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ALEXANDER I'S DEATH AND DESTINY

By LEONID I. STRAKHOVSKY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The life of Emperor Alexander I of Russia has attracted many writers because of its dramatic elements. He came to the throne of Russia after the murder of his father, Emperor Paul I and, although there is no evidence that he sanctioned this regicide, it is quite clear that he had been aware of the existence of the conspiracy. This, in my opinion, is the psychological key which opens the mystery of his death.

To begin with, it was strange that the victor over Napoleon, the autocrat of all the Russias, chose in the fall of 1825 the small and distant city of Taganrog on the Sea of Azov as a place for the recuperation of his wife, Empress Elisabeth. Neither the climate nor the general conveniences of the place warranted such a choice, since there were in Russia many places better situated and with a milder climate than Taganrog which was open to fierce autumnal winds. The only reason for the choice, in my belief, was its seclusion and its location on the sea, offering a better means of escape than other places. Because Alexander's mind by that time was made up to stage a fake death and to disappear.

The theory of Alexander's survival in the person of the Siberian hermit Fedor Kuzmich has so far no conclusive proof, although it is accepted by some historians. Yet the amount of information on this subject is large and varied enough to warrant its acceptance at least as a strong probability. The fact that Alexander's tomb in the Fortress of SS Peter and Paul in Leningrad was found to be empty when the Soviet authorities opened it in 1926 seems to confirm the validity of the assumption that Emperor Alexander I of Russia did not die in Taganrog in 1825, but in Siberia in 1864.

The items presented here are the concluding chapters of my forthcoming book on the life of Alexander I.

L. I. S.

1. JOURNEY'S END

THE LAST two weeks that Emperor Alexander spent in Taganrog before his official death have been recorded in the diaries of Empress Elisabeth, Prince Peter Volkonski, Sir James Wyllie, Bt., Doctor Dimitri Tarasov, and in an unsigned manuscript entitled "Official History of the Illness and Death of Emperor Alexander I." We possess also the recollections of some of the Emperor's servants, especially those of his valets Anisimov and Fedorov, but they do not contain a day-by-day record of events and very often give way to the temptation of recalling stories based upon hearsay and therefore of no historical value. Prince Peter Volkonski kept a day-by-day record and his description is the most complete if not always the most accurate. However, as a whole, the four principal witnesses have left us four different stories full of the most obvious contradictions. This state of affairs can be explained only by two suppositions: (1)

that they had to write something about Alexander's illness in view of the Emperor's determination to use it as a means of escape and, obviously, did not arrange among themselves all the details of their narratives; and (2) that some of these diaries, and especially Volkonsky's were written *post factum*.

On the morning of November 18, Prince Volkonski notes that the Emperor had just spent a good night. Wyllie on the other hand writes: "The night from the seventeenth to the eighteenth was bad. I am afraid that it may all turn for the worse." In his description of the day of November 18, Volkonski states that Wyllie and himself had to interrupt their dinner at 3:00 P.M. because the Emperor felt feverish. He tells us that they went together to the Emperor's room and remained there. This is contradicted by the Empress who writes that Wyllie was alone in Alexander's room and that she herself went in later, not mentioning Volkonski at all, whilst the latter omits to note the presence of Empress Elisabeth. Then, too, Volkonski writes "At *seven o'clock* in the evening the Emperor thanked Wyllie who left his room. Later came the Empress and stayed until *ten o'clock*."

Empress Elisabeth contradicts this statement by saying: "I had been with the Emperor until *seven o'clock* and then returned to my apartment. He slept all evening and *did not call for me*." On November 19, Volkonsky writes: "The Emperor has spent a good night. In the morning at about eight o'clock he got up and dressed as usual. About 11:00 A.M. he took a laxative and felt relieved, but towards the evening his temperature rose again *because he refused to take any more medicine*."

For this day, the Empress gives many more details, whilst Volkonsky's diary contains only the short statement mentioned above. The Empress writes: "He had come to my apartment between 11:00 and 12:00 A.M. and told me that he was feeling much better. . . . He was still looking rather yellow, but was much happier. We busied ourselves in sorting sea shells that I had gathered. I begged him not to work too much as he had done the day before, to which he answered that work with him was a habit, that when he did not work he felt that his head was empty and that if he abdicated he would devour entire libraries, because otherwise he would go insane."

The Empress further relates that she dined that day with Alexander and after dinner he visited her again. Towards 7:00 P.M. she was called to the Emperor. She found him lying on a couch clad in a dressing gown. He told her that *he had taken his medicine* which had acted so violently that it had caused cramps, but that Wyllie had given him some tea which had relieved the pain. He said that he was

feeling fine. He talked with great animation and laughed heartily. Volkonski and Wyllie went in at nine o'clock. Wyllie asked the Emperor how he was feeling. Alexander answered smilingly: "Fine!"

Wyllie's notes are in complete contradiction with the long and detailed description of Empress Elisabeth. He writes: "The Emperor is apathetic. Spells of vertigo and attacks of fever repeat themselves too often. I dare not declare that it is *hemitritacus semitertiana*, although everything seems to indicate that it is."

On November 20, the Empress, Volkonski and Wyllie all state that Alexander's health was satisfactory. Only the anonymous author of "The Official History of the Illness and Death of Emperor Alexander I" comes out with an alarming statement: "He is so ill that Doctor Stoffregen has been called to his bedside." This statement is very strange, not only because it contradicts the previous three, but also and especially because it mentions Doctor Stoffregen, court physician to the Empress. Alexander had his own two medical men — Wyllie and Tarasov, in both of whom he placed great faith. Were there need for the opinion or help of another physician, would it not have been more natural to call for Tarasov who had attended the Emperor for so many years but had not been called to his bedside since his return to Taganrog, than to call in Doctor Stoffregen? And if Stoffregen had really been called to Alexander's bedside would the Empress and Volkonski not have mentioned this fact in their detailed description of that day?

The date of November 20 contains also an important statement in Volkonski's diary. He relates that the Emperor wrote a letter to St. Petersburg addressed to his mother, the Dowager-Empress Maria Fedorovna, and ordered this letter to be antedated by two days, forbidding everyone to write to the Capital about his illness. To this Volkonski remarked that it would be better to tell the truth because some of the townspeople might write and exaggerate the real situation. This is particularly astounding when one recalls that Alexander had returned to Taganrog only three days before and that nothing alarming could have been said about his state of health, since he arose and dressed every morning at 8:00 o'clock, as usual, receiving couriers, listening to the daily reports of General Diebitch, moving around the house, suffering apparently only from a slight indisposition.

The next day, November 21, the Empress writes: "The night was satisfactory and, although perspiration continued, the Emperor felt better and spent the day without any further change in his health. . . . As another courier was leaving this day for St. Petersburg, the Emperor asked me to write about his illness to the Dowager-Empress

and ordered General aide-de-camp Diebitch to inform the Grand-Duke Constantine, in Warsaw, that after his return from the Crimea, where he had contracted a slight fever, he had been compelled to remain in his room."

Prince Volkonski mentions the same fact, but adds in the margin: "This order to General Diebitch was given not on the 21st but on the 23rd." Wyllie states also that there was an amelioration in the condition of the Emperor's health.

It is important to note the Emperor's sudden decision to inform Constantine, then still considered heir to the throne, notwithstanding the fact that he had formally renounced his rights long before, and this not personally but through the medium of a third person, whilst the letter to his mother though written by the Empress was signed by himself. This was in accordance with what he told his brother in Warsaw sometime before: "When the time to abdicate will come, I shall let you know and you will inform mother of your decision." It seems evident that the Dowager-Empress Maria Fedorovna served as an intermediary in the secret correspondence between her two sons concerning the question of their mutual abdication.

Up to November 22, the statements of the witnesses were noticeably contradictory, but those describing that day are most peculiarly so. The Empress writes that on that day Alexander fainted in the morning, but that in the afternoon he was feeling very well and conversed animatedly with her until evening. Volkonski states, however, that all through the day the Emperor felt badly, that towards the evening he was completely prostrated and hardly spoke during the whole day; and Wyllie makes an extraordinary statement under this same date. He writes: "I notice that since November 20 the Emperor is preoccupied with something other than his health. These thoughts seem to dominate him completely."

But it is the next day, November 23, which seems to be the most important of all. This date decidedly marks the turning point in Alexander's last days as ruler of the Russian Empire. Both Volkonski and Empress Elisabeth note distinct amelioration in the condition of the Emperor's health. Wyllie still expresses his grave concern whilst the Empress contradicts him when writing: "About five o'clock in the afternoon I asked Wyllie to come to see me and to tell me how things were. Wyllie was jovial and told me that although the Emperor still had some fever, I should go and see him, because he was distinctly better."

The Empress spent the whole evening with Alexander and later wrote a letter to her mother in which she exclaimed: "Where can one find refuge from this life? When one thinks that one has arranged

everything for the best and is able to enjoy it, a new and unexpected trial arises which upsets all one's plans and takes away the faculty of enjoying the fruit of so much effort."

Is not this mysterious outcry of despair in contradiction with Elisabeth's statement in her diary? And is it not strange that her diary ends under this date? What could be the reasons for all this? What other explanation could one find than the one that the Emperor had told Elisabeth that very evening that the fulfillment of his decision was near and had asked her to help him to carry it out? Did Elisabeth then find that there was no reason to continue her diary since she knew that what was going to take place was merely stage play? Or did she continue to write and was the rest of her diary destroyed?

This possibility is quite admissible because Alexander's brother and successor, Emperor Nicholas I, destroyed the diary kept by his mother, Empress Maria Fedorovna, and in general "liked to destroy many things having any connection with his brother," according to a statement made by the wellknown Russian historian, the Grand-Duke Nicholas Mikhailovich in a letter to Prince Vladimir Baryatinski. One thing is quite clear: something must have happened in the course of the evening of November 23 that made Empress Elisabeth write to her mother as she did. And the only thing that could have happened was Alexander's announcement of the imminent fulfillment of his decision of which he had spoken earlier to Elisabeth during their stay in Taganrog.

On November 24, one finds another contradiction between the statement of Prince Volkonski and that of "The Official History." Volkonski writes: "Towards evening the Emperor felt *better*" while the anonymous author states: "Towards the evening the Emperor felt *worse*." On November 25, Volkonski, Wyllie, and the anonymous author concur in their opinion, that the situation is hopeful, for the first time. On November 26, Wyllie makes the following important statement: "The situation is critical. . . . I wanted to give him some medicine, but the Emperor refused saying, 'Go away!' Then, when he saw that I was crying, he said, 'Well, dear friend, I hope that you do not mind. *I have reasons of my own*'."

The same day at about nine o'clock in the evening, Doctor Tarasov was called to the Emperor for the first time since the latter's return to Taganrog. Tarasov spent over an hour alone with Alexander. When he left, Alexander went to sleep and spent a good night. Of what did they converse? And what had Tarasov been doing during all these days since their return from the Crimea?

The night was pitch dark when the body of courier Maskov arrived

in Taganrog. The small town was fast asleep. Tarasov, who had been waiting at the entrance to the town, gave orders to take the body to his house where he was to perform the autopsy. Soon the body lay naked on a table in a back room of the house occupied by the court physician; and Tarassov began to perform his duty. He could not help admiring the perfect form of the deceased courier and must have compared it with that of the Emperor. No doubt if the face were hidden the body could easily be taken for that of Alexander himself. Tarasov also noticed that Maskov's right leg bore a scar; probably from an old wound. He must have thought: "What a pity it is not the left leg." The Emperor's scar as a result of a horse's kick was on his left leg.

Through the remainder of the night Tarasov busied himself with the dead body. But if anyone could have spied upon him, he would have been astounded by the discovery that it was not an autopsy that the surgeon was performing. Tarassov was embalming the body of courier Maskov. This work continued for two more days and nights until the corpse was well preserved from decay. Then Tarassov waited to be called to the Emperor in order to announce to him that he could then "die" safely. He took this news to Alexander in the evening of November 26. Five days earlier, a simple ceremony had taken place at the local cemetery. Courier Maskov was buried with military honors. There were few people present besides a detachment of infantry, because Maskov's family lived too far away to be able to come to the funeral. When the grave was closed, the officer commanding the detachment of infantry had deposited on the small mound a large wreath, bearing the Imperial crown and Alexander's initials. This attention on the part of the Emperor had touched the hearts of the officers and soldiers who were present at the funeral ceremony. But what would they have thought if they had known that the casket supposed to contain the body of courier Maskov was empty?

The days immediately following November 26 precipitated the crisis. Everything seemed ready for the passing of Emperor Alexander into another world. The accounts of the witnesses continue, however, to be as contradictory as before. On November 29, Prince Volkonski states that the end was approaching, the Emperor remaining fully prostrated. Tarasov, too, remarks that the illness had reached its paroxysm. And Wyllie makes a remarkable revelation. He writes: "Things are getting worse and worse. Prince Volkonski has been occupying my bed in order to be nearer to the Emperor." This is the most significant statement of all that had previously been made by the court physician. It is hardly conceivable that at a time

of extreme danger, such as was revealed by the records, it should be a personal friend of the Emperor who would occupy the nearest place to Alexander's bedroom instead of his own physician. One can understand, however, that in order to carry out his plans it was more important for Alexander to have near him not Wyllie but Volkonski. On November 30, the witnesses indulge in their usual contradictions. However, they all state that the situation was so critical that one could expect the worst. Wyllie writes more plainly than the others: "No hope to save our beloved sovereign. I hastened to inform the Empress as well as Prince Volkonski and Baron Diebitch."

Then came the night, the last night in the life of Emperor Alexander I. Contrary to the rule, it was Tarasov who was on duty in Alexander's bedroom. Prince Volkonski occupied the bed in the corridor between Alexander's bedroom and dressing-room. There were, therefore, no other persons besides Volkonski and Tarasov in the Emperor's apartment during the night of November 30-December 1. Diebitch and Wyllie remained in the basement with the servants. It was around midnight that Tarasov left the Emperor's room and went to see Prince Volkonski. The Prince was ready. They cautiously went to the door leading into the courtyard, opened it, and waited. Soon they saw four men carrying something heavy that looked at first glance like a coffin. It was, however, a bathtub. The four men deposited their burden in the Emperor's dressing-room and went away. Volkonski followed them to the door and told them to return in an hour in order to take the bathtub back. In the meanwhile, Tarasov removed a linen sheet covering the bathtub and revealed the body of courier Maskov. An hour later, the four men came back and carried the bathtub away. Little did they suspect that they were then carrying their master, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias! And on the Emperor's bed reposed, calm and serene, the unfortunate courier Maskov, whose accidental death had made his Emperor's escape possible.

The morning of December 1 was gray and somber. The space before the Emperor's residence was crowded. People who had attended the early mass offered for the recovery of His Imperial Majesty went straight from church to the palace in order to get the latest news about their master's illness. No one except the Empress and Prince Volkonski had been in the Emperor's room since dawn. Tarasov had left the house early in the morning in order to obtain a little rest after his sleepless night on duty. At 10:50 A.M., the news of the Emperor's death reached the crowd. Soon after, the mournful ringing of church bells announced the sad tidings to the whole city.

During the whole day of December 1 no one but those comprising the Emperor's closest entourage was permitted to enter Alexander's bedroom. The same precautions were taken the following day. In the evening of December 2, the body was placed in the Emperor's dressing room and Wyllie together with Stoffregen began to make preparations for embalming it. Tarasov refused to assist his colleagues in this part of their duty, probably because he felt that he had already done more than his share and did not care to be involved any further. During the entire process of embalming the body its face was kept constantly covered so that not one of Wyllie's and Stoffregen's attendants saw it. This continued all through the night and on the following day the body, dressed in a general's uniform, was viewed by the awestruck people. But the face was already unrecognisable.

There is a strange mystery about the autopsy of the body. Wyllie has declared that he performed it and described its results in a *procès-verbal* which, as an official document, bore the signatures of nine people including also that of Tarasov. However, Tarasov assures us that, though it was he who composed the document, he did not sign it. Such contradictions in the statements of as important personages as Wyllie and Tarasov can lead only to an obvious conclusion, if one bears in mind the part played by Tarasov since Alexander's return to Taganrog after his Crimean journey. This conclusion can be nothing but that the document in question described the autopsy of courier Maskov and not that of Emperor Alexander. And it is confirmed by the statement that the body had a scar on its right leg.

The Empress did not remain in the same house where the body lay in state. She had moved in the morning of December 1 to a nearby house belonging to some people by the name of Schikhmatov, who had been prepared to receive her on the day before, when they were told by Prince Volkonski to have quarters ready for the Empress. This indicates that Volkonski *knew* of the forthcoming change. From the Schikhmatov's house, Elisabeth addressed a number of letters. On December 2, she wrote one to the Dowager-Empress Maria Fedorovna in which one finds a peculiar sentence: "When he goes I will go too if permitted. I will go with him as long as I shall be able to. I still do not know what will become of me."

Two days later, she wrote to her mother and repeated almost the same sentence that she had written in the letter to her mother-in-law: "I stay here as long as he is here; when he goes, I shall go too, but I do not know when. . . . I feel well, do not worry too much about me, but, if I dared, I would like to follow the one who has been my very life."

Meanwhile, life followed its usual course. The beautiful Bay of Taganrog, always gay with vessels from many foreign countries, gradually became deserted. Every ship hastened to leave port in time to clear the entrance to the Sea of Azov before it was blocked by ice. And by December 1 there was only one boat which had fearlessly remained at anchor on the steel-gray waters of Taganrog Bay. This vessel was a private yacht and it bore a British flag. Her owner was the Earl of Cathcart, former ambassador of His Britannic Majesty at the Court of St. Petersburg. When the sad news of the Emperor's death rang through the town, hardly anyone paid attention to the belated stay of this yacht in Taganrog waters. The people of Taganrog, the people of Russia were alarmed. No one in the Russian Empire could expect much good from the reign of Constantine. So the people of Taganrog did not display their usual curiosity, and failed even to notice the day when the lonely ship left the harbor. Nor could the actual date of her sailing be ascertained from her log, because for some obvious reasons her skipper neglected to make any entries until the end of December. By that time, the yacht was sailing lazily through the blue waters of the Mediterranean. She had performed an important mission after leaving Taganrog with a distinguished visitor on board. She had been to the Holy Land, where the distinguished visitor had gone to pray on the tomb of the Saviour, as reported by the British Consul at Jerusalem. Then she had taken him back to the land of "barbarians" where even a once-crowned head still had a conscience and was ready to expiate with Christian resolution and fortitude a voluntary, or even an involuntary, crime in order to save his immortal soul.

2. EXPIATION

Almost eleven years had passed since the day Emperor Nicholas I was crowned autocratic ruler of the vast Russian Empire. His reign had begun with the suppression of a rebellion and was now progressing towards the establishment of Russia's greatness under autocratic rule.

On September 16, 1836, a stranger mounted on a beautiful white horse followed the trail of exiles to Siberia. He rode his superb mount in silence. The autumn days were clear and sunny. The roads were deserted. The air was filled with the fragrance of pine and cedar trees and with that little something of sadness that is so characteristic of a northern autumn. In the early mornings, frost, the first messenger of winter, spread a silver veil over the green grass and the yellow sand of the road. It was obvious that summer had gone.

Late in the evening of that day, the stranger reached Krasnoufimsk. Stopping at an inn, he silently dismounted, entered the large, low-ceilinged room and made the sign of the cross before the ikons. He was tall and had a military bearing notwithstanding his very simple civilian clothes. He appeared to be a man of about sixty years of age and wore a gray beard. He remained silent most of the time as if in deep thought. When addressed, he made short and enigmatic replies, but he did not start a conversation himself. The innkeeper did not ask him who he was, because in Siberia only the authorities are interested in the names or deeds of people. So the stranger passed a quiet night at the inn. The next morning, however, the police demanded to see his papers. He had none. They asked him who he was. He refused to answer them. The police then arrested him as a tramp and took him to court on the charge of vagrancy. In accordance with the existing laws, he was sentenced to twenty lashes of the whip and to deportation, because he was too old to serve in the army. And on April 7, 1837, under the number 117, which had been assigned to him, he was sent to Bogoyavlensk with a party of other prisoners. This time he could not ride, because he had given his horse to the innkeeper in payment for his stay. He walked through the deep snow rubbing shoulders with thieves and murderers. And in a small bundle containing his belongings there was an ikon of Our Lady of Pochayev bearing on one side the letters "A.I" surmounted by the Imperial Crown.

In Bogoyavlensk, the stranger remained for five years until 1842. From then on he was known by the assumed name of Fedor Kuzmich. Very often people would ask him to tell them his real first name so that they could pray for him to his patron saint, but invariably he refused, once even adding that it was not necessary because the Church prayed for him.

Very soon after his deportation to Bogoyavlensk, Grand Duke Michael came to Krasnoufimsk where Fedor Kuzmich had been sentenced. When the Grand Duke learned that the stranger had been punished with twenty lashes of the whip, he became furious. He went to the judge who had pronounced the sentence and threatened to inflict upon him a lashing also and to send him to Bogoyavlensk to take the place of Fedor Kuzmich. But later, after he had visited the stranger himself and had spent a long time in conversation with him, he seemed to be pacified and did not carry out his threat to the unfortunate judge.

During Fedor Kuzmich's stay in Bogoyavlensk it happened that Afanasi, Archbishop of Irkutsk, when passing through the town desired to visit the stranger. Fedor Kuzmich met the archbishop at

the entrance to his modest dwelling and bowed to the ground. The archbishop did likewise. Then they kissed each other's hands and entered the house where they remained closeted for many hours and talked in a foreign language. This puzzled the good people of the small town, but they were not accustomed to asking too many questions. After the archbishop's visit, Fedor Kuzmich's landlord, calling his attention to the ikons and engravings which were visible on the walls of his room, asked if it was not the archbishop who had left them for him. Fedor Kuzmich replied that he had possessed them for a long time and that he had received them as a gift from a certain Peter Volkonski, a very good friend of his.

In 1842, Fedor Kuzmich left Bogoyavlensk and for some time moved from place to place until he settled in a village near Krasno-rechensk. There he lived for eight years in the depths of the forest in a small hut which had been built for him by a rich peasant named Ivan Latyshov. Fedor Kuzmich felt very happy here. During the summer he lived in the small hut among the dark and massive cedar trees. He kept bees and was always very proud to be able to offer his landlord or his guests some of the honey that his bees had collected during the short summer. For the winter months he abandoned his small hut and took quarters in his landlord's house. In the course of the long winter evenings he told the people who came to see Latyshov and Latyshov's family innumerable stories about court life and historical events that had occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It appears that he recalled with the greatest pleasure the times of Empress Catherine II. Stories about her, about the Turkish campaigns, about the exploits of Field Marshal Suvorov delighted his simple listeners. Then he told them also about the famous men of a more recent period, about Kutuzov and how the old soldier emerged victorious from the campaigns of 1812. But he never mentioned the name of Emperor Paul I and very seldom that of Emperor Alexander I. Only once did he recount the following anecdote: "When Napoleon was marching on Moscow, Emperor Alexander went to pray at the casket of Serge of Radonezh. The cathedral was dark and he was alone. Abundant tears streamed down the cheeks of the praying Emperor. And suddenly he heard a voice which said distinctly, 'Go, Alexander, and trust Kutuzov. God be with you.'

Although not belonging to any of the orders, Fedor Kuzmich led the life of a monk. He slept on a thin mattress placed on boards. He wore only the simplest garments of unbleached linen. His food never included meat and he fasted often. He kept up a large correspondence

staff of the military settlements, who was on a tour of inspection in Siberia. Kleinmichel, of course, knew Alexander well enough to recognize him even after all these years. As soon as Fedor Kuzmich heard about Kleinmichel's impending visit, he took every precaution to avoid being seen by him. Finally, when Kleinmichel entered the ward where Fedor Kuzmich occupied a cot, the latter drew the sheets over his face and pretended to be asleep, thus avoiding recognition.

Years went by. The gray beard of the stranger had turned quite white. His hair, also white and rather thin on the crown of his head and temples, flowed down his neck in long curly streams. He stooped rather heavily although when he walked with his two hands thrust in his belt he seemed to be taller, revealing without a doubt his former military training. And his light blue eyes ever remained alive as if age did not dare to touch their beauty.

All through these years he had continued to lead a simple and uneventful life among simple people. Important events had taken place in Russia and in Europe. Emperor Nicholas I had attempted to undertake the emancipation of the serfs by two laws promulgated on April 14, 1842, and November 20, 1847. They had perhaps as much the nature of half measures as the famous law promulgated by Emperor Alexander in 1803. Nevertheless they were conscientious attempts to solve that all important problem. Then came the year 1848. Europe was once more in the throes of revolutionary convulsions. Russia alone stood out like an invulnerable giant. But it was already evident that the giant had feet of clay. News of these events reached Siberia also and became a topic for regular comment on the part of Fedor Kuzmich. He invariably praised the attitude of Emperor Nicholas I, but never compared it with that of Emperor Alexander. Only once did he make a direct allusion to the past. When commenting on the downfall of Prince Metternich (he called him always "Count" Metternich, and we know that the Austrian diplomat and statesman received his princely title only after 1825) he said, "If that had happened during the reign of Emperor Alexander, it would have pleased him, because Alexander did not like the old fox of Vienna."

Then came the news of the Hungarian rebellion and of Russia's intervention in order to help Emperor Franz-Joseph retain his crown. Fedor Kuzmich followed the news of Russian victories with a great deal of excitement and praised the Russian soldier as the best in the world.

It was in this year, 1849, that he had given his blessing to a young

woman who was going to make a pilgrimage to the venerated shrines and monasteries of Russia. This young woman was named Alexandra Nikiforovna and was the daughter of a peasant from Krasnorechensk. Born in 1827, she had lost her parents while still in her infancy and had been educated by a priest, Father Polikarp. She was very religious and it was not surprising that when, at the age of 12, she first met Fedor Kuzmich she soon began to regard him almost as a saint. With passing years this admiration turned itself into a profound attachment and affection. The girl became a real companion to Fedor Kuzmich. She helped him in whatever she could and served as his regular messenger. But most of her time she spent listening to the old man's stories of the past.

Of all that Fedor Kuzmich told her, she liked best his descriptions of different Russian monasteries, and began to dream of a regular pilgrimage to the holy shrines of Russia. When she was getting ready to leave she said to Fedor Kuzmich: "But above all I should like to see the Tsar." And when the old man inquired of her why she was so anxious to do so, she replied, "Well, Little Father, everyone says, 'the Tsar this, and the Tsar that' and no one knows exactly how he looks." To this Fedor Kuzmich remarked pensively: "Wait, perhaps you will see not only one Tsar. If it be the will of God, you might even talk to them and would then see that tsars are human like everyone else."

When Alexandra Nikiforovna arrived in Russia she wanted at first to go directly to the monastery of Our Lady of Pochayev, but remembering that Fedor Kuzmich had told her to visit the town of Kremenchug and to find there Count Dmitri Osten-Sacken, she did so and spent several months in the Count's house. While she was there, Emperor Nicholas I came to Kremenchug and also stopped at the house of Count Osten-Sacken. There he learned of the presence of Alexandra Nikiforovna and asked to see her. She came and was received by the Emperor in the presence of their host. Nicholas immediately began to ask her about life in Siberia and about Fedor Kuzmich. Alexandra Nikiforovna replied frankly to all his questions. Some of her replies amused the Emperor who said to Count Osten-Sacken: "You have a brave guest here. She is not even afraid to answer any questions of such a powerful man as I." To this the girl replied at once: "Why should I be afraid, when God is with me and I am protected by the holy prayers of Fedor Kuzmich." The Emperor then became pensive and said, "Indeed, Fedor Kuzmich is a holy man."

Upon leaving, Nicholas gave Alexandra Nikiforovna a personal

note and told her to come to visit him in St. Petersburg. "You will have but to show this note at the entrance to the palace and you will be brought to me at once. And do not forget to ask me for anything you need. Friends of Fedor Kuzmich are my friends."

But Alexandra Nikiforovna did not go to St. Petersburg, and in 1852 returned to Siberia. There she was eagerly awaited by Fedor Kuzmich who asked her to describe to him all of her journey. When she described her meeting with Emperor Nicholas and repeated what he had said to her about Fedor Kuzmich, the old man could not restrain his tears. For many days, Alexandra Nikiforovna entertained her protector by relating to him in detail all that she had done and seen during the two years of her absence. One day, while he was listening to her apparently absorbed in his own thoughts, the girl suddenly said, "Little Father, Fedor Kuzmich, how like Emperor Alexander Pavlovich you are!" No sooner had she pronounced these words than Fedor Kuzmich jumped to his feet. His eyebrows were menacingly drawn together, his blue eyes flaming. "How do you know it? Who told you so?" he demanded sternly. Alexandra Nikiforovna became frightened and explained: "No one told me, Little Father, I said it without thinking. I saw a portrait of Alexander Pavlovich at Count Osten-Sacken's and it seemed to me that you are like him and that you hold your hand on your belt exactly as he did in the portrait."

Fedor Kuzmich did not reply to this, but went into the next room in order to hide the sudden emotion that overwhelmed him.

For five more years Alexandra Nikiforovna remained with Fedor Kuzmich. In the course of this time the old man received an important visit. One day an open carriage stopped near his modest house. A young man wearing the uniform of an officer of the Hussar Regiment of the Guards stepped out and gracefully assisted a young and attractive woman to alight. They entered the house and spent over an hour in animated conversation conducted in a foreign language. When they were leaving, the young officer kissed Fedor Kuzmich's hand, a thing that the latter had never before permitted anyone to do. The old man accompanied them to their carriage and afterwards stood for a long time in the middle of the road gazing in the direction where they had disappeared. When he returned to his dwelling he smiled and said: "A long time ago I was known by my grandparents and now it is the turn of my grandchildren." Fedor Kouzmitch concealed his true relationship to the visitors, because the young officer was his nephew, the Grand Duke Alexander Nikolayevich, the future Emperor Alexander II, and the young woman who

accompanied him was his wife, the Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna.

On March 2, 1855, Emperor Nicholas I died. When this news reached Fedor Kuzmich, he was deeply moved. He could not remain in his room and went outside. He walked slowly down a narrow path in the snow, along the river, and into the dark forest. His thoughts must have been troubled. So, after all he had outlived his younger brother; and many others. Where, now, were Pahlen, Kutuzov, La Harpe, Napoleon, Arakcheyev? For a moment he visualized what would have happened if he had not fled from the throne, but he soon drove these thoughts away. God had willed it thus and he had but to thank Him for His mercy.

Late in 1857, Alexandra Nikiforovna again left for a pilgrimage to Russian monasteries. She was never to see her protector again. Soon after her departure, Fedor Kuzmich accepted the invitation of a wealthy merchant by the name of Simeon Khromov and went to live with him. At first he settled on Khromov's small estate three miles from the town of Tomsk but later he moved into Tomsk where Khromov had a hut built for him in his own garden. Here Fedor Kuzmich spent the last years of his life as a recluse. He now became even less communicative than before and spent most of his nights in prayer. Khromov once saw that the old man's knees were calloused from kneeling for hours on the hard floor. The stranger's health failed visibly during these years. No doubt, it was the result of the hermit-like existence that he was leading, but of course old age also had something to do with it: he was eighty years old.

In Tomsk he aroused the natural curiosity of people. Some of them, not aware of his dislike of being questioned, bothered him with attempts to discover his real identity. One day, a young woman by the name of Natalia Popova asked him to tell her the names of his parents so that she might order a *requiem* mass for the repose of their souls. "You need not know them," Fedor Kuzmich replied, "because the Holy Church prays for them. If I told you my name, I would have to disappear and Heaven would mourn, while Hell would rejoice and celebrate a victory."

In the summer, Fedor Kuzmich spent most of his time in the large fruit grove adjoining Khromov's garden. There too he kept bees as he had done before when he had lived at Latyshov's. Khromov used to tidy his hut personally, because Fedor Kuzmich did not like to employ servants. One day, a woman by the name of Olga Balakina, who often went to see Fedor Kuzmich, entered the old man's abode, but found only Khromov. When Balakina entered, Khromov

was bending over a wooden box in which the hermit kept all his papers. At the sound of steps, Khromov turned abruptly, but seeing it was not Fedor Kouzmich he produced a large blue sheet of paper bearing seals and many signatures and said: "They all say that Fedor Kuzmich is a tramp, but see, here is a marriage certificate of the Grand Duke Alexander Pavlovich and Elizabeth Alexeyevna."

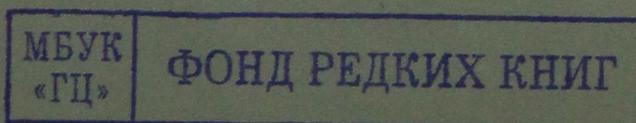
When the news reached Tomsk that Emperor Alexander II had freed the serfs, it caused great excitement among the people, although there were no serfs in Siberia. Fedor Kuzmich, however, refrained from discussing this subject, although in previous years he had always been ready to comment on all important events. It was not until the evening of the day when this news had arrived that he told Khromov: "It has always been a cherished dream of Emperor Alexander I."

In January 1864 Fedor Kuzmich became very ill. He could not take any food and subsisted only on water. His strength was failing, but he kept a clear head up to his last hour. During this time, Khromov slept in his room in order to be near him should he need anything in the night. On January 31, Fedor Kuzmich awoke in the night, raised himself on his cot and said distinctly: "The end is near." Then he lay back and slumbered until morning: When Khromov left the old man's room in the morning he said as usual: "Give me your blessing, Little Father." Fedor Kuzmich replied: "Go with God!" and then added: "Now give me your blessing." At first Khromov protested, but when the old man insisted, he said: "God bless you, Little Father." Fedor Kuzmich smiled and lay back on his bed.

The whole day of February 1 he remained silent. From time to time his lips moved, but his eyes were closed. Khromov understood that he was praying. He had not the strength to get up. Towards nine o'clock in the evening Khromov noticed that Fedor Kuzmich was nearing his end. He was suffering great pain, but not a murmur escaped his lips, and his eyes were extraordinarily bright and luminous. People hearing that the old man's life was ebbing, came into his cell and stood there holding lighted candles. With a trembling hand Fedor Kuzmich motioned for a candle. He held it for but a few moments; then he let his hand fall and a deep sigh marked his passing.

His body clad in a simple white shirt of unbleached linen, was buried in the grounds of the Bogoroditsko-Alexeyevsk monastery in Tomsk on February 4, 1864. A simple cross marked his grave. The cross bore the inscription: "Here rests the body of the Great and Blessed Father Fedor Kuzmich."

Many years later, when the last Russian Emperor Nicholas II, then



still only heir to the throne, travelled through Siberia on his way to the Far East, he visited the simple grave. Noticing the poor wooden cross he ordered a marble slab to replace it and a chapel built over the grave.

Few things remained in the modest hut in Khromov's garden that had belonged to the departed old man. They had all been gathered together, carefully sealed, and sent to St. Petersburg by special command of the Governor-General at Irkoutsk. Khromov had kept only a small satchet which he had taken from the hermit's neck after his death, and which contained the old man's secret, as Fedor Kuzmich had told Khromov on more than one occasion. The satchet contained only a note in cipher. For many years it kept its secret until it was recently deciphered. It read:

"Anna Vasilievna: We have discovered a terrible flaw in our son: Count Pahlen informs me of Alexander's participation in the conspiracy. We must hide, tonight, wherever it is possible.
Saint Petersburg.

23—III. 1801.

Paul."

HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

NOTE

The material for this extraordinary story is to be found in the following sources: I. For "Journey's End": Prince Vladimir Baryatinski, *Le Mystère d'Alexandre Ier*, Paris, 1929; N. Danilevski, *Taganrog ou la description détaillée de la maladie et de la mort de l'Empereur Alexandre Ier*, Moscow, 1828; E. R., *Poslednie dni Aleksandra Blagoslovennago* (The last days of Emperor Alexander the Blessed), Moscow, 1877; N. K. Schilder, *Imperator Aleksandr Pervyi* (Emperor Alexander the First), Vol. IV, St. Petersburg, 1898 (contains the diaries of Prince Volkonski, Empress Elisabeth and Sir James Wyllie and the text of the official narrative); D. K. Tarasov, *Vospominaniya* (Memoirs), St. Petersburg, 1872.

II. For "Expiation": K. G-v, *Zamechatel'nyii zagadochnyi sibirskii starets Fyodor Kuz'mich* (The noteworthy and mysterious Siberian elder Fedor Kuzmich) St. Petersburg, 1905; F. I. Konovalova (ed.), *Zagadochnyi starets Fyodor Kuz'mich* (The mysterious elder Fedor Kuzmich), Moscow, 1898; P. N. Krupenski, *Taina Imperatora* (The Emperor's secret), Berlin, 1927; K. V. Kudryashov, *Aleksandr In: zagadka Fyodora Kuz'micha* (Alexander I and the mystery of Fedor Kuzmich), St. Petersburg, 1923; K. N. Mikhailov, *Imperator Aleksandr I — Starets Fyodor Kuz'mich* (Emperor Alexander I — Elder Fedor Kuzmich), St. Petersburg, 1914; D. G. Romanov (ed.), *Zagadochnyi poselenets Fyodor Kuz'mich v Sibirii Imperator Aleksandr I* (The mysterious settler Fedor Kuzmich in Siberia and Emperor Alexander I), Kharkov, 1912; Nikolai Sementowski-Kurilo, *Alexander I. Rausch und Einkehr einer Seele*, Zurich, 1939; *Starets Fyodor Kuz'mich, 1837-1864* (Elder Fedor Kuzmich), Tomsk, 1907; Adolf Törngren, "Mystiken Kring Alexander I's död," *Finsk Tidskrift*, v. cxxiv, 1938; Vassilich, *Imperator Aleksandr I i Fyodor Kuz'mich* (Emperor Alexander I and Fedor Kuzmich), Moscow, 1910; Martin Winkler, *Zarenlegende, Glanz und Geheimnis um Alexander I*, Berlin, 1941.



