

## CHAPTER VI.

### *BISMARCK IN THE REICHSTAG.*

LEAVING out of sight for a moment the ex-Chancellor's political genius, he has proved to be an orator of the first rank—not only on the score of the clearness of his views and his happy way of explaining them, but still more by reason of the consummate skill he manifests in interesting his hearers. He had, however, a very bitter opponent in the person of Eugène Richter, the leader of the Opposition party, and whose name will frequently appear in the following pages.

Herr Richter is a man possessing great dialectic skill and astonishing self-possession. His speech is rapid and fluent, and he is an extremely well-informed man; besides which, he is a perfect master of sarcasm. It

is rare that a speech from him misses its effect; and were not the instinct of obedience as strong as it is in the Germans, he would more than once have placed the Chancellor in a difficult position, the latter having occasionally failed to refute in a satisfactory manner the damaging statements and vexing questions put forward by the former.

But this is wandering from the subject. Let us see what have been the habits and attitude of Bismarck in the Reichstag—or Imperial Diet, as the word means.

*His voice* is the first thing to be noticed. This is what a shorthand writer in the Chamber says of it:—

“It cannot be said that Prince Bismarck is an orator in the full acceptance of the term. One is surprised to find that this man, whose size and proportions are much above the average, has only a woman's voice. It is especially weak at times when the Prince is labouring under his nervous affection. At these moments he can scarcely be heard

at all, and the difficulty is increased by an intermittent cough, which is sometimes very troublesome. After these fits of coughing, only disconnected sentences can be made out, and what he says no longer partakes of the nature of a speech. However, he never appears to be at a loss for words, and I have often suspected that this cough might perhaps be an oratorical trick, by which he was enabled to collect his ideas, and at the same time produce an effect. But, however that may be, it is a very wonderful cough.

“He will begin, for example, by a rude and impolite remark, and everyone is expecting it to be followed by another still more scorching, when, suddenly, the cough comes on, followed by an expression very different from what was looked for. Here is a case in point, which has remained fixed in my memory:—

“‘I am in the Emperor’s service. I do not care in the least to know whether I shall sink under the task or not, and you—[here

a fit of coughing]—you probably care just as little.’

“Everybody expected an insulting remark to follow, but no! the little fit of coughing had changed the current of his thoughts.”

It is quite probable that this reporter was right. Prince Bismarck, when he indulges in a cough, probably proceeds on the principle of those persons who, not able at the moment to find a satisfactory answer to a question, get the question repeated in order to gain time for reflection.

Some time ago the *Neue Freie Presse* published a sketch of Bismarck from the pen of Herr Theophilus Zolling, and this is worth repeating:—

“Prince Bismarck took his seat on the end chair in front of the Ministers’ table, his colossal form being wrapped in the undress tunic of the Magdeburg cuirassiers. His bright buttons and the bullion of his general’s epaulets glitter in the light which

falls upon them from the glazed dome. He has to hold his head quite upright, owing to the stiff black stock round his neck and the high yellow coat-collar outside it. His features, which look as if they were cast in bronze, are well known to everybody. His complexion, once fair and smooth, is a deeper colour now, and his white moustachios and long eyebrows stand up stiffer than ever, and are very prominent objects. He has a pair of greyish-blue eyes, and his face is lined with deep wrinkles, which tone down in some degree its fatness. His nose is inclined to be snub, but very well formed, and seems smaller than it really is, on account of his bushy eyebrows and heavy moustache. His grey hair is short, and of quite the regulation cut. A high forehead rises above it all, furrowed with the lines of care and study, and over this one would search in vain for the three famous hairs once invented by the *Kladderadatsch*.

“The Chancellor listens very quietly while the representatives of the nation are speaking,

meantime swallowing enormous quantities of water, with which he mixes a few drops of cognac. This, however, is not a prescription of Dr. Schweninger's, who had the good fortune to considerably reduce his corpulence : it is rather a departure from his doctor's advice. Now and then he plays with his eye-glasses, which lie on the table before him—quite an antique pair, mounted in horn ; then he will take a look round at the galleries. But all this does not prevent him from listening to what is going on, nor from taking notes with his pencil. And what a pencil! A pencil like this is not seen every day. It is yellow in colour, and of an inordinate length. It is whispered that after every sitting these pencils regularly disappear—taken away by the Deputies, who give them to their wives as relics of Bismarck. Presently a sigh of impatience seems to make his moustache bristle up. Oh, these professional talkers! They little think what valuable time they waste. If only his son Herbert were there by the

side of him—as he usually is at the Reichstag sittings, opening dispatches and passing them to him! But the Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs is unwell at this moment. Ah! here comes a footman bringing a huge black leather portfolio, which he places upon his master's knees.

“Bismarck now takes a bunch of keys from his pocket, opens the portfolio, and takes from it two bundles of papers—one red and the other blue; all the most important documents are there. He runs over them, and lays on the table in front of him those which he will have occasion to consult; then he glances at his watch, for the long-winded orator is still on his legs.

“When this speaker has finished, Windhorst gets up to speak; and finally, when he has delivered himself, Bismarck's turn comes. He rises slowly from his chair, and one gets almost a shock at seeing this Herculean form towering so high above the table that his hands do not reach down to it. His body is by this means deprived

of any support, and he rocks about unsteadily. His arms swing backwards and forwards, and his hands (the only part of him, it would seem, bearing visible signs of their owner's great age) shake a good deal as they feel about for something to rest upon; now the fingers are nervously twirling the heavy moustache, now one of them is poked into his ear; at one moment they are playing with the skirts of his tunic, at another they are clutching the Iron Cross, the only decoration which the Chancellor is wearing. At another time a hand will pass into the hind pocket of the tunic and bring forth a pocket-handkerchief, and he blows his nose with noise and energy.

“And his voice! By heaven, it astonishes a person who hears it for the first time. One expects to hear a kind of thunder issue from that capacious chest, but instead of that it is a tiny baritone, very agreeable, and very pleasant to listen to at first, but after a few fits of coughing it gets stronger. And then each word is accompanied by a

movement of the body which seems to facilitate its utterance. When he arrives at the end of a period his words tread on each other's heels in their impatience to break forth, and now they are no longer accompanied by inarticulate sounds, and coughings and clearings of the throat; the idea is plainly there, lucid and mature, and yet another is waiting in the background to take its place. His speech is clear, with a somewhat antiquated accent, and his final *r*'s are not pronounced strongly. His tone is never solemn, and never pathetic, even when he is deeply moved, or when he is talking of his great age, of his Majesty the Emperor, or of his country. It is quite in the style of a drawing-room chat, addressed to the Deputies seated near him, the people in the galleries not appearing to be taken into consideration at all. These listeners have to content themselves with a few fragments caught up at hazard; but indeed, if they will only wait until the evening, they will find reports *in extenso* in the public prints. Besides,

the Chancellor's speeches are much better when read in print; he is not what one might call an orator, and does not even want to be one. This is what he once said himself in the Reichstag: 'I am no orator; I have not the gift of influencing your minds, nor of obscuring the real meaning of things by a cloud of words. My discourse is simple and clear. . . . A good orator is seldom a statesman.' He hates professional talkers too; and one day he said: 'When a man is too fluent of speech he talks too long and too frequently.'

"Immediately the Chancellor sits down, the voice of Eugène Richter is heard, and every one knows how the Chancellor dislikes it. The speeches of this man have spoilt some of his best triumphs, upset his good humour for weeks at a stretch, and often caused him to make a breach in his parliamentary manners. Richter's physique is anything but agreeable to the eye. He is stout and short, with a full beard, and a thick head of black hair shining with pomade,

and brushed so as to conceal a commencement of baldness. That is the appearance of the famous Progressist Deputy, and he is much like Emile Zola to look at. His nose is energetic, without being large, his eye is bright and intelligent, and his delivery is easy and elegant, and void of the slightest emphasis.

“While Richter is speaking, Bismarck appears to be the victim of lively emotion. His face changes colour—from very pale at first it becomes crimson—his eyes seem to be starting from his head, and they shine with a melancholy lustre. He then clutches his pencil convulsively, and jots down hurried notes upon his paper. Sometimes he tries to join in the general hilarity, but his laugh has something forced and harsh about it. Suddenly he jumps up in the midst of the uproar caused by Richter’s speech, and pulls down the skirts of his tunic with the air of a man who is preparing himself for a severe tussle, and his chest heaves and expands with violent throbs, as if he had

the greatest difficulty in fetching his breath. But while he is looking at the audience and taking the measure of his opponent, he regains the mastery of himself, and his temper changes suddenly. His gay humour gets the upper hand again, and a smile lights up his countenance: he is cool and self-possessed once more, and he replies to his adversary in a jocular style, doing all he can to make fun of him and turn the laugh against him. He begins by scoffing, in a pleasant way, at Herr Richter’s political ideas—every arrow is well aimed, and every stroke tells; and the gayer Bismarck grows, so much the more does Richter get gloomy and cross. From time to time the latter is heard to mutter in a low voice, ‘That’s all nonsense!’ and he throws himself back in his chair and directs furious glances towards the Ministerial bench. Then, when he has worked himself up to a good pitch of excitement, his neighbour (Traeger, the poet of the *Gartenlaube*) says a word to him, and he relapses into a smile.