

**TEN YEARS AT THE
COURT OF ST.
JAMES, 1895-1905**

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Ten years at the Court of St. James, 1895-1905 by Baron von Eckardstein

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BARON VON ECKARDSTEIN

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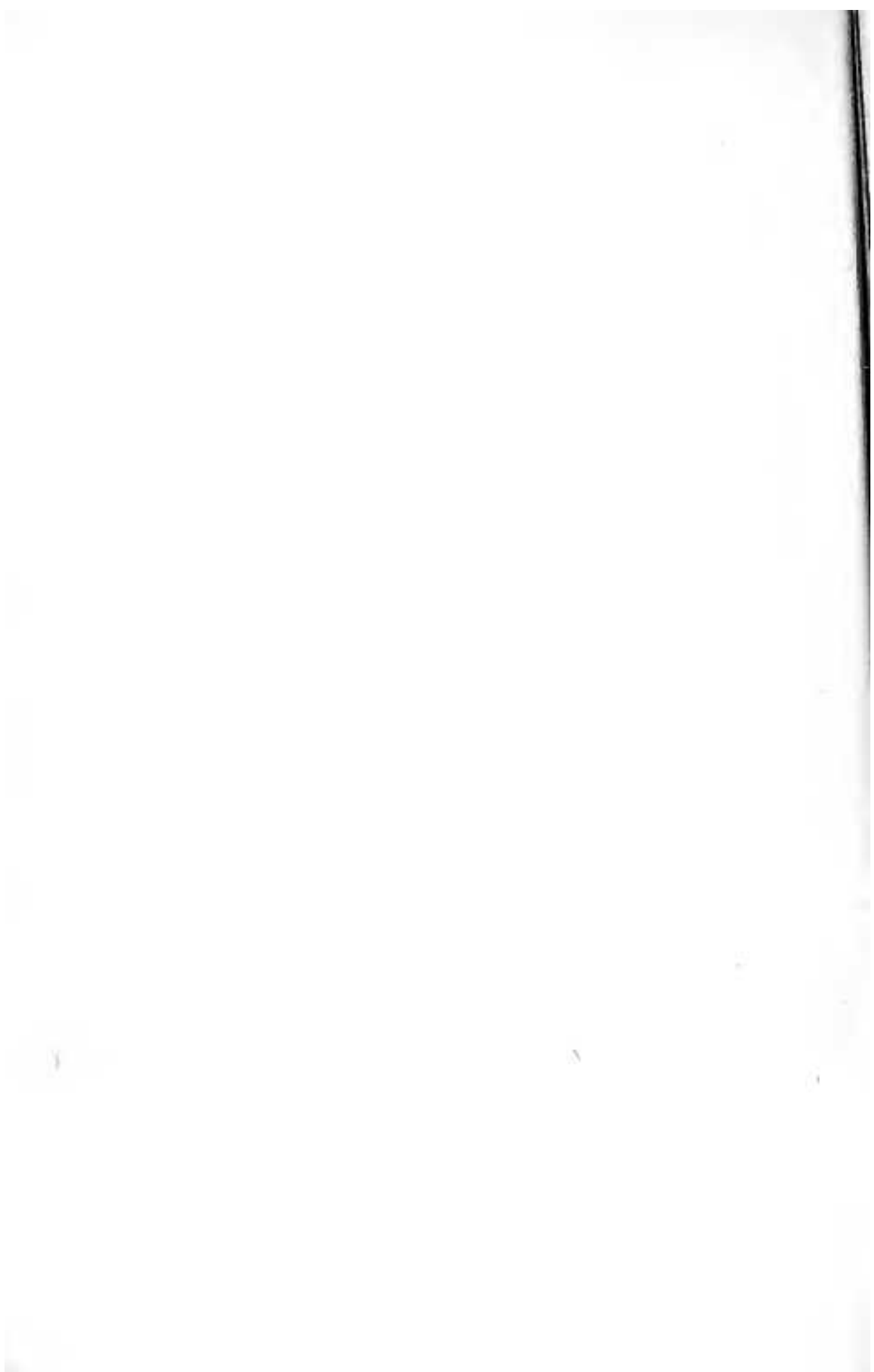
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Editor's Preface

Those who remember the official functions of late Victorian and Edwardian London will have a memory picture of Baron von Eckardstein in his white Cuirassier uniform towering above the tall men and women of London Society. From his glittering helmet to his gleaming jackboots he seemed an embodiment of the military Empire he represented. That this grim and gigantic guardsman was an acting-Ambassador very much in the good graces of our Court and Cabinet was well known, but few suspected that he was an angel of peace from German Liberalism and the ally of those English Statesmen who were trying to re-establish the peace of Europe on the firm foundation of an Anglo-German Alliance. How and why they failed—when and where the rifts first began that ended finally in rupture and ruin—can be seen more clearly, I think, in these memoirs than in any elaborate analysis of pre-war politics.

For the student of politics these reminiscences represent a document of a different class altogether from the usual diplomatic autobiography. Von Eckardstein was by tradition a diplomatist, and a diarist by training. The amusing anecdote of Disraeli at the Congress of Berlin (page 19) shows his early experience of the tricks of the trade, and he tells us that from boyhood he noted every evening what had been said to him during the day. His baffled bewilderment when he tried to summarise the substance of a talk with, or rather by, Gladstone (p. 52) is as significant of his own method as of Gladstone's. Moreover, owing probably to his peculiar position in the Embassy, he seems to have been able to keep copies of secret official correspondence and of the still more secret and significant personal letters by which all diplomacy of real importance is conducted. As the German principals he represented are now dead or deposed, he has published these documents; and thrown thereby a searchlight on the dark places of pre-war diplomacy only second in interest and importance to the revelations of the Russian revolutionaries.

The general reader also will be well entertained by this diplomatist's snap-shots of the real personalities of personages whose caricatures are familiar to him; and by the diarist's "detectophone" records of intimate talks that proved to be the turning-point in the history of Europe. For as the reader follows the story he realises that he is watching from the wings the first scenes of the first act of the tragedy of modern civilisation. He sees the impending storm-cloud, dark with the doom of Empires and the death of millions, draw visibly nearer when the Kaiser calls King Edward "an old peacock" (p. 56) and his ministers "unmitigated noodles" (p. 217).

He sees the shadow recede again because the Duchess of Devonshire has met King Edward at Newmarket over the "*affaire Senden*" (p. 123), or because Lord Salisbury has gone to the Riviera. He will leave these tremendous trivialities with a real perception not only of what was rotten in the pre-war German Empire, but of what is still rotten in the international relations of European States.

"He is over six foot, can drink without getting drunk and is otherwise suitable, so we'll make a diplomat of him," said Bismarck of von Eckardstein. Born a member of the imperialist clique that ruled the German Empire and of the international class that still regulates the affairs of Europe, von Eckardstein under an aged and ailing ambassador became the representative of Berlin in London during those fateful years when Lord Salisbury, Mr. Chamberlain, the Duke of Devonshire and Lord Lansdowne were trying to associate Great Britain and Germany in arrangements that would have prevented the war. The record he now gives us of their negotiations is evidence that the failure of our Statesmen was not their fault. It was due, in von Eckardstein's opinion, to the waywardness of the Kaiser, the weakness of his Chancellors, and the tortuosities of Holstein.

Whether this goes deep enough or no, we shall after reading these rather artless reminiscences be disposed to acquit von Eckardstein of any large share of blame for the failure. He was apparently a more competent diplomatist than his contemporaries suspected, this being an appreciable asset in itself. As is shown by his encounter with Lord Salisbury over the "Swiss cheese ultimatum" (p. 157), and with Holstein over that spidery word-spinner's private spy service (pp. 63-4), he knew how to deal both with an English gentleman and with an "Empire Jesuit." He seems, however, to have suffered from the danger to which all diplomatists are exposed—that of becoming, or of being supposed to have become, rather an agent of the country where he was residing than of that which he officially represented. This is suggested when one compares his last conversations with the Kaiser and with King Edward (p. 244). It was no doubt the fault of Berlin not of the Baron that almost all his negotiations resulted very much more to the advantage of Great Britain than of Germany, but one must allow for this in condemning the buttings-in and breakings-off of Berlin that he denounces.

It is, however, no duty of an editor to try to correct the personal equation of an author. If it were, several variant versions might be appended to the events he recounts. As it is, the editor must apologise for the liberty he has allowed himself in abridging and arranging these volumes for English readers.