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Edited by Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

ST PETERSBURG

1861–1862¹

Meeting with Cavour. Journey to St Petersburg. Bismarck. Frau von Bismarck. Bear-hunting. Bismarck's status at the Court of the Tsars. The function of the Prussian Legation. Count Adlerberg. Schlözer, Croy and Loen. Social unrest in Russia. The Russian Court. Nesselrode. Goltz.

AT the beginning of December 1860, while I was travelling in Italy, news reached me of my appointment as an Attaché to our Legation in St Petersburg. On my way back to Berlin I stayed a few days at Turin where I had friends. I was introduced to Cavour,² a short, thick-set, bull-necked man with a faintly sarcastic expression and a pair of spectacles which would have incurred Goethe's disapproval. The shape and carriage of his head, and the searching glance he gave you over the top of his spectacles, occasionally resembled Bill Bismarck³ in later life.⁴[...]

¹ The chapter-heading is the editors'. See Appendix I.

² Camillo, Count Cavour. Head of the Sardinian Government, 1852–9, 1860–1.

³ Wilhelm, Count von Bismarck. In the Prussian Judiciary Service, 1874–9; temporarily attached to the office of the Governor of Alsace-Lorraine, September 1879–80; an official in the Reich Chancellery, 1881–2; *Regierungsrat*, mostly on the staff of the Chancellor, October 1882–4; *Vortragender Rat* in the Prussian Ministry of State, May 1884–5; *Landrat* in Hanau, August 1885–9; Head of the administration of Hanover, March 1889–95, for the province of East Prussia, 1895–1901.

⁴ In a letter to Giovanni Lanza of 8 December 1860 Cavour wrote of Holstein's visit: 'Il barone Holstein, giovane diplomatico prussiano che farà parte della Legazione prussiana a Pietroburgo, ottiene il permesso di fare un viaggio in Italia prima di recarsi in Russia, e sta compilando un rapporto sulle nostre condizioni attuali. Non potendo recarsi a Napoli, egli manifestò il desiderio d'esser posto in relazione con lei, per conoscere il vero stato delle cose colà [...]. Importa che il barone Holstein riporti a Berlino ed a Pietroburgo giudizi rassicuranti sulla possibilità di fondare nella penisola un ordine di cose regolare e durevole. A ciò gioveranno moltissimo i discorsi ch'egli terrà con una persona così autorevole come il Presidente della Camera dei deputati; ed è questo principalmente il motivo che mi induce a recarle questo disturbo, e ad avvertirla confidenzialmente delle tendenze aristocratiche e dei pregiudizi germanici del barone Holstein. [...]' Luigi Chiala, *Lettere edite ed inedite di Camillo Cavour* (Turin, 1885), vol. iv, pp. 111–12. There are a number of Holstein's notes on political and economic conditions in Italy in 1860 amongst the Holstein Papers. They contain no personal reminiscences.

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MEMOIRS AND POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

On 2 January 1861 I set out from Karlstein¹ and, together with my late father, returned to Berlin before travelling to St Petersburg to take up my duties as an attaché. At the station we learnt that the King was dead.²

A few days later I took my departure. An hour or two before I started, my manservant left me in the lurch. He told me he was afraid the climate would be too much for him, and that he preferred to remain behind and get married.

In those days the railway went no further than Stallupönen, so from there to Wirballen I took the usual yellow postchaise.

As I was sitting in the custom-house at Wirballen with my eight pieces of luggage, feeling rather bewildered and helpless, I noticed a pleasant-looking gentleman who spoke both Russian and German and appeared very inclined to make my acquaintance. I placed no obstacles in his way, and he turned out to be Herr Alex von Harder, Stieglitz's³ nephew. We decided to join forces, which proved an excellent arrangement for us both. He enjoyed the advantage of riding in my special courier's compartment, *podorochny*, and I was even more fortunate in that he made all arrangements for interpreters and so forth at the halts. I subsequently found that an interpreter was not so absolutely indispensable as I had imagined. At each posting station, even if we arrived in the middle of the night, there would appear from nowhere one or more of those inevitable Jews with a knowledge of German and a readiness to perform any service required.

In Wirballen I realized I had entered a new world. I felt I had left Europe far behind. Our luggage was tastefully arranged on the sleigh, with my largest trunk serving as a seat. In front stood the *Jämschtschik* in his long sheepskin coat, urging on the four galloping horses with words and with blows. By the same means, his voice and his stick, he cleared the peasants out of our way. They obeyed readily enough; only on one occasion, when we had a really tiny *Jämschtschik*—he looked like a boy of thirteen—did a peasant decide to give a rude reply. We drove fast, about twelve and a half miles an hour, but this was offset by a considerable waste of time at the halts. There are no buckles on Russian har-

¹ Karlstein near Zehden-on-the-Oder. The estate owned by Holstein's aunt, Minna von Holtzendorff.

² Friedrich Wilhelm IV, King of Prussia, died on 2 January 1861.

³ Alexander, Baron von Stieglitz. Director of the Russian Imperial Bank.

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JOURNEY TO ST PETERSBURG

nesses; everything is knotted. The posting stations, like the railway stations, are nearly always outside the towns. Both highways and railroads in Russia are perfectly straight.

For the first few hours the motion of the sleigh along the undulating track made me seasick. Then I felt tired. With no support to my back I should have slipped off my trunk time and again if Herr von Harder had not held on to me. This monotonous journey started at midnight and lasted until 2 p.m. a couple of days later. After thirty-eight hours we stopped outside Dünaburg station. The only incident I recall is a halt towards 10 p.m. to order a drink of tea and a bite of food at a reasonably respectable inn at Wilkomir. Harder conversed in Russian with the Polish landlady. I could tell by his expression that she had made some unpleasant remark. She had in fact replied to his request for some tea: 'You can make it yourselves.'

When Harder translated this to me I immediately declared we could not possibly let such a brazen creature serve us with supper. So we drove on. At the next halt there was nothing to be had. On reaching the next halt at three in the morning, absolutely famished, we ate black bread with butter tasting like axle-grease, and washed it down with a schnapps.

Later, when going on leave at Christmas, 1861, I had a similar experience to that in Wilkomir. I was staying at the inn at Kovno, and sent for the barber early in the morning. The boots came back with the message: 'Barber says he not go to Prussian man, Prussian man can come to him.' Both episodes revealed the attitude of the Poles, which was to find expression in the insurrection.

During the railway journey from Dünaburg to St Petersburg I found myself for the first time in my life in a train blocked by the snow. But not for long. In just under an hour the track was cleared. As we were sitting there helplessly I heard a peasant make some remark as he went by which caused amusement. Harder translated it as: 'Yes, mate, I mayn't go so fast but I get there in the end.'

At eight in the morning I reached St Petersburg and drove to the Pension Benson on the English quay, close by Stenbock House, where Herr von Bismarck¹ lived.

¹ Otto von Bismarck-Schönhausen, Count in 1865, Prince in 1871. Prussian Minister to the Federal Diet in Frankfurt, August 1851–9; Minister in St Petersburg, April 1859–62, in Paris, May–September 1862; Minister-President and Foreign Minister, 1862–71; Chancellor of the German Reich, 1871–90.

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MEMOIRS AND POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

I well remember announcing my arrival. As a child I had seen Bismarck once or twice at my parents' home. He was young and jovial then. Later I met him in Wiesbaden in 1859 when he was recuperating from a severe illness. In 1860 my father, who had been against my choosing a military career and realized I was not cut out for the law, asked me whether I would like to be a diplomat. I answered, 'Yes, if Bismarck will take me on as an attaché.' He was approached, gave his consent, and subsequently pushed through my appointment in defiance of von Schleinitz's wishes.¹

Now, when I presented myself, he held out his hand and said, 'You are welcome.' As he stood there, tall, erect, unsmiling, I saw him as he was later to appear to his family and the rest of the world: 'A man who allows no one to know him intimately.'

Bismarck then introduced me to Schlözer,² the Second Secretary, who was sitting at a table working. A spare man of about forty with a sharp nose and little beady eyes. He has since told me that I asked him what he was doing. When he said he was ciphering I replied, 'I hope I don't have much of that to do.' I have forgotten all this, but I do remember how Schlözer's face took on an even more mournful expression than usual.

As I walked back from the Legation to my pension along the quay, I was conscious perhaps for the only time in my life of a feeling of homelessness, or homesickness, as they say. In front of me stretched the broad Neva, with the east wind driving across its frozen surface flurries of finely powdered snow that gave a slight tinkle as it fell. That oddly pale Nordic light, making the gilded cupolas on the churches look like silver. Instead of human forms, walking sheepskins. An un-European quality in much that met the eye. And then the cold; not merely the thirty degrees out of doors but also the frosty welcome of my chief, which I, young,

¹ Alexander von Schleinitz, Count in 1879. Prussian Foreign Minister, summer 1848, 1849–50, 1858–61; Minister of the Royal Household, 1861–85. Schleinitz had refused Holstein's request for a transfer from the judiciary to the diplomatic service. The transfer was finally granted after an appeal to the Prince Regent. (Cf. Rogge, *Friedrich von Holstein*, pp. 17–18.)

² Kurd von Schlözer. Secretary of the Legation in St Petersburg, 1857–62; temporary Chargé d'Affaires in Copenhagen, 1863; Secretary of the Legation to the Holy See, 1864–9; Consul-General of the North German Federation in Mexico, 1869–71; Minister in Washington, 1871–82, to the Holy See, 1882–92. (Cf. his *Petersburger Briefe* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1921), p. 187.)

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RECEPTION BY BISMARCK

inexperienced, straight from home, had imagined would be totally different.

At that time Bismarck was forty-five, slightly bald, with fair hair turning grey; not noticeably corpulent; sallow complexion. Never gay, even when telling amusing anecdotes, a thing he did only occasionally, in particularly congenial company. Total impression one of a dissatisfied man, partly a hypochondriac, partly a man insufficiently reconciled to the quiet life led in those days by the Prussian representative in St Petersburg. His every utterance revealed that for him action and existence were one and the same thing. 'The 1848 revolution must have been a harassing time for you', I once said to him. 'There was so much to do that there was no time to feel harassed', was the reply. On another occasion he recalled the parliamentary struggles of that period and said: 'Yes, in the days when you appeared every week in the *Kladderadatsch*¹ you really were somebody.'

The main attraction of this Frankfurt period for him had been the fact that it was one of constant strife.

His behaviour in public is perhaps best illustrated by the following little incident, which I may as well mention here. One day Herr von Bismarck and I had been out hunting and arrived at the Peterhof station just as the train was about to move off. The officials made signs to us and shouted 'Hurry up there!'. I, in obedience to authority, at once started to run. On reaching the carriage door and looking round I saw the Minister approaching at a most leisurely pace. The train waited. As he got in, Bismarck said, 'I'd rather be late ten times over than have to run once.' Bismarck's whole person was calculated to impress, and he knew it. The idea that his behaviour might give offence to those of his colleagues of less prepossessing appearance did not trouble him in the least. 'Your chief always reminds me of an ancient Roman; all he wants is a toga', I was told one day by the Vicomte Moira, the Portuguese Minister, an amiable but entirely insignificant-looking fat man, who can certainly never have impressed anyone.

Bismarck's attitude to the diplomatic corps as such was one of indifference. He probably found most of his *confrères* boring; at all events he reduced his points of contact with them by usually spending his evenings at home. [...]

¹ A humorous German weekly, devoting considerable space to politics.

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He certainly did not lead a healthy life. He ate only one meal a day, but then, as is well known, he ate and drank very heavily. The fact that he was able to continue this mode of life up to about 1880, that is, until he was over sixty-five, shows how well equipped he was, physically as well as mentally, to sustain exceptional demands. But there is no doubt that the black moods to which Bismarck was so frequently a prey were due as much to physical as to mental strain. I have scarcely ever known anyone so joyless as Bismarck. When he was at the height of his intellectual powers one received the impression that he was always striving towards some goal, and putting behind him all past achievements. In earlier life, particularly in his Frankfurt days, he used to be passionately fond of hunting. When I went to St Petersburg he would still hunt, but not often, and when he became Minister-President his other interests gradually obliged him to give it up altogether.

He kept a peculiar household. During the year and a quarter I served under him, Bismarck gave not one single dinner. Schlözer, at that time a perpetual fault-finder, declared that a dinner Bismarck had given shortly before my arrival, in honour of the Saxon and Danish Ministers, had been a complete failure. Plessen, the Dane, a notorious gourmet, scarcely touched anything, but at the end of the meal he said, 'Please may I have some more cheese.' But this was one of Schlözer's pieces of exaggeration. I can well believe that the dinner was ill-balanced, because Bismarck took no interest in food and Princess Bismarck,¹ although she looked like a cook all her life, had not the slightest knowledge of how to cook, or at any rate how to give dinner parties. But they had quite a good chef, and their everyday diet was more copious than that of any other household I know, in fact they ate more than was good for the average digestion. There was so much food that one or two guests could arrive at the last minute without causing any embarrassment. A limited number of people, including Captain (now General) Erckert, the young Württemberg Minister, Spitzenberg, and any of the Balts who happened to be in St Petersburg—Keyserlingk, Üxküll, Öftingen, Hase—had a standing invitation; one or two others, e.g. Fieldmarshal Count Berg,² were asked to a meal when they came on a visit, without neces-

¹ Johanna von Bismarck, *née* von Puttkammer.

² Friedrich, Count Berg. Governor of Finland.

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THE BISMARCK HOUSEHOLD

sitating any alteration in the arrangements. In those days I was young and a hearty eater, but I was amazed at the amount Bismarck could eat, and still more at what he could drink; I was also astonished at the time we spent at table.

When the conversation turned on political questions past or present, I listened with uncritical attention, without grasping their inner connection. But Bismarck was also fond of speaking about his youth and his student days, about his experiences in 1848 and the Frankfurt period. One listened to the same stories over and over again. They were always stories in which Bismarck figured as the hero, while the other characters usually appeared in a ridiculous, and at times a despicable light.

The note of true gaiety was lacking, so that the laughter was always at someone's expense. Once, for example, a passing cavalry officer was billeted on Bismarck in Kniephof, and was invited out to dine with a neighbour. But beforehand Bismarck had a few drinks with the lieutenant who, being unable to carry his liquor as well as his host, was soon three-quarters drunk. Description of their appearance at the party, Bismarck cool and correct, the officer reeling from side to side. Description of the hospitable neighbour's look of reproach and the horror displayed by his wife. The fact that the day had been ruined for several people was not of the slightest importance to Bismarck. All he saw was his own triumphant progress.

But his flow of speech became positively vitriolic if the story concerned someone he disliked, as for example the Hanoverian Minister Count Münster.¹ The latter had once reported to his government a politically indiscreet remark made to him by Bismarck when out hunting. From Hanover the remark had been passed on to Berlin, and Bismarck had received a reprimand from Schleinitz, which, though not comparable in form and content with the subsequent 'rockets' of the Bismarckian era, was nevertheless bitterly resented by its recipient, who became Münster's enemy. From that day Bismarck painted Münster in the darkest colours, and in particular declared he was a traitor and a liar. As

¹ Georg Herbert, Count Münster, Baron Grothaus; from 1899 Prince Münster von Derneburg. Hanoverian Minister in St Petersburg, 1856–64; from 1867 hereditary Member of the Prussian Upper House; Member of the Reichstag, 1867–73 (*Deutsche Reichspartei*); German Ambassador in London, 1873–85, in Paris, 1885–1900.

MEMOIRS AND POLITICAL OBSERVATIONS

evidence of his falsehoods Bismarck would quote a hunting tale worthy of Baron Münchhausen, which Münster was supposed to have told of himself. When Bismarck told this story for the second time to the English First Secretary, Savile Lumley, whom he knew from Frankfurt days, Lumley screwed his monocle more firmly into position and said, 'The story has improved.' It is typical of Princess Bismarck that, quite unaware of its sting, she repeated Lumley's remark and thought it very witty, as indeed it was. [...]

He said quite openly that his salary did not permit him to do much entertaining. Consequently he would hardly ever accept luncheon invitations himself. Similarly he was seldom out in the evening. The only Russian salon he frequented now and again was the one held by Countess Antoinette Bludov,¹ where the guests talked politics. Otherwise he held himself strictly aloof from Russian society. After dining at five o'clock he usually remained at home reading newspapers or studying maps. I can only speak from personal observation, but I rarely saw him reading a serious book. Once, I remember, he read a volume of eighteenth-century memoirs with which I too was familiar. For some time he quoted from it constantly without acknowledging his source, with the result that he gave the impression of having studied a complete body of literature. Even so he had certainly retained a great deal from that single book.

Abeken says in his memoirs² that Prince Bismarck must at some period of his life have read very widely. And Bucher³ told me that when Bismarck was living in solitude in the country he read Spinoza and various similar authors. But one day Bucher expressed a different view: 'Bismarck obtained most of his solid political knowledge from the memoranda and the protocols of the Federal Diet and the Prussian Ministry of State. They contain a great deal of information, if only you can remember it.' Bismarck possessed a prodigious memory and also accomplished much by solitary reflection. Since his assumption of office he read very few serious works but read novels for mental relaxation.

¹ Daughter of Count Dmitri Bludov, President of the Russian Senate.

² Heinrich Abeken. In the Prussian Foreign Ministry from 1848; *Vortragender Rat*, 1853–71. See *Heinrich Abeken, Ein schlichtes Leben in bewegter Zeit, aus Briefen zusammengestellt*, edited by Hedwig Abeken (Berlin, 1898).

³ Lothar Bucher. *Vortragender Rat* in the Foreign Ministry, 1864–86.

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FRAU VON BISMARCK

He was not understood by St Petersburg society; it occasionally made fun of his striking stiffness of manner and resultant air of constraint which formed such a contrast to the Russian ease and urbanity, and it dismissed him as *peu homme du monde*. One day Frau von Bismarck said to him, 'Otto dear, whatever was the Tsar saying to you yesterday evening? You were standing there looking so worried.' 'I was not aware I was worried', he replied, evidently upset by her remark.

Frau von Bismarck, like her husband, was a peculiar person. The only attraction she could boast was a pair of arresting dark eyes. She had dark hair too, which revealed the Slav origins of the Puttkamer family. She was entirely devoid of feminine charm, attached no importance to dress, and only lived for her family. She exercised her quite considerable musical talent merely for her own enjoyment, though Bismarck liked to listen when she played classical music such as Beethoven. In society her speech and behaviour were doubtless not always appropriate, but she moved with a calm assurance which prevented her from ever appearing ill at ease or uncertain of herself. Her husband let her go her own way; I never once saw him take her to task. During the thirty years of our acquaintance I heard him rebuke her only twice. On the first occasion she had invited to Countess Rantzau's¹ wedding two ladies whom he considered socially unsuitable. The second incident occurred soon after, about 1880. The Chancellor, on coming in to a meal, was met by his wife with the words, 'What do you think, Otto dear! X—I can't remember the name—has just called and said I shouldn't have repeated certain things, because it may cause trouble.' Prince Bismarck answered indifferently, almost with a smile, 'It's not the first time people have said you sometimes render my task even more difficult.' She made no reply and the subject was dropped.

Bismarck displayed considerable nobility of character in the way he bore with his wife's inept behaviour, which was at times appalling. He never winced at it, but would on rare occasions gently admonish her. Even though he did not move much in society it seems hardly credible that he can have failed to notice his wife's blunders. It was most probably the conviction that he

¹ Marie, Otto von Bismarck's daughter, was married in November 1878 to Kuno, Count zu Rantzau.

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could never bring his wife to mend her ways, coupled with his disdain for mankind, which determined him to let well alone. And it was part of Bismarck's strength of character to remain true to that decision.

When she lived in St Petersburg, Frau von Bismarck (as she was then) was a great friend of a certain Frau Berteau. (Despite the French name her husband was a German from the Baltic provinces.) She and Frau von Bismarck would drive round in a little droshky every morning to buy their household provisions. This was thought odd and no doubt raised a smile, but the complete indifference displayed by the Bismarcks impressed people nevertheless, particularly as they knew how high the Minister ranked in the Tsar's estimation. On Bismarck's arrival in St Petersburg Alexander II began to invite him to a small bear-hunt he held every week during the winter; he was the only diplomat included in the party.

These bear-hunts had first come into fashion with the opening of the railway linking St Petersburg and Moscow. Work on it was begun in the days of the Tsar Nicholas I. Taking a pencil and ruler—I have often heard Bismarck tell the story—the Tsar drew a straight line from Moscow to St Petersburg, thus marking out its course. The greater part of it, to the north, ran through marshy woodland. The cost of construction was so enormous that after its completion the accounts were burnt by order of the Tsar. This railway opened up a vast hunting ground and there arose among the peasants living in those lonely forests a new branch of commerce—bear-trading. With the first fall of snow the bear, as is well known, seeks out a place to hibernate in the dense undergrowth, and if disturbed only moves a mile or two away, so that it is not difficult to encircle him in his second lair. Here he remains until the thaw, and thus becomes a commodity with a market price, which is governed by the proximity of the lair to the railway and by the size of the bear's footprint. The deal is concluded either in the villages by means of a travelling agent, or in St Petersburg if some enterprising peasant makes his way there at his village's expense. The customers are the Court Hunt and various diplomats or foreign merchants; the Russians themselves, with their dislike of any kind of physical exertion, find bear-hunting too arduous. Between paying for your bear and hunting him there may well be