BISMARCK AT HOME

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Bismarck at home by Jules Hoche

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BY

JULES HOCHE

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

THÉRÈSE BATBEDAT

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ENGRAVINGS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

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PREFACE

A BIOGRAPHER, I think, must be endowed with many and various qualities if he is not to fail in his responsible duties. Impartiality, in the first place—that is, the absence of all preconceived feeling against the subject of one's portraiture; sincerity, too, like that of a faithful mirror, which will not make the monkey look like a saint nor the saint like the monkey.

But, over and above all that, the biographer must furnish his readers with a psychological key to his hero's (I had almost said his patient's!) character. He must expound in minute detail the moral character of the man, giving a precise and accurate sketch of him which shall be as luminous as opaque bodies are when traversed by the Röntgen rays. For the deeds of a man, however celebrated, only interest us by reason of the mind and inner cause we discern in them, and by the more or less intricate way in which they show forth, indicate, reflect, the mysterious light and shade of the soul.

In a word, the human type put before us, the being of flesh and blood, covered with clothes, armed with defiance, fortified by the sympathy—or the hatred!—he inspires in his contemporaries,—this type must become not only stiff and hard, but subtle and incorporeal; so that we comprehend it, it must be reduced to a simple expression in physico-psychology, a mental equation worked out in one

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or more volumes, the clue to which, however, must be plain to the reader from the very first page.

This theory, I think, must be applied in every biography of importance, and especially in that of Bismarck, whose strange and complex character has caused as many to belittle as admire, who has been so praised and so reviled, that it is difficult to get at a proper opinion of him—unless you possess the psychological key I have been talking of.

Now there are writers who, situated as I am, would begin by pleading their difficulties in approaching the task. But I think I can promise that, in the following study, readers will find two essentials hitherto omitted in all Bismarck's biographies—and these are, in the first place, absolute impartiality, and, in the second place, a strict psychological theory, which explains somewhat clearly, I think, the strange problem put before the world by the puzzling character of the man who for half a century has guided, in a more or less official capacity, the destinies of a large part of Europe.

I was quite a child when the name of Bismarck was first made known to me, not only by fire and sword (*ferro et igne*, according to his own fine formula), but also by the talk of my seniors, some of whom, alas! paid the tribute of a limb or two to the fiery shot which then rained down on poor Strasburg. From morning till evening the shells filled the air in the neighbourhood of our house with a melody so pleasing to my ignorant and music-mad fancy, that I resented the comparison of Bismarck, the indirect cause of my music, to Croquemitaine, Troppmann, and Mephistopheles, the names hurled by the besieged at the master of the German invasion.

A short time after, I found myself in the difficult situation of the man whom the old allegorical picture represents as naked between two suits—one in the fashion of

yesterday, the other in that of to-morrow. Thanks to the treaty of Frankfort, I had all the trouble in the world to get back into my former costume, which I was being strongly persuaded to get rid of. The recollection of my momentary nakedness, so to speak, long pursued me like that of an outrage to which I had nearly fallen a victim at an early age. One good result I got from it, though,—and that is a great scepticism when I hear the hollow phrases which some good patriots go spluttering.

However, the ridiculous idea never entered my head that one single man, even though his name was Bismarck, could be the only cause of the disasters heaped upon my country. I prefer to see in these a necessary phenomenon in the social and political evolution of Europe.

Hence my impartiality towards the man who played such an important *rôle* in these unhappy circumstances—to which I owe it that I was snatched back to that shrine of my race and fatherland which I have never since been tempted to forswear.

This much being said, I go on without further preamble to the psychological key which I promised the reader.

Bismarck is, evidently, from the biological point of view, a man of *elemental* force and power. This explains generally the inequalities, the exaggerations, the contradictions, the extraordinary paradoxes, out of which his politics have been kneaded like a ball. But that doesn't explain his inner nature, which is so subtle and varied that it has found as many diverse interpretations as it has found diverse biographers, although a single word, a single epithet, joined to his name is sufficient to dispel the darkness and to create light about his character.

Bismarck is, above and beyond all else, a *humorist*.

He has carried into diplomacy the same manner and way of thought as is shown by Sterne, Carlyle, Lamb,

Heine, and Schopenhauer in literature. He borrows from some of these their sly and malicious fun, from others their love of paradox and trifling comedy, from all their spirit of contradiction, their disdain of others and themselves, grafted on a spirit of brutal frankness that approaches cynicism,—a cynicism which in Bismarck's case is almost negatived by a most lively sensibility and by a remarkable number of domestic virtues, in which, and in which alone, his monstrous egotism ceases to appear.

As a diplomatist he proclaims the nothingness and vanity of all diplomacy; as a political orator he condescends to defend himself by nothing but squibs and sarcasms more or less witty; while toiling, as he says, for God and his country, the Protestant patriot, nevertheless, confesses his pessimism and the unsatisfactory nature of his faith. These distinctive features, so characteristic of the *humorist*, are especially seen in his private correspondence. I shall give a few examples. And, first of all, this passage from a letter sent to Madame Bismarck from Frankfort, where the Federal Diet was then sitting:

"Unless foreign complications supervene — and we Federal delegates with our extraordinary wisdom are perfectly incapable of either getting into them or out of them—I know exactly all we'll accomplish in one, two, or five years, and I wager I'd do it in four and twenty hours if the others would only be sensible and sincere for a single day.

"I always knew these gentlemen made their soup with nothing but water, but their present concoction is so insipid and weak that I confess it surprises me. Send me your schoolmaster or foreman on the roads, and if they're washed and trimmed, they'll make as good diplomatists as these. I have made gigantic progress in the art of saying nothing in an infinite number of words; I write letters many pages long, clear and precise as articles seen at the

bottom of water; and if, after reading them, Manteuffel can tell me what's inside them he's better up than I am! Nobody, not even the most rabid of Democrats, can imagine without actual knowledge all the emptiness and quackery that passes for diplomacy."

Humour, by its very definition, has for mode of expression a kind of dry impassivity,—a sensibility, true, but a sensibility that is self-centred instead of being expansive, a sensibility which is often at the bottom both of egotism and melancholy, since it springs from the most intimate sources of our being; and for its accidental peculiarities, again, humour is often marked by a predominance of inherited *physical* instincts and affinities over the *spiritual* tendencies of the individual. 'Tis this last peculiarity that has made the Prussian giant, for all his apparent capacity for intellectual freedom, a grim and patient believer, bowed down beneath the double weight of his Emperor and his God, whose diverse prerogatives he willingly confounds, attached to this tyrannic duality like a dog to his master. Yes, like one of those great big dogs with which he loves to surround himself, and some of which resemble him so terribly with their searching and steady glower, their shaggy overhanging eyebrows, their immobile, mask-like, and leonine features, and the firmness of their powerful jaws that open only to ravin or to bite.

Bismarck himself explained one evening to his guests at Ferrières, how his piety, atavistic in a way,—indeed, I had almost said, congenital,—was at the basis of his politics and all his human aspirations—which, let me remark in passing, have put back for a century, at least, the general progress of humanity.

"I don't understand how anyone can live without believing in God and a future life. If I were not a Christian I would not consent for a moment to remain at