GREAT BRITAIN AND GERMANY:
A CONVERSATION WITH COUNT VON BULOW, THE GERMAN CHANCELLOR.

For many months—nay, for the last few years—the belief that Germany's Kaiser and Chancellor have been, and are still, playing a hostile game against Great Britain, and are cynically laying an elaborate plot for the ultimate ruin of our country's power, has been gaining ground in all spheres of British society, and not amongst the masses of unthinking people alone, who, perhaps, take their cue from the unreliable lucubrations of sensational journalism. The cultured classes of the United Kingdom also have become impregnated with similar views, and many persons from among the intellectual portion of the King's subjects speak of Germany as England's bitterest and most dangerous foe. In very exalted circles, too, we find persons who think they are justified in believing that Germany wants to rule the North Sea; to wrest the whole shipping trade out of our hands; to invade England; and to annihilate the world-power of Great Britain. For the attainment of these ends German
diplomacy is said to be everywhere angling in turbid streams, and to be intriguing against England in all the capitals of the world.

Some writers have recently gone so far as to denounce every Englishman who ventures to doubt the sufficiency of the grounds set forth in support of such insidious designs as too optimistic, or a simpleton—or even as a partisan of Jewish bankers. And yet, as a distinguished French diplomatist not very long ago remarked to me, ‘il faut être un peu optimiste dans la vie.’ But for the encouragement of optimism, how would countries ever be able to bury their animosities? Austria would never have become reconciled to Prussia; Great Britain would still be at loggerheads with the United States and with France. If one did not cherish a hope for better relations between Great Britain and Germany, one would have to throw up the sponge and abandon the task of striving for them. But no sane person can pretend that it is in the interest of our country, whose foreign policy is and must be determined by our commercial interests, to continue a campaign of insult and mischievous suspicion that in the long run would infallibly prove disastrous, whichever way it ended. Nor is one a simpleton for supporting such views; and even a Jewish banker can assuredly lay claim to political judgment.

The causes of controversy with Germany that have been exciting the passions of both Germans and Britons for so long should be removed, and we should start with a clean slate. In trying to effect so laudable a consummation, there can be no abandonment of either our intellectual or political independence. A perpetual cannonade of the same unproved statements, based on mere suspicions, produces an unhealthy condition of things; and a campaign of this kind is unworthy of a great and free people.

Whenever an incident unpleasant to England happens in any part of the globe, a German diplomatist or the Central Government in Berlin is said to be behind it. Could anything be more fatuous than to attribute so much power to German diplomacy; or could anything be less complimentary to the representatives of Powers that are friendly disposed to us than to insinuate that they are completely under the thumb of their German colleagues?

If we look at the matter from an unprejudiced and business-like point of view, we must surely admit that nothing is more mischievous than to convert a rival into a bitter enemy. If some very serious international question were to arise whilst the peoples of two great Powers like Britain and Germany are being wilfully kept asunder by fomenters of international hatred, the situation might suddenly become fraught with untold danger; for the existing friction between them could easily develop into a complete rupture of relations. Friendship with other Powers need not involve bickerings with Germany. King Edward’s political programme has
been to try to establish friendly relations with all countries on a practical basis of mutual interests making for continuous peace.

A few months ago I was talking to Count von Bülow, at a reception at his official residence, on the deplorable state of the relations between our two countries. It had long been my desire to broach the subject to him. His Excellency rejoined: 'I regret this condition of things as much as you do; but can you suggest any way for bringing about a change?'

My reply was to the effect that if his Excellency would do me the honour of allowing me to have a conversation with him on this subject, and would permit me to communicate the gist thereof to the British public in such a way that it would be a faithful reflection of his views, I thought a very salutary effect would be produced, because hitherto no authoritative statement had been made calculated to dispel the suspicions and apprehensions concerning German policy towards Britain which, whether well or ill founded, undoubtedly existed at home amongst all spheres of people.

The Chancellor without hesitation signified his willingness to accede to my request; but owing to a variety of circumstances—pressure of Parliamentary business, the visit of the King at Kiel, commercial treaty negotiations, and his own absence for his summer holiday—the date of the audience had to be constantly postponed. He very kindly sent me a message from Homburg to the effect that on his return to Berlin in the autumn he would be glad to see me.

Those who know Count von Bülow will have always been enchanted by his amiable and courteous manners and speech; but he has the character of telling nothing whilst he entertains his visitor. Diplomatists say he is most urbane, complaisant, and communicative of speech, but tantalising as regards his reticence on subjects about which his views are sought. This also is the criticism passed on him when he speaks from his seat in the Reichstag.

On this occasion I found him, on the contrary, most desirous to dispel the errors as to German policy that are current on your side of the Channel; and, as will be seen in the following lines, he spoke frankly and at length on the chief points upon which it was my desire to enlighten the public at home. We did not discourse on the special relations between Germany and Russia, on which subject Lord Lansdowne is amply informed, but confined our conversation to specific matters affecting German policy towards Great Britain, the Chancellor’s political views on Anglo-German relations, and his personal sentiments towards our nation. Nor did we touch, except in a cursory manner, on incidents that no longer have a bearing on present practical politics. I know personally that Count von Bülow always opposed and condemned the extravagant malignity of the enthusiasm of his fellow-countrymen for the Boers, but deem it
desirable not to rake up questions of the past the discussion of which is now futile and could only lead to renewed misunderstandings or divert attention from the main points at issue. If I am correctly informed, the King's visit to Kiel completely obliterated the soreness that had been left by those incidents. The mischievous perpetuation of an exaggerated sense of suspicion, of withering gall and blighting bitterness, must be stemmed if Britain and Germany are not to drift into a condition of dangerous hostility.

THE BRITISH PRESS.

'I have had much pleasure,' said Count von Bülow, as he greeted me in his library on the evening of the 15th of November, and motioned me to take a seat close to his writing-table, 'in acceding to your request to have a conversation with me. A good deal of hostility towards Germany seems to influence the writing of a number of your compatriots—which I sincerely regret; and I am bound to say that it seems to me as if a certain school of your publicists looks upon a paper-war against Germany as the main object of its life. Surely our mutual interests would be better served if these writers were to try to extinguish, instead of to foment, ill-feeling between Germany and England.

'I am gratified, however, to see that a reaction appears to have set in—at least, against the calumnious excesses of this campaign—and some of the English papers have of late been dropping that tone of rabid bitterness that was so very irritating.'

Suppressing the obvious comparison with the other side, especially as the leading organ of the Pan-German press tried to make the amende honorable about a couple of months ago by distinctly admitting the grave error of the malicious Teuton campaign during the Boer War, I merely intimated that the bitterness of our writers had not been unprovoked.

'Even the Anglo-Chinese press,' added the Chancellor—'I refer to the North China Herald—considers the constant hammering at Germany with insinuations against our policy in China to be undignified and dangerous, and calculated to throw Germany into Russia's arms.'

THE THIBET QUESTION.

'Let me cite the charge made in the Times against our Minister at Pekin concerning the Thibet Question,' continued the Chancellor. 'I think I may assume that people in England are by this time convinced that we did not interfere in order to prevent the ratification of your treaty with Thibet—or, indeed, with any matters affecting Thibet.'
'I can assure you that we are at least as indifferent about Thibet as we are about Manchuria. We have always strictly confined our efforts for the protection of the neutrality and integrity of China to the Celestial Empire proper, and have left the provinces beyond it and its dependencies outside the scope of our policy. We have documentary evidence showing that the representative of the German Empire at Pekin has refrained from all interference whatever in the Thibet Question, and that all assertions to the contrary are pure inventions.

'Let me show you Baron von Mumm's despatch, which is his answer to my telegram asking for an explanation of the statement published in the Times of the 18th of October.'

The text of this despatch, which I then had an opportunity of perusing, clearly showed that the Times report was erroneous. Baron von Mumm stated that he simply asked once at the Wai-wu-pu whether the text of the Treaty, as published in the newspapers, was authentic; and that he expressly made a point, at the time, of saying that Germany took no interest in the matter.

The Chancellor continued: 'I do not mean to affirm that Dr. Morrison deliberately told an untruth. I can easily imagine that in his efforts to discover some anti-English act in Germany's diplomatic policy he came across somebody who bore him a grudge. There are persons in the Wai-wu-pu, and also outside this Chinese Department, who think they can derive some advantage by presenting Germany as interested in the Thibet Question.

'At all events, I authorise you to state publicly that Baron von Mumm did not meddle with this question, and that I characterise any other version about this matter as a fabrication.'

THE ALLEGED GERMAN WARNINGS TO RUSSIA.

'Another recent effort to excite bad blood against us is the story that the nervousness of the Baltic Fleet was due to "warnings" from Germany; so that we are denounced as the cause of the misfortune that befell the Hull trawlers. There is not a word of truth in this, either. As a matter of fact, anxiety concerning the safety of the Baltic Fleet was felt in Russian official circles long before the date of its departure was fixed. I may tell you that as early as last August the Russian authorities officially drew our attention to what they thought was the possibility that a Japanese attack would be also made from some place on German soil. It is our duty, as it would be the duty of every neutral State in similar circumstances, to take measures for preventing our territory from being used as the basis of hostilities against a belligerent. We acted in obedience to the call of duty by so far taking note of Russia's warnings as to urge
our Admiralty and our coast officials to be specially on the watch and to investigate the matter. Denmark acted in a similar manner. We are pleased to think that no untoward event occurred in our waters, whilst we regret that a misfortune took place elsewhere.'

**England and Russia.**

In reply to my remark that many people in England believe that the German Government 'intrigues' against England all over the world, and has been particularly busy of late in trying to make mischief between England and Russia and between England and France, his Excellency continued:

'I anticipated a question from you on this subject, and I want to lay special stress on the fact that we do not aim at setting the English and the Russians by the ears, either in Asia or in Europe. We are, on the contrary, most desirous that there should be no violent collision between England and Russia anywhere, if for no other reason than because our own interests would compel us to try to prevent it. We could not possibly tell, supposing such a calamity should befall the world, how far war between these two countries would spread, or what consequences might accrue therefrom to ourselves. We would not dream of playing with such a firebrand, because we have no desire to see our own house ignited.'

'That is why we have done everything in our power to localise the war in East Asia; and we are entitled to say that our endeavours have met with success. We can claim some credit for China's remaining neutral, and we hope that there is no longer any fear that she will break her neutrality.'

'The questions as to our relations with Russia and as to England's relations with Russia are always treated in a very extraordinary manner by some of your publicists in England. A party in your country is always advocating a special understanding between England and Russia. Good! we have nothing whatever to say against this, especially if it makes for peace; but when it is a question of Germany being on specially good terms with Russia, there is at once an outcry in England that we have some ulterior aim in view, and that we are concocting an alliance against England. We have no special arrangements with Russia, but we have every desire and intention to live on friendly and intimate terms with our Eastern neighbour, and neither I nor any other German statesman would be doing his duty if he did not foster this friendship. If you look at the map, I think you will have no difficulty in comprehending this.'

'During the present war we have observed strict neutrality, and shall continue to do so; and we hope to remain on intimate terms with Russia.'
ENGLAND AND FRANCE.

'As regards the charge made against us of having tried to sow discord and embarrassment between France and England, with a view of hindering the ratification of the Agreement, could you possibly believe that we should select the present moment for doing so, when we see before our eyes all the most patent signs of an *entente cordiale*? Surely blundering intrigues of this nature would have no effect on the sincerity of an *entente* like this? Is it possible—and how is it possible—that we should be considered in your country to be capable of such arrant stupidity as this, for it could only compromise us?

'On the other hand, it is quite allowable—if you like—to question whether this intimacy between France and England is likely to be considered desirable or not by us.

'At all events, by agreeing to what you desire in Egypt we showed our good-will to the British Government in that we did not throw any obstacles in the way of its friendly arrangement with France.'

GERMAN HISTORIANS AND ENGLAND.

Whilst talking generally about the language used by German writers, and notably by some celebrated German historians, as to the probability of a war between Germany and England in the future, I pointed out to the Chancellor that much importance was attached in intellectual spheres in England to the menacing language occasionally met with in the writings of learned German professors which are accepted as text-books at the Universities. I cited as a specimen a sentence Heinrich von Treitschke is said to have used in 1884: 'The reckoning with England has still to come; it will be the longest and most difficult'; and mentioned that it had been said of him in England that he 'had made it the task of his life to foster in Germany a passionate hatred for England.' Count von Bülow replied:—

'I have never seen the passage you quote; anyhow, I can assure you—for I know Treitschke well—that hostility to England cannot be fairly attributed to him. He had many friends in England, Carlyle amongst them; he was intimately acquainted with English literature and life. You will find many passages in his writings which will prove the contrary of what you tell me is asserted in England. If passages expressing anti-English sentiments are cited from Treitschke's works, those showing friendly feelings to England should also, in common fairness, be given. You must not forget that Treitschke, besides being an historian, was a poet and a man of strong passions. He was an ardent Imperialist even before 1870,'
and hated Particularism. Although a Saxon by birth, he had no
fondness for his narrower Fatherland, precisely because of what he
interpreted as its Particularist tendencies, nor could he abide the
States of southern Germany. If he really made use of the words
you cite, it must have been in a fit of emotion or rage; for he
was easily moved to anger. But even if he or others did use such
words, they do not contain the doctrine encouraged or advocated by
the statesmen or educators of the land. There is no means of
controlling the whims and language of poets, philosophers, and
historians; but of Treitschke I can speak from knowledge. He
admired England, Greece, Italy—all three countries where liberty
and letters have been fostered. Carlyle and Byron were amongst
his favourite heroes.

‘How often, too, is it said by your countrymen that Bismarck
was a hater of England! This is not true, however, whatever you
may say about his policy. Bismarck is known to have often said:
“We (the Germans) like the English; but they will have nothing
to say to us.” I can speak myself with some knowledge of
Bismarck’s policy; and I utterly repudiate the idea that he was a
hater of England, or that he entertained designs against England’s
position in the world.

THE GERMAN NAVY.

‘Now let me say a few words about the constantly recurring
assertions that our naval policy is aimed at preparing for a war with
England. I can conscientiously say, in answer to this charge, that
we do not dream of conjuring up such a war. It would be a
monstrous crime to do so.

‘A war to the knife between Germany and England could only
be politically justified on the assumption that Germany and England
were the sole competitors on the world’s surface, and on the assump-
tion that the defeat of one of the two rivals would mean the absolute
supremacy of the other. In former centuries England was always
in a state of rivalry with only one rival at a time—with Spain,
Holland, and France in turn. Everything was then at stake. But
nowadays there are a number of Powers that make the same claims
as we do, and the Russo-Japanese War shows that an addition may
be made to their number.

‘As things are, a war between Germany and England would be
the greatest piece of good fortune that could possibly be conceived
for all their rivals. For whereas such a war—and we must not
deceive ourselves on this point—would completely destroy German
trade, as far as one can judge, and would seriously damage British
trade, our rivals would utilise the opportunity for securing the
markets of the world without firing a shot. So that, were we to
come to blows, there would be a whole bevy of tertii graduantes.
'As you have yourself gone very carefully into the question of our navy, you will certainly have obtained proofs that our fleet is only meant for defensive purposes. Its object is to secure our waters against any attack, and to afford the necessary protection for our interests abroad. We shall, of course, always take care that it is ready to strike when required, for our motto must be—"Always be ready."

'Foreign countries must reconcile themselves to the fact that the German merchant beyond the seas is no longer the poverty-stricken creature who must content himself with picking up the crumbs from under the table. He now takes his seat next his fellows; and we are fully entitled to stand up for and defend the rights which are ours in company with the citizens of other nations.'

Before taking leave of the Chancellor I craved permission to put one more question, intimating that I felt sure that his answer would add great weight to the remarks he had already been good enough to communicate to me. I said that a belief prevailed in Great Britain that Germany is Britain's real and mortal enemy, adding: 'It is also widely reported on the other side of the Channel that your Excellency entertains a cordial dislike of England. Will you kindly authorise me to reply to this remarkable charge?'

'Certainly,' responded the Chancellor in an earnest and serious tone. 'I will answer this question as a politician and as a man. As a politician and German statesman I consider that it would be most iniquitous and criminal to represent a policy that was directed towards fomenting hostility between two great nations such as Germany and England, both of which are indispensable to the civilised world. A war between these two peoples would be a dire calamity, and, I repeat, it would be an unpardonable crime for a statesman wilfully to provoke it or to act in such a way as to render it possible or probable. As a man, I can assure you that nothing could be farther from my thoughts than dislike of, not to mention hatred or hostility towards, England.

'I admire the country, its people, and its literature. Pray state that I most emphatically repudiate the charge that I entertain the slightest ill-feeling or dislike of England or the English—a charge that is quite new to me and wholly incomprehensible.'

The above conversation was carried on partly in English and partly in German. Count von Bülow has a perfect knowledge of English, which language he speaks quite fluently—more fluently than did his great predecessor, Bismarck.

J. L. Bashford.

Berlin: November 1904.