest of his life Alexis will not be seriously ill again.'

Anna Vyrubova had brought an icon as a gift from the Tsarina. It was signed by the Tsar and Tsarina and their five children and came from the city of Novgorod where, a few days before, the Tsarina had visited an ancient prophetess. The prophetess, in mortifying chains despite her 107 years, had addressed the Tsarina flatteringly: 'And you, the beautiful one, do not fear the heavy cross.' In fact, the formidable Tsarina had aged beyond her 44 years. Her facial expression was a daunting mix of hauteur and pain: the legacy of an already troubled life.

The icon from Nizhny Novgorod would form the last tangible bond between the Tsarina and her precious 'Gr'. The Tsarina regarded their relationship as a sort of partnership, at one point closing her instructions to the Tsar with a robust 'Listen to your staunch wifey and our Friend.'

Anna Vyrubova now commented on Rasputin's appearance: 'What about you, Grishka? You do not seem to be in very good health.' That was probably an understatement. He was showing the effects of a late-night session more or less running into a long lunch. One friend testified that, in the course of that day, Rasputin had drunk 12 bottles of his favourite Madeira before passing out.

Though aged just 47, Rasputin's appearance was not good: his close-set eyes were ringed with yellow excrescences. The irises, said to be so dazzling that their colour couldn't be determined - grey, blue and even blue and brown - were dulled. His broad nose was pock-marked, his lips blue and his moustaches protruding like worn-out brushes. Following years of use as a napkin, his straggling beard was festooned with decaying food.

His poor personal hygiene had not helped. The French Ambassador in St Petersburg, Maurice Paleologue, said he 'carried with him a strong animal smell, like the smell of a goat'. The singer Bellin talked of his rotten teeth and foul breath. His friend Aron Simanovich, the jeweller to the Imperial family, admitted that Rasputin had 'teeth like blackened stumps'.

Rasputin batted off Anna's concern, growling: 'I am like a horse, nothing affects me.' But his maid, Katya, weighed in: 'He should get more sleep.' Rasputin retorted that he was not planning an early night: he had an assignation with one of the richest aristocrats in Russia, Prince Felix Yussoupov, who was to pick him up at midnight and take him to his palace. There he would be introduced to Yussoupov's wife, the Tsar's beautiful young niece, Princess Irina.

Anna Vyrubova later testified at a commission conducted by the Provisional Government in 1917: 'I knew that Felix had often visited Rasputin, but it struck me as odd that he [Rasputin] should go to their house, for the first time, at such an unseemly hour.' She urged him not to go. But she was less concerned about his security than his status: he should not go to the Yussoupovs' Moika Palace unless he was being invited openly, at a normal time.

As Anna Vyrubova left the flat, she hesitated and Rasputin uttered what would be his last words to her: 'What more can you ask of me? You already have all I have to give.' Later that afternoon, Anna Vyrubova visited the Tsarina and mentioned Rasputin's plan. The Tsarina was bemused, as she knew that Princess Irina was, at that point, not in St Petersburg but far away in the Crimea.

According to his daughter Maria, Rasputin's last supper at the apartment was an unexpectedly jolly affair, during which he joked and played with her, her younger sister Varya, aged 16, and his

young niece, Anna. He plunged his fingers readily into his fish and black bread and honey. After supper, he cheerily showed Maria a stash of 3,000 roubles, stored in a drawer for her dowry. He read to his daughters the opening of the Gospel of St John: 'In the beginning was the word...' Maria wrote 'For the first time I could feel the beauty and truth of those mystic passages.'

But running alongside Maria's reverential memory is the less wholesome testimony of the halberdier porter, who noted a further visit that evening: 'A lady of about 25 was with him from 10.00 to 11.00pm'. This lady was also spotted by Rasputin's niece Anna, who clearly had few illusions about her uncle. She recalled that 'around 10pm a plump, blonde woman arrived called "Sister Maria" though she was no sister of mercy. She helped him to remove the tension that apparently took hold of him against his will.' Rasputin and 'Sister Maria' immediately retired to a little room where they set about removing that tension.

At some point that evening, Maria had taken herself out into the blizzard. She returned at 11pm missing 'Sister Maria', but in time to catch the next visitor, Alexander Protopopov, the Minister of the Interior. Protopopov was himself a controversial character, in the advanced stages of syphilis and rumoured to be a necrophiliac. He regularly visited the flat, mostly at the behest of the Tsarina who hoped the curious pair would discuss the country's troubles and that 'our Friend' might offer helpful tips.

Protopopov allegedly told Rasputin's daughters to leave the room so that he could talk to their father in private. Testifying later, however, he made no mention of the girls: 'I stopped by to see Rasputin... around 12.00. I... saw him for about ten minutes and saw only him since he opened the door himself. He didn't say anything to me about intending to go out.' If he had, Protopopov insisted he would have remonstrated with him: the Tsarina had specifically told him not to let our Friend leave his flat. He made a point, nevertheless, of warning Rasputin that he had heard of a plot against his life.

Rasputin did mention his plans to his daughter, Maria. As she testified: 'After I got back and was going off to bed, Father told me that he was going to visit "The Little One".' Rasputin's nickname for Yussoupov was, confusingly, the same as the one used by the Tsarina for her son, Alexis. He also told his niece where he was going. But Maria added that none of them would have been in the least surprised, as the strikingly handsome and charming young Prince, then aged 29, had become 'for us, my sister and myself, the friend of the household'.

Rasputin also phoned his friend Simanovich, that night, to tell him that he was seeing Yussoupov. Simanovich's loyalty had been assured after Rasputin cured his son of the shaking disease, St Vitus' Dance. Simanovich himself, it seemed, had heard of a murder plot, and was sufficiently worried to warn his friend not to go out, then to insist he call again at 2am. That call never came.

Who the last visitor to the flat was that night was to become a matter of dispute. After dismissing Protopopov, Rasputin changed his clothes for the third time that day. Owing either to excitement or drink, he was unable to dress himself, and Katya had to help him into his favourite light-blue shirt, embroidered with cornflowers: 'He couldn't button the collar and I buttoned it for him.' He wore a golden sash and his best pair of blue pantaloons; he also put on a bracelet with a monogram of the Tsar. Then he retired to his bedroom. As his niece Anna testified: 'Uncle lay down on his bed just after 12 in his clothing.'

Katya felt uneasy and lay awake. She slept in the kitchen, in a bed sealed off by a curtain. She later said that 'the bell rang at the back door'. After a few minutes, she heard voices, peeked through her curtain and recognised Prince Felix Yussoupov.

But, in an early police interrogation, Yussoupov denied having been to the flat: 'Around 12.30 Rasputin called me from somewhere... inviting us to go to the gypsies... voices could be heard over the phone as well as a woman's squeal.' The idea of the Tsarina's Man of God telephoning from a noisy venue, in the style of a breathless teenager, apparently did not give rise to comment. But then the police would have been too overawed by Yussoupov's connections to question him further. It would have been unthinkable to take the word of Rasputin's peasant maid, Katya, over that of the Tsar's nephew.

Whether Yussoupov intended to carry on lying cannot be known. But, with his strong sense of theatre, he was soon finding the colourful truth too hard to contain. Within days, he was revelling in the telling of a wholly different sequence of events, beginning with his first glimpse of Rasputin at the flat door. He noted the efforts of the Man of God to clean himself up: Rasputin had combed the food out of his beard and now smelt of cheap soap. Later reports said that he had also covered his ears and neck with cologne. He took an unexpected pride in his ability to brush up, occasionally calling for scissors for his fingernails and perfumed pomatum for his stringy hair. Maria wrote however, that, despite all his pains, her father had begun to feel apprehensive about the arrangement. She reported that he said to Yussoupov: 'Must I leave tonight?'

Maria herself was nervous. Though they were not suspicious of Yussoupov, Maria and her sister Varya had become worried about their father leaving the flat after dark. As he struggled to find his boots, he said: 'It's those children again, they have hidden them. They don't want me to go out.' But he finally found the boots and was ready to go. Maria, who, like Katya, had been unable to sleep, made unsuccessful attempts to comfort herself with her father's maxim: 'Nothing can happen to me unless it's God's will.'

In her testimony to the police on December 18 Maria Rasputin said: 'Later I went to sleep and did not see whether "The Little One" arrived and whether he and my father left together.'

Years later, however, the fanciful Maria told a different story. She described herself back at her window, watching her father walking along the street, pulling up his collar and making the sign of the cross. She wrote that she wept as she watched him getting into a car with Yussoupov; and swore that, as the motor fired up, she spotted an elegant hand reach out to shut the car door.



Rasputin never had any difficulty reconciling his weakness for beautiful young princesses with a passion for the simple life. During his last years, he spent many a happy hour at palaces repeating one of his favourite instructions: 'Be glad at simplicity.' He was full of invitations as unlikely as they were picturesque: 'Come with me in the summer... to the open spaces of Siberia. We will catch fish and work in the fields. And then you will really learn to understand God.'

He evidently wanted his listeners to know he set great store by his Siberian origins. But, as with so many of Rasputin's pronouncements, it is hard to gauge the extent of his sincerity.

What is certain is that the spiritual pride of puritans was among his biggest bugbears. The traditional Siberian had no qualms about embracing wine, women and song. In this Wild East of Russia, if a man could prove he had been drunk when attacking a judge, he would get only three days in prison. A Siberian picnic comprised a parcel of fresh cucumbers and a hearty pail of wine. According to one contemporary traveller, female binge drinkers in comic headgear lined the streets on freezing winter nights. The traveller described one incident during which the women hurled

snow at men, then, in a grand crescendo, fell down and threw up their legs, 'revealing the most remarkable sights'.

The prevailing hedonism was combined with mystical fervour. Hunters in Siberia were reputedly able to teleport themselves from covey to covey. Religious sects flourished in the forests, ranging from groups of Old Believers quibbling over alterations in the liturgy to fanatics burning themselves to death. In extreme sects, baptisms by fire included male castration; women had their nipples and clitorises cut off while holding icons.

Pilgrims, '*stranniki*', wandered through the villages, telling spell-binding stories of their travels in return for food and a bed. Villagers left bowls of food and milk on their doorsteps; these would be snapped up by the *stranniki*, vagrants or escaped convicts, whoever was first. In Pokrovskoye where Rasputin grew up, the bowls would have been particularly appreciated by the pigs that wandered freely up and down its main street.

In Rasputin's day, the village comprised 1,000 people in 200 houses. The villagers endured harsh winters, with temperatures dropping to minus 50, followed by spring thaws which reduced the rough main track to a sea of liquid mud.

The Rasputins were one of Pokrovskoye's oldest established families, with roots dating back to 1643. Rasputin's supporters have been quick to point out that the family name was derived from '*rasput*', meaning 'crossroad', and not '*rasputnik*', debauchee, as was sometimes claimed. Indeed in the early 1800s, Rasputin's forebears, Ivan and Miron Rosputin (sic), were listed among the village's 'better souls'.

Whether Rasputin's father, Efim, carried on in the 'better souls' family tradition is a matter of argument. According to some reports, he liked strong vodka and was a 'deplorable drunkard'. Though primarily heterosexual, he successfully cultivated young male lovers: this despite his appearance: 'chunky, unkempt and stooped'.

But at his funeral the family spoke of his religious dedication and untiring work on the farm. His dutiful granddaughter, Maria, portrayed him as a gentleman of the old school, sipping China tea while railing against the horse thieves who blighted the 'better souls' lives: canny thieves would lasso their prey then make silent escapes, with the horses' hooves wrapped in rags.

It was claimed, by his supporters, that Efim Rasputin acquired conversational skills and wisdom through his job driving carts. This seems unlikely. He certainly took pride in his work, flaunting a smart carter's badge on his left arm and a cap with an Imperial eagle. But rides on his route, 'Trak 4', linking Tyumen and Tobolsk, were so rough that passengers in the clattering carts were obliged to lie full length on piles of hay to save their spines.

Maria's claim that Efim read the Bible to his family also seems far-fetched. In an 1877 census conducted when little Grishka was eight, Efim indicated, with crosses, that the whole family was illiterate. Twenty-two years later, another census revealed that no progress had been made: the Rasputins, now including Grigory's wife Praskovia, were still unable to read or write.

Rasputin's mother, Anna, was described in one report as 'short and rotund' but in another as 'tall, slim with shining eyes'. The photographic evidence is flawed, as the images are blurred and there are conflicting captions. One indistinct photograph of her apparently exists in which she peers intently at the camera, perhaps suspicious of the new technology. Her loyal granddaughter, Maria, claimed that Anna kept a meticulously clean house.

Rasputin's parents married in 1862, when Efim was 20 and Anna 22. The Rasputins were relatively well off, apparently occupying an *izba* with an unlikely sounding eight rooms and owning 12 cows and 18 horses. They may have used their yard as a latrine, but they were not reduced to

creating windows out of stretched animal bladders.



The miasma of confusion surrounding Rasputin's life begins in his childhood. Rumours and counter-rumours have sprung up, even concerning several mysterious siblings.

Much has been made of real evidence that his parents lost four children before Rasputin was born; it has been suggested that this was some kind of divine warning. Three sons born after him also died. There may have been one surviving sister, Feodosia. Some biographies mention a brother Misha or Dmitri, and a sister, Vara, who helped in the house; allusions have been made to a second epileptic sister, who fell into the river and drowned while doing the laundry.

Amid these confusing details, it is perhaps understandable that, in her memoir, Maria got her own father's birth date – January 9 1869 – wrong. Rasputin himself misled people, sometimes adding as much as eight years to his age. Considering himself a sort of elder to the Imperial family he disliked being younger than the Tsar, who was born a year before him.

According to Maria, her father's birth was marked with a comet across the sky. Others claimed that babies were born that day with iron teeth and dogs with six legs; it was said that snakes fell from the sky.

The stark contradictions that were to mark Rasputin's life began shortly after his birth. Though his birth weight was an average seven pounds, he was freakishly advanced physically: standing at six months and walking at eight. This physical prowess was not matched, however, by any mental development and he was unable to speak until he was two and a half. His mother, Anna, became increasingly worried as the toddler stared interminably at the sky and at individual blades of grass. She thought he 'was not quite right in the head'. She might have been relieved if she had advanced knowledge of the 1917 Commission's conclusion that there was no history of mental illness in the Rasputin family.

His propensity for being virtually catatonic alternated with periods of great restlessness. When he was not holed up in the *izba*, staring fearfully at shadows, he would be running amok in the forest. He wet his bed, and cried so frequently that he was known as 'sniveller' and 'snot nose'. Aged eight, he was swimming in a river with his cousin Dmitri when the boys got into difficulties. Though they were both rescued, Dmitri died of pneumonia shortly afterwards. In his grief, the young Grishka went off his food, barely touching his favourite pickled fish and stuffed eggs.

Rasputin was 12 when his mystical gifts became apparent. First it was discovered that the family cows produced more milk if he was nearby. Then he cured a lame horse by placing his hand on its hamstring and throwing his head back. He was soon able to predict when a stranger was on the way: an hour after his announcement, a traveller would appear, in the distance, on Trakt 4.

On one occasion, when he was lying ill, the boy overheard his father and friends discussing a recent horse theft. He struggled off his sick bed, came into the kitchen and pointed to the richest peasant: 'He's the one who stole the horse.' The villagers followed the man home, discovered the stolen horse and, Siberian-style, beat the man half to death. Grishka claimed he never stole as a boy because he had visions of thieves ringed by their ill-gotten gains.

As a child, Rasputin was not up for the usual Siberian games of convicts and soldiers. Nor did he attend school; in this he inadvertently followed the teaching of his namesake, Saint Grigory, who viewed learning as one of life's obstacles. He eventually grew to enjoy some regular boyish

pursuits: gorging on salted cucumbers, hunting, fishing and dancing the Kazachok, with bent knees. But he remained isolated, spending particularly desolate hours sitting by the roadside, thrashing himself with thistles. As he admitted: 'I was an outsider.'

His physical strength ensured that, despite his isolation, he was never a victim of bullying. Indeed, he succeeded in beating up the village bully, Boris, to some extent even stealing his crown. He was clearly impulsive. He once assaulted a beggar woman but, because of his age, there was no inquiry. He threw a 15-month-old girl into the river because she wouldn't smile at him. At 14 he nearly killed a man who tried to rob him, for which he was punished with 20 strokes of the whip. A doctor who treated him for smallpox was impressed by the 'ardent expression' in his eyes but also described him as the 'terror of the district'.

Perhaps it was lucky that his violent impulses were tempered by a taste for mysticism. The desperate village priest offered the young terror bribes to stay away from Sunday services. But ten kopecks was not enough to keep Grishka from the white church with gilded domes that dominated Pokrovskoye. He even claimed to enjoy discussions about the scriptures with his one friend, called like his dead cousin, Dmitri. As he said of his adolescence: 'I dreamt of God many times... I wept without knowing why or where my tears came from.'

He was so thrilled when he first heard about the 'Kingdom of God within you' that he had a vision of a bright light. The vision came to him while he was sitting under a larch tree. Years later, when Maria was aged ten, he took her to the same larch tree and told her how he had realised, then that 'God is here, inside, this moment – for ever.' When he told his timorous mother that he'd 'almost seen God', she was worried that he had blasphemed and told him not to mention the vision to his excitable father.



Rasputin's enjoyment of the female form began innocently enough, watching fellow villagers skinny-dipping. At 16, however, he underwent some sort of sexual assault by the young wife of a general. Maria's description of the assault leaves little to the imagination. Her information concerning the seamier side of her father's life came from another of Rasputin's maids, Dounia, aunt of the maid Katya. Dounia never shrank from telling Maria the fruitier details. The young girl kept a meticulous record of their chats in a school notebook.

Maria describes how Rasputin was enticed by the general's wife to a summer house on her large estate. She reached down his trousers, 'grasped him gently, releasing him for a moment then touching him again'. After the grasps, she lay on a bed, gazing at him provocatively. Apparently he was about to pounce, when four maidservants appeared from behind curtains. These maidservants humiliated him, throwing water over him and 'touching his out-thrust organ'.

Fortunately for the young Grishka, Dounia was one of the maidservants. Seeing him for the first time, aged 14, she was immediately smitten. She took pity on him, found his scattered clothes and returned them to him. Dounia may have been captivated by his out-thrust organ; she was unlikely to have been attracted by his face. As a result of innumerable scraps, his large nose was already slightly askew and looked, according to one account, as if it had been slapped on with a trowel.

This first sexual experience marked Rasputin's debut as a serial seducer of women. From now on he would feel free to accost young women of all shapes and sizes, kissing them while struggling with vital buttons.

But for all these insensitive fumbblings, the teenage Grishka sometimes showed a soft heart. Later that same year, he saw a naked widow being dragged through the streets by a horse. She was being punished, according to the local custom, after having been found sleeping with a vagabond. Grishka pursued her into the forest and built her a hideaway. He visited her several times but, in a surprising turn-up for the books, left what remained of her honour intact: his restraint here is particularly laudable as she was purportedly the first woman he healed with caresses to the buttocks.

It was during a visit to a religious fete in a monastery at Avalak, on the River Tobol, in 1886 that Grishka met his future wife, Praskovia Dubrovina. When they parted, Maria reported that her father left a 'fervent kiss upon her willing lips'. It has been claimed that Praskovia, then aged 20, already felt left on the shelf and that her subsequent forbearance towards Grigory, then 17, stemmed from relief at being rescued from spinsterhood. But she seems to have had all the right attributes: she was plump, with dark eyes, small features and thick blonde hair. Though short, she was strong, an important asset in a wife expected to bear children while tackling the harvest. Photographs exist of the burly young Grishka but Praskovia is always absent.

Grishka and Praskovia were married five months later, on February 2 1887, three weeks after the groom's 18th birthday. Their first child was born the following year, but died at six months of scarlet fever. There was then a mysteriously long gap before the couple had twins, who both died of whooping cough. Could the rampant Grishka have restrained himself a full six years? That seems unlikely. But it seems almost more unlikely that the obliging Praskovia was keeping him at bay. In any case, they finally had their three surviving children: Dmitri in 1895, Maria in 1898 and Varya in 1900. A seventh child also died.

Rasputin proved a trying husband. His defenders claim it was his mother Anna's early death that drove him to drink. But then, according to some reports, Anna did not die until 1904.

Either way, it was during his early years of marriage that he got into the habit of driving carts to Tyumen to collect grain, then returning on foot, penniless and drunk. He sold the family bread to get money for alcohol. At one point he was hit on the head by a neighbour while trying to steal fence posts. As the neighbour testified: 'He wanted to run and was about to hit me with his axe, but I hit him with a stake so hard that blood starting coming from his nose and mouth.' This developed into a medical emergency, as the nearest doctor was 70 miles away. The neighbour was worried he had given Grishka permanent brain damage. Certainly Rasputin retained, for life, diabolical protuberances on his forehead. These were referred to, in several accounts, as 'bumps of budding horn'.

In 1891, aged 22, he was working for a Tobolsk haulier when he again mislaid his horse, claiming it had fallen in the river and drowned. He also lost a cartload of furs, which he insisted was stolen while he was relieving himself on the side of the road. The British chaplain in St Petersburg in the early 1900s, the Rev Bousfield Swan Lombard, wrote with disapproval of several randomly selected transgressions: 'He was guilty of... many crimes, horse stealing, perjury and the rape of a very young girl'.

During these roustabout years, Rasputin resembled Dostoyevsky's Dmitri Karamazov, a blustering innocent, repeatedly falling prey to drink and gypsy women. He might have preferred a comparison to Dmitri's gentler younger brother, the spiritual Alyosha: Rasputin loved to evoke the honey and flowers of Siberia. But he was not altogether ashamed of his youthful misdoings, readily incorporating them into his wondrous life story: 'I was dissatisfied... I turned to drink'; 'I was a drunkard and smoked tobacco but then I repented and just look what I made of myself.'

Endless floggings and prison sentences proved counter-productive. Grishka had discovered ‘the joy of suffering and abuse’. It was not until 1897, when Rasputin was in his late twenties, that the authorities found an effective punishment: banishing him from Pokrovskoye and sending him to a monastery. He spent three weeks walking the 325 miles to the 40 churches of Verkhoturys, sleeping in barns on the way. His dissolute father had once vowed to visit Verkhoturys as a penance. Now his son would go in his place. Rasputin later grandly claimed an inner voice said: ‘Take up the cross and follow me.’

Other accounts claim that he reached the monastery simply by chance, after giving lifts to a seminary student or a priest: the prospective passenger had been obliged to seek out his carter Grishka, and finally unearthed him at home, in an armchair, snoring loudly.



The Verkhoturys Monastery was considered by some clerics to be pagan, housing sectarians of whom the regular Orthodox Church disapproved. The most extreme of these sectarians were known as khlysty and would whip each other: ‘*khlyst*’ being the Russian for whip. The khlyst men were forever either testing their mettle by sharing beds with ‘spiritual wives’ and resisting temptation or throwing themselves into sadomasochistic orgies. Some preferred not to trust to their mettle and simply to castrate themselves.

At that time there were khlyst churches, ‘arks’, in 30 Russian provinces. Congregations, known as ‘ships’, would gather, wearing white ‘tunics of fervour’ and calling themselves Christs or Mothers of God. The founder of the movement had thrown all his books into the river, seeking instead the ‘golden book of life’ and instigating the worship of a Christ figure born to a woman and a man both aged 100. Rasputin would presumably have chosen the golden book of life over real books. But he might not have been so keen on the ancient parents: his distaste for older women was matched by rage at his ageing father.

Rasputin spent three months at Verkhoturys, where it seems he was preyed upon by at least two over-excited monks. His first admirer, Father Josif, pressed a thigh against him during a visit to his cell: Grishka was obliged to pile furniture against the door to prevent further calls. Father Josif was then joined by a second admirer, Father Sergius; the pair pleaded together through the door: ‘We want to love you.’

He did, however, meet one monk, Father Makari, who appealed to him. Father Makari had misbehaved in his early life. Now he lived in a tumble-down shed and slept on a mud floor; he ate almost nothing but black bread and wore chains to mortify his flesh. The British Embassy chaplain the Rev Mr Lombard, wrote approvingly of a good influence on Rasputin, doubtless Makari, who ‘talked to him about the brevity of life, the necessity of preparation for death and hideousness of sin and the means of achieving salvation’. The Rev Mr Lombard would not have been put off by tales of Makari’s extreme devotion: he himself performed exorcisms and was a student of the occult.

Rasputin kept in touch with Makari for the rest of his life, at one point even persuading the Tsar to give him money. Makari’s only indulgence was his poultry: deprived of human company, he would chat to his hens and chickens.

A new Grishka returned to Pokrovskoye having given up alcohol, tobacco and meat. His supporters claim he did not touch vodka for years. In years to come he developed an odd belief that carnivores were in some way blackened by meat; fish eaters, on the other hand, were lightened and

might even acquire a halo. The reformed Rasputin appeared 'with dishevelled hair and no hat singing and waving his arms, blazing with the fire of the zealous convert'. During church services he swung his arms and made grimaces; he beat his head on the church floor until it bled and 'sang in an improper voice'. To the relief of many of the congregants, he began holding separate services in a hole dug under the family stable.

This increase in religious fervour did not dull his sex drive. He may have resisted some button pulling at first, but, as a healthy married man of 28, he was not about to become celibate. He soon began practising a sort of khlyst-style fusion of sex and religion.

This process began, curiously, with his successful resistance to the charms of a woodcutter's wife. He had undergone a struggle after being 'made to feel the pressure of her breasts against his arms and neck in the small *izba*'. Leaving the woodcutter's house frustrated, his attention was caught by some birds which, he maintained, were singing love songs to each other. The birds offered an irresistible example of joy in love and, declaring that 'nature glorifies God and makes us joyful', he resolved never to pass up any future opportunity for sex.

As luck would have it, he promptly ran into three obliging women bathing nude in the river. His approving daughter, Maria, later wrote: 'They accepted his love-making one by one.' After the 'love feast', Rasputin claimed he was put into a meditative state: 'The Virgin smiled at him.' He was keen to spread the word, taking his joy in love a stage further, insisting: 'chastity is the sin of pride'. He initiated orgies around fires under the stables, merrily embracing what he referred to as 'mutual sin'.

In one account, a Mr Verintsev describes a religious ceremony and orgy conducted by Rasputin in the woods near Pokrovskoye. The worshippers dug a pit, which they filled with logs and leaves. Rasputin then lit a fire, offered prayers to St Michael and threw incense into the flames. The congregants held hands and began to dance; Rasputin prided himself on his dancing; he would leap and shout 'Oh', in the manner of someone lowered into icy water, then whirl in place for a whole hour at a time. If a dance had to go one way or the other, he made a point of dancing towards the left.

His daughter claimed that, when he heard songs such as 'Along the Roadway' and 'Troika Fluffy Snow', he couldn't restrain himself. He would float about the room 'like a feather', with all the natural grace of Tolstoy's Natasha Rostov. Maria was delighted by her father's response to music: 'The rhythm of it made him vibrate as it does all primitive and sensitive people.' He himself had no reservations about dancing: 'David danced before the Ark of the Covenant.'

After dancing, the congregants, dizzy and overcome by 'spiritual beer', traditionally fell down. Then, as the embers of the fire were dying, they would turn to each other and have sex, or 'rejoice'. The *khlyst* leader, known as the pilot, would set the ball rolling, bearing down upon his female followers in a 'sweet smelling cloud'.

Mr Verintsev described how Rasputin, as pilot, descended on his female congregants proclaiming: 'I cleanse you of all your sins.' Once the orgy was underway, wrote Mr Verintsev, the battle-cry was: 'Sin for salvation!' The correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, E.J. Dillon, later wrote wryly of Rasputin: 'The simple souls who gathered around him as their saviour were amazed at the ease with which they could qualify for the Kingdom of Heaven.'

While Mr Verintsev's vivid descriptions seem plausible enough, Maria's claim that her father dabbled in black magic seems less likely. She maintained that her father took part in black masses during which the Lord's Prayer was recited backwards and wine poured into the navel of a naked girl on the altar. In her accounts there is often a conflict between her love of her father and her

weakness for sensationalism.

With his increasing influence, Grishka developed an unlikely taste for sophistry. He offered one miscreant in Pokrovskoye an unlikely prediction: 'You will attain the highest rank.' When the miscreant was hanged for murder, Grishka was challenged with the prediction. He replied with unexpected aplomb: 'I told you he'd be placed above everybody.'

The Pokrovskoye village priest, Father Peter, remained unimpressed. He had red hair and a red beard and apparently looked as though he was about to burst into flames. He complained to the Bishop of Tobolsk of Rasputin's practices. According to Maria, he was angry primarily because Rasputin was costing him money, taking services for which he himself was normally paid. But then Maria herself hated Father Peter because he had thumped her on the ear when she hadn't learnt her catechism.

It seemed now that for every new follower whose soul Rasputin 'lightened', there was an ill-wisher lined up with Father Peter. Indeed, Yussoupov always maintained that, if Rasputin hadn't left Pokrovskoye, he would have ended up in the River Tura and nobody would have searched for him. Rasputin himself admitted: 'People blamed me when things went wrong, even if I had nothing to do with it.' But he later said confusingly: 'I spent my first 28 years in the world and I was one with it.'



So it was perhaps just as well that, in 1898, aged 29, Grigory Rasputin experienced a life-changing vision. He was taking a break, standing halfway down a furrow and leaning on his hoe when the Virgin Mary appeared, hovering in the sky and pointing to the horizon. She wore a purple-brown veil and dress and looked, coincidentally, exactly like a statue of the Virgin in the Kazan Cathedral at St Petersburg. This vision was accompanied by the celestial voices of 1,000 angels. Whatever sceptics later made of the vision, Rasputin himself had no doubts, proudly marking the relevant furrow with a wooden cross.

That night he claimed he woke to find his icon of the Virgin Mary weeping and issuing silent instructions: 'Go, wander, and cleanse people of their sins.' At Verkhoturys, the ascetic Makari was very excited when he heard of the manifestations, telling Rasputin he must now walk thousands of miles to Mount Athos in Greece.

The family had mixed reactions when they heard of Rasputin's new calling. His wife, Praskovia, mindful of her husband's appetites, worried that there was 'something lacking in the way she responded to his love-making'. His father was equally convinced his son was simply skiving off the harvest. Rasputin failed to tell either of them when exactly he planned to leave; they only realised he'd gone when they noticed his robe and staff were missing.

It would take him a full ten months to reach Mount Athos. He would have been sporting a beard at this time, as Athos had laws forbidding entry to 'any woman, any female, any eunuch and anyone with smooth visage'. He was horrified to find monks openly engaged in homosexual activity and later complained to Makari that he'd seen monks ravaging a novice. He claimed that only one in a hundred pilgrims was following in the footsteps of Christ. He himself was proud of his privations, boasting peremptorily: 'Wore shackles for three years, was attacked by wolves, they did not harm me.' He claimed to have gone six months without changing his underwear or laying hands upon himself.

He entered into a routine. Every spring he would wander to holy places and return, perhaps conveniently, after the harvest. At one point he claimed to have walked to the Holy Land and, in the space of two and a half years, to have walked 7,000 miles. He would boast of his endurance: ‘I didn’t sleep for 40 nights each spring.’ How much walking he actually did is impossible to know. It is tempting to imagine him walking to the next village and holing up in a bar until the harvest was safely over.

His patchy presence at home was, however, much prized by his young children, including the new baby, Varya. He took all three to fetes and retained sufficient energy after his pilgrimages to play ball games. His decision to teach Dmitri to drive the family cart proved unwise; aged 13 Dmitri tipped the cart over with 11-year-old Maria on board. Fortunately, both were unhurt. He relayed Russian fables, including the Dragonfly and the Ant, the Rich Man and the Cobbler and perhaps most appropriately, the Poet and the Millionaire.

Praskovia never failed to welcome her constantly returning husband, falling to her knees in homage. This, despite his frequently being so bedraggled that she struggled to recognise him. She was not put out by his new habit of bringing back groups of young women in nun’s clothes. It was around this time that his lifelong love of unimaginative nicknames was spawned as he named these early followers: ‘Hot Stuff’, ‘Boss Lady’, ‘Sexy Girl’. He made up equally leaden titles for the boys that he came across: ‘Fella’, ‘Long Hair’ or ‘Big Breeches’.

There was the odd scandal, including a woman who claimed he had raped her in his cellar. But the doughty Praskovia took it all in her stride. Indeed, she convinced herself that sex was a burden for her Grishka. She was learning well: altruistic sin was one of her husband’s favourite notions. He maintained that he generously took upon himself the sin of each of his sexual encounters and further, that these sins reduced the overall amount in the world. Presumably he nodded his whiskery head sagely as Praskovia lamented: ‘Each man must bear his cross and this is his.’

After more pressure from the irascible Father Peter, an inquiry into Rasputin’s activities was launched in Pokrovskoye in 1903 by Bishop Anthony of Tobolsk. Rasputin never had any official role within the Church, but some of the Church leaders clearly felt that his spiritual activities fell under their jurisdiction. A policeman snuck into his services dressed as a peasant. Unfortunately for Father Peter, the inquiry foundered, as the policeman not only failed to find anything irregular, but succumbed to a full-blown attack of what would become known as ‘*Rasputinschina*’.



Rasputin was aged 33 when he decided he had had enough of rustic life and set out on a near-600-mile walk to the nearest city, Kazan. Or at least that is how it would appear. It is hard to tell how purposeful Rasputin actually was in many of the things he did in his life – to what extent he directed himself and to what extent his actions were dictated by random moods and circumstances.

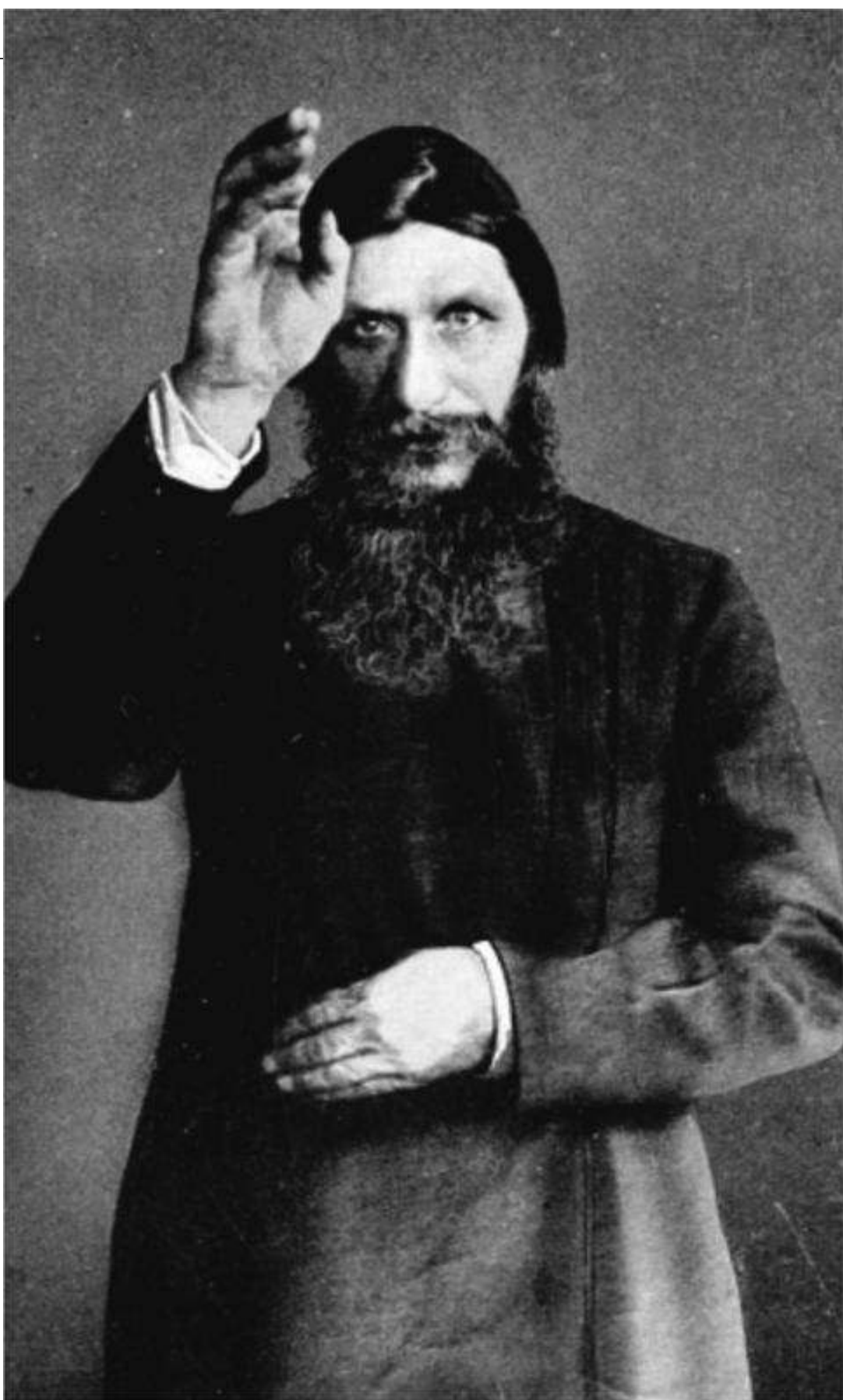
It was in Kazan that he had his first taste of fine living, sitting in lavishly carpeted rooms watching gentlefolk sip tea rather than suck it through sugar. His subsequent passion for gadgets was inspired by this first sight of radios, electric lights and, most importantly, telephones.

The telephone was to become a staple of Rasputin’s life. In later years he would use the phone to vet women callers, asking how old they were and what they looked like, before making appointments. He and his daughter Maria became notorious for making nuisance calls. Maria would make suggestive overtures to men listed in the phone directory, while Rasputin enjoyed exposing

bashful supporters when he knew they had company, waiting on the line with grim satisfaction, as the manservant delivered the unwelcome news: 'I have Grishka Rasputin on the phone.' His happiest moments on the telephone, however, were spent dancing: a singer friend would run through a medley of songs while he clutched the receiver and danced in squats, twirls and stamps.

Shortly after his arrival in Kazan, Rasputin managed to gain the confidence of one particular cleric after warning him of a knife attack. But other clerics were not so impressed by his burgeoning love of the bath-house. They heard that he was inviting women to wash his genitals: 'Take off your clothes and wash the *muzhik*' [peasant]. The women would watch as he, at least in theory, controlled himself; they would then thrash him with twigs. At one point he took two sisters, aged 15 and 20 for a thorough session of washing and thrashing. When he was accosted by their outraged mother he pronounced grandly: 'Now you may feel at peace. The Day of Salvation has dawned for your daughters.' An accusation levelled at Rasputin by the Tobolsk Theological Consistory concerning his 'odd behaviour towards women' did nothing to dampen his ardour. Indeed, the joys of urban life took such a hold that he was soon gravitating from Kazan towards the larger city of Kiev.





It was widely acknowledged that the Man of God's eyes were mesmeric and that he could expand and contract the pupils at will



In Kiev he had his first encounter with Russia's Imperial family. Grand Duchess Militza was

married to the Tsar's cousin, Grand Duke Peter, and was the elder of two Montenegrin princesses known as the 'Black Sisters' or 'Black Peril'. She considered herself a religious expert and in the early 1900s was the proud author of 'Selected Passages from the Holy Fathers'.

Intrigued by tales of Rasputin's powers, Militza, then visiting Kiev, tracked him down to an obscure shed, where she found him sawing wood. She and her younger sister, Princess Anastasia had once been considered great beauties at Court. Militza retained a soulful face, with large, dark, sorrowful eyes and a delicate mouth, but by this time she was well into her thirties and evidently held no interest for Rasputin. Though aware of her presence, he carried on sawing noisily. She told him to sit down but he refused; when she asked how long he would remain in Kiev, he replied curtly that God would tell him when he should leave. His abrasiveness and her conciliatory responses would become characteristic of Rasputin's exchanges with members of the aristocracy, who were prone to welcome his rudeness as a mark of integrity.

Their second meeting was altogether happier. Rasputin had arrived in the Russian capital, St Petersburg, in 1903. His unlikely claim was that he had come to raise money for the church at Pokrovskoye. Whatever was behind his motivations, he seems to have decided, at this point, that it might be worth being civil to grand duchesses after all. He paid a visit to Militza and her younger 'black sister', Anastasia. Completing a formidable party would be the Tsar's so-called 'dread uncle', Grand Duke Nicholas.



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