CHAPTER IX

FLANDERS, PALESTINE AND MESOPOTAMIA

1917

From this time onwards Lord Curzon had little reason to complain of lack of work. Between December 1916, when Mr. Lloyd George's Government took office, and November 1918, when hostilities on the main battle areas were brought to a close, the War Cabinet of which he was throughout a member, held over five hundred meetings. Normally it met daily in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon and evening as well. It became the brain of the Empire to which the daily developments of the war on land, on sea, under the sea and in the air, together with the problems to which each fresh move gave rise, were continuously communicated for information, consideration and decision. And to problems of a strictly military character were added questions no less bewildering in their complexity nor vital in their consequences, affecting the Imperial and Foreign relations of the Country and the economic and social organisation of her peoples.

So great, so complex and so continuous a flow of work necessitated a considerable departure from the methods of transacting business hitherto followed by British Cabinets. The preparation of agenda and the maintenance of a record and Minutes of the proceedings were found to be essential if the mass of business which came before the War Cabinet was to be properly dealt with, and these innovations entailed the creation of a Secretariat with a highly competent and responsible officer at its head.

Lord Curzon applauded all such changes and, as a result of eigh-

teen months experience of the working of the new system, gave it as his deliberate opinion that when the history of these days was written, it would be found that they had left a not inconsiderable mark upon the constitutional development of the country. He paid a glowing tribute to the officer—Sir Maurice Hankey, G.C.B.—who as Secretary to the Cabinet was charged with a task of no ordinary difficulty and of immense responsibility. "That distinguished officer by his ability, his industry, his knowledge of affairs and his unfailing tact, has really been far more responsible than any individual for what I claim to be the successful working of the [illegible] when history is written he will deserve his own niche in the [illegible] which records the builders of our national Constitution."[1] Of [illegible] innovation, namely, the elaborate Private Secretariat which [illegible] George added to the machinery of government for his own convenience, and which, owing to its location in the grounds of [illegible] Street, came to be known familiarly as "the Garden Suburb," Lord Curzon had a different story to tell. For he was to discover by experience the embarrassment to which a Foreign Minister might [illegible] by a Prime Minister with a highly staffed Secretariat at his [illegible] who took an active and sometimes independent part in directing the foreign policy of the Country. This was, however, the development of a later date; and so far as the organisation presided over by Sir Maurice Hankey was concerned, he appreciated to the full the method which an efficient Secretariat introduced into the procedure of the Cabinet.

Lord Curzon was by temperament and by experience better equipped, perhaps, than some of his colleagues for assimilating the contents of the never ending stream of papers which flowed in upon them. On the other hand, the habit which he had acquired in India of conscientiously perusing all the documents in a file rather than rely upon a summary prepared by someone else, imposed on him a ceaseless and tremendous strain. At the end of an exhausting day he would return from a dinner party or some official engagement to sit up far into the night, poring over the mass of papers which had accumulated during the day; and it was rare, indeed, if those

[1] Speech in the House of Lords, June 19th, 1918.

concerned did not receive their boxes back the following morning with a clear Minute of instructions written in Lord Curzon's own hand.

Nor was this all, for membership of the War Cabinet carried with it, automatically, membership of the Imperial War Cabinet—that gathering of statesmen from the Dominions and India which met for a Session, once during the year 1917 and twice during the following twelve months. He also served as chairman of many Cabinet Committees, was Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Lords. "I am much obliged to you," he wrote to Lord Crewe on December the 10th, 1916, "for telling me about the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. How I am to do all these things with War Committee sitting daily, often twice, I do not know."

The burden of these days would, indeed, have weighed heavily upon a man in the full vigour of life and in the enjoyment of perfect health. Lord Curzon was still short of sixty; but he was called upon to wage constant warfare against physical pain which, with advancing years, grew steadily in the frequency and the intensity of its attack. "I have not cared to publish my afflictions," he wrote about this time, "but I have been in almost constant pain for the past six weeks."[1] Something of the struggle was to be gathered from his appearance. Even entering a dining room he walked haltingly and with a stick. He retained much of the freshness of colour which had always been so striking a feature of his appearance and in his younger days had been the subject of Bœotian humour on the part of his contemporaries. But the hard grip of the lips, the mute but unmistakable message of the eye, the contraction of the brow above the nose and the slant of the eyebrows giving him at times an almost Mephistophelian expression, all told of prolonged and bitter conflict, waged with iron resolution, against the infirmities of the flesh.

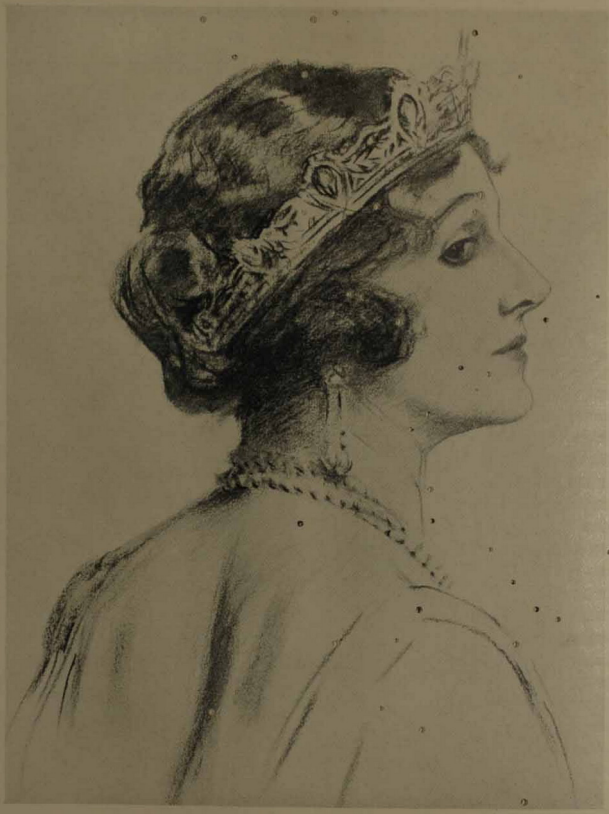
Yet Lord Curzon was, perhaps, happier now than he had been at any time since his return from India. To be at the heart of things; to have his finger on the pulse of great events; to play a dominant part in guiding and determining the destinies not merely of indi-

[1] Letter to Lord Lamington.

viduals but of nations, to be moulding the material of which history —and what history!—would be made—these were the things that he loved. It was thus that, in those far-off days when he had stepped across the threshold of the world on leaving Oxford, he had dimly pictured himself as he projected his gaze into the mazy mirror of the future. And for a time the enthusiasms of the past burned once more with something of the brightness of their earlier flame. Moreover, there came into his life at this time the joy which he was capable of deriving in such abundant measure from that intimate companionship to which he had now for so long been a stranger, but for which it was not in his nature not to crave. "When you read before long in the papers," he wrote on December the 7th, 1916, "that I am going to marry Mrs. Duggan, pray believe that I am doing a wise thing which will make us both happy and brighten my often desolate life."[1]

His house in London became once more a centre of brilliant social life; it also became the scene of fateful and historic gatherings. Somehow or other the gaunt spectre of war which trailed carnage and infinite misery across the face of the world, must be laid. By some means or other the long, wasting months of stagnant warfare in the sodden and blood-soaked trenches, which drew a ghastly furrow half way across Europe, must be brought to an end. And the problem, which was debated with increasing urgency and anxiety as winter melted into spring and spring blossomed cheerlessly into summer in 1917, was that of giving to the struggle once more the character of a war of movement which it had long since lost and seemed powerless to regain. The attempts which had been made at intervals from the spring of 1915 onwards had been costly beyond all previous computation and grievously inconclusive. Yet, when faced with this supreme problem, human ingenuity seemed bankrupt and could suggest no other way of smashing the yoke under which the Western world lay groaning and so of freeing Europe from the nightmare in which she had become ensnared. And it was at a dinner party given by Lord Curzon that those charged with the responsibility of planning a further effort, came to decisions of momentous consequence. "We have now had Haig

[1] Letter to Lord Lamington.



THE MARCHIONESS CURZON OF KEDLESTON
From a drawing by SARGENT

and Robertson before us for two days," he wrote on June the 21st, "and we have to take decisions for the autumn and winter which may affect, indeed must affect, the whole future conduct and perhaps the ultimate issue of the war."[1] Far into the night of June the 20th, the members of the Committee—Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Curzon, Mr. Bonar Law, Lord Milner, General Smuts and Colonel Hankey (the Secretary)—sat in earnest conclave, first on the terrace overlooking the Mall and later on in the house itself.

> "Last night my dinner to the Committee went off very well. . . . After dinner we adjourned to the terrace to embark upon the great discussion. But after three quarters of an hour the wind drove us in and we adjourned to your boudoir where the guests showed a complimentary but uninstructed interest in the pictures. The pow-wow lasted till 12.30 a.m. and sent me to bed quite worn out."[2]

The formal decision which resulted in the Flanders Campaign of the autumn of 1917 was taken and recorded elsewhere. But it was at 1 Carlton House Terrace, on the night of June the 20th, that the die may be said to have been cast. The decision to be taken was a sufficiently difficult one. The summer of 1917 found the French forces weary and disheartened and the French people sullen and depressed. And it was abundantly clear that in any large offensive, which might be undertaken during the remaining months of the year, the French army must be left out of account as a serious factor in the calculations. On the other hand it was equally plain that the very state of the French *moral* demanded something more inspiriting than a passive defence on the part of her Allies. In these circumstances two alternative plans were open to consideration. The first to be examined by the Committee was an attack in force on the Italian front with a view to dealing the Austrian army a crushing blow, to be followed by the capture of Trieste. It was thought that if this plan was carried through successfully, Austria might then be detached from Germany by the offer of a separate peace. An admitted difficulty in the way of the project was the Italian shortage

[1] Letter to Lady Curzon. [2] *Ibid.*

of heavy artillery ; and it was recognised that for its successful prosecution it would be necessary to concentrate a force of 300 to 400 British or French guns on the Isonzo front in support of the Italian advance. With such support General Cadorna was prepared to make the attempt.

The alternative to this plan was a thrust in force by the whole British army in Flanders with a view, not only to harassing and wearing down the resistance of the strongest of the enemy Powers, but to effecting the subsidiary, but by no means unimportant, object of sweeping the German forces from the Belgian coast. The anxiety of the Admiralty to see Zeebrugge and Ostend cleared of enemy submarines and destroyers before the winter, weighed heavily with the Committee against doubts which they entertained as to the ability of the British army to carry to a successful issue the entire series of operations involved in the ambitious plan of campaign drawn up by Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. Even so, it was not until they had passed in review and submitted to expert military opinion all possible objections to the plan, that they decided to recommend its adoption in preference to the offensive on the Italian front. On June the 25th, five days after the fateful dinner party at Lord Curzon's house, Sir Douglas Haig was authorised to proceed with his preparations. But it was not until after further prolonged and anxious consideration that orders for the commencement of the offensive were finally issued. At the same time it was decided that plans for the transport of guns and ammunition to the Italian front should be accurately worked out, so that, in the event of the advance in Flanders being brought to a premature standstill, a blow might still be struck at the Austrian army on the Isonzo.

The doubts and fears with which the Committee had been assailed were unhappily more than justified by events. On neither front were the expectations of the Allies realised. On the Southern front it was not the Italians, but a composite Austro-German force assembled behind the Austrian lines with complete secrecy, that broke through the defence, and effected the biggest surprise of the War since trench warfare had set in. In the course of these disastrous operations the Allies lost no less than 2,300 guns and a quarter of a million prisoners. French and British reinforcements were

hurried to the assistance of the hard-pressed Italian army and before the end of the year were firmly established in the firing line. In Flanders no appreciable advance was made; Zeebrugge and Ostend remained in the hands of the enemy, and it was not until a year later that the great results hoped for from the Flanders campaign, were realised.

But while Lord Curzon was necessarily preoccupied with these profoundly moving events which bulked so large upon the European stage, it must have been clear to those associated with him, that Asia had lost nothing of the fascination which she had always exercised over him. His thoughts were continually turning in the direction of those lands over which hung the unchanging glamour of the Orient; and it was by virtue of his own intimate connection with them in the past, that he constituted himself in a special sense the custodian of British interests in the East. Whether it was a question of the extension or the blocking of a railway in the debatable lands beyond the Indian frontier; of the future of Palestine, of Constantinople or of Cyprus; of the aims to be pursued in Mesopotamia or Arabistan; of the possibilities of German East Africa as a future outlet for a surplus Indian population; of the nature and extent of the military co-operation to be sought from Japan; of peace negotiations with Turkey or of means for making known to the Muhammadan world the real aims of British policy, as distinct from the distorted versions of it sedulously propagated by her enemies; of the future of the new capital of India at Delhi, and not least of the concessions to be made to the Indian peoples in the way of Constitutional Reforms, Lord Curzon was equally at home, a dominant and challenging figure, approving here and condemning there, wielding with zest and with effect, in the discussion of all such questions, the varied weapons of an unusually well stocked armoury.

"As one who has had a good deal to do with the Sistan question for the last quarter of a century," he wrote in a Memorandum for the Committee of Imperial Defence in August 1916, "and has been to a large extent responsible for the Quetta-Nushki-Sistan developments both in politics, strategy and trade during that period, I may, perhaps, be permitted to say something about the latest

proposal. . ." When Viceroy of India he had himself been responsible for the construction of the railway from Quetta to Nushki; but in the circumstances then prevailing had discouraged its further extension. He did not now dissent in principle from its prolongation in the direction of the Persian frontier. But the strong strain of practical common sense which sometimes asserted itself in the very cases in which his romantic imagination might have been expected to carry him with it—his demolition of the dreams of a great trunk line from Burma into the heart of China fifteen years before was a case in point—led him to counsel a much more modest advance than had actually been proposed. He did not think that the question ought to be decided exclusively from the point of view of the existing strategical situation in Eastern Persia. There were other and more permanent considerations to be taken into account, the future of which might easily be compromised by an extension hastily decided on to meet a particular emergency, since it was in the nature of frontier railways "to go forward rather than to go back, and to substitute a larger for a smaller purpose." In place of a broad-gauge line he would suggest one of 2ft. 6in. as sufficient for all immediate requirements; and for the long extension into Persia one that would stop short at Dalbandin some distance from the Persian frontier. When the total railway expenditure of India had been cut down to £3,000,000 in consequence of the war, a proposal to spend £2,000,000, on a broad-gauge railway across the deserts of Baluchistan into Persia demanded greater justification than it had received. He would prefer to see the whole matter treated as tentative and experimental, and speed of construction the principle test. If the broad-gauge was wanted later on, conversion could be carried out without difficulty.

In another Note written for the Committee of Imperial Defence about the same time, he argued strongly against the assumption too lightly made, that the British Government were committed even in principle to the construction of a Trans-Persian Railway—a proposal which he had always regarded as highly undesirable. And he requested that his Note might be placed on record for reference whenever the matter might come up for further discussion.

Lord Curzon had, indeed, lost nothing of his trenchant ability for dissecting a proposition with which he disagreed. If there was a bubble to be pricked his was the pen with which to do the pricking. With good-humoured satire and with obvious satisfaction he would expose the hollowness of the premises on which some elaborate and showy superstructure had been built. Temptation to indulge in this seductive pastime was great when people in high places began inventing formulas to define the things for which they conceived that the nations had been fighting, or, at least, the things which it gratified them to think were to be the fruits of their having fought. "The establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish race," was the formula coined to express an aspiration of some, at any rate, of those who were ranged under the banner of the Allies. Was this an aspiration with which His Majesty's Government ought definitely to associate themselves? By some the question was answered with an unhesitating affirmative. Lord Curzon thought they should have paused before they leapt. He wanted to know, in the first place, what was the precise meaning of the phrase "a National Home for the Jewish race in Palestine"? And in the second place, what was the nature of the obligation which the Government of Great Britain would be assuming if they accepted the aspiration as a principle of British policy? And, since no one seemed prepared to offer any definite explanation of the meaning of the phrase, Lord Curzon proceeded to an analysis of it himself.

A National Home for the Jewish race would seem to imply—if the words were to bear their ordinary significance—a place where the Jews could be reassembled as a nation and where they would enjoy the privileges of an independent national existence. Such at any rate must be the conception of those who spoke of the creation in Palestine of "an autonomous Jewish State"; that was to say, a political entity composed of Jews, governed by Jews, and administered mainly in the interests of Jews. "Such a State might naturally be expected to have a capital and a form of Government and institutions of its own. It would possess the soil, or the greater part of the soil, of the country. It would take its place among the smaller nations of the earth."

Now was this a practicable ideal? Let them consider the main

factors in the situation. It was estimated that the Jewish people numbered approximately 12,000,000 souls scattered broadcast over the face of the earth, of which number 125,000 only had been domiciled in Palestine before the war. So much for the race which was to inhabit the National Home. What of the Home itself? The land extending from Dan to Beersheba, i.e., the Palestine of the Scriptures, was, if the deserts were excluded, about the size of Wales. And it was helpful to remember when considering the question, that Wales, in spite of possessing one city of nearly 200,000 and two others of 200,000 between them, supported a population of 2,000,000 only. As compared with this, Palestine could at best claim to support a population which even before the war fell short of 700,000, and which consisted for the most part not of Jews but of Moslems. The poverty of the land had admittedly been increased by the war, since the Turks had broken up such Jewish colonies as existed, had conscripted and to a large extent destroyed the peasantry, and had reduced the small urban population to beggary. But the war had merely added to an already existing leanness. The Scriptural phrase, "a land flowing with milk and honey," had to be read in relation to the desert features of Sinai, and lost something of its picturesque charm when it was realised that the milk was that of the herds of goats that roamed the hills, and the honey the juice of the small grape that was used as a substitute for sugar.

The country, in short, was one which would require a colossal expenditure on afforestation, irrigation and restoration generally, before any considerable revival could take place—one which called for patience and prolonged toil by a people inured to agriculture. Assuming the inhabitants not to have been exterminated by the war, the nucleus of such a population would be found already in possession of the land—a mixed community of Arab, Hebrew, Canaanite, Greek and Egyptian blood.

> "They and their forefathers have occupied the country for the best part of two thousand years. They own the soil which belongs either to individual landowners or to village communities. They profess the Muhammadan faith. They will not be content either to be expropriated for Jewish immigrants,

or to act merely as hewers of wood and drawers of water to the latter."

A prodigal expenditure of money might no doubt secure the expropriation of some part of the existing population.

"But when we reflect that the existing Jewish colonies in the most favoured spots, after a prodigious outlay extending over many years, have only in a few cases as yet become self-supporting, it is clear that a long vista of anxiety, vicissitude and expense lies before those who desire to rebuild the National Home."

Nor was this all. Those whose imagination was captivated by the prospect of the establishment of a National Home for the Jewish race in Palestine, dreamed of a Jewish State with a Jewish capital at Jerusalem. Such a dream was rendered wholly incapable of realisation by the conditions of Jerusalem itself. It was a city in which too many peoples and too many religions had a passionate and permanent interest to render any such solution even dimly possible.

"The Protestant communities are vitally interested in the churches and in the country as the scene of the most sacred events in history. The Roman Catholics collect annually large sums and maintain extensive establishments at Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Greek Orthodox Church regards the Holy Places with an almost frenzied reverence. Great pilgrimages come annually from the Slav countries and Russia. I recall a flourishing Russian monastery on Mount Tabor. The Hellenic clergy have large properties in the country. Finally, next to Mecca and Medina, Jerusalem is the most famous city of the Muhammadan faith. The Mosque of Omar, on the site of the Temple of Solomon, is one of the most hallowed of the shrines of Islam. It contains the great rock or stone, known as Haram, which is regarded with so much awe in the Moslem world that when, a few years ago, an Englishman was alleged to have been

digging under it, the uproar spread throughout the Moslem world. It is impossible to contemplate any future in which the Muhammadans should be excluded from Jerusalem. Hebron is a site scarcely less sacred to Islam."

These then were facts which it would be folly to ignore—on the one hand a total Jewish population of twelve million ; on the other a small poverty-stricken agricultural country already occupied by a people of a different race and creed, and one which, for the reasons given, could possess no national urban centre or capital. How, out of this modest material, were they to fashion the sort of thing that must inevitably be conjured up in the minds of men by phrases such as that to which they were asked to subscribe—" His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish race "? Was it not perfectly obvious that all that they could hope to realise—assuming that the Turks were defeated and ejected from Palestine—was the establishment of some form of European Administration under which the peaceable possession of their Holy Places would be secured to Christian, Moslem and Jew respectively ; equal civil and religious rights would be guaranteed alike to Jew and Gentile, and some scheme for land purchase and the settlement of returning Jews might be undertaken ?

" If this is Zionism there is no reason why we should not all be Zionists, and I would gladly give my adhesion to such a policy. . . . But in my judgment it is a policy very widely removed from the romantic and idealistic aspirations of many of the Zionist leaders whose literature I have studied, and, whatever it does, it will not in my judgment provide either a national, material, or even a spiritual home for any more than a very small section of the Jewish people." [1]

When, in due course, the Government made their declaration on the subject, it was accompanied by certain precautionary provisos—

[1] Note dated October 26th, 1917.

> "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of that object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish Communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

Farther east in the lands washed by the waters of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, British and Indian troops had brought two and a half years of chequered fighting to a definite issue by the capture, in March 1917, of the historic city of the Abbasid Caliphs. And with Baghdad in British hands the future of Mesopotamia at once became a question of something more than purely academic interest. It was natural enough, in view of his own past association with the politics of the Persian Gulf, that Lord Curzon should cast a somewhat anxious eye in that direction. The danger of the establishment at the head of the Gulf of a strong and hostile Turko-German combination had now been removed; and the danger to be guarded against must be looked for nearer home. There was, undoubtedly, a distinct undercurrent of suspicion perceptible in certain quarters in England, that in this region the Government were harbouring Imperialistic, or at least commercial, aims. And Lord Curzon realised the importance of convincing public opinion of the impossibility, on the highest grounds, of our ever voluntarily agreeing to the restoration of Baghdad and the Province of which it was the capital, to Turkey. He accordingly sat down and penned a Memorandum in which the arguments against any such act of gratuitous folly were skilfully marshalled. First and foremost was the compelling need of self-preservation. To restore Baghdad to Turkey would be to revive the shattered German ambition of a great Teutonised dominion stretching through Europe and Asia Minor as far as the Persian Gulf—"which is the real dream of German world policy and which is the weapon with which, in a future war, Great Britain is to be struck down."

But there were other reasons equally cogent and of a kind more likely to appeal to the particular section of public opinion which

was most in need of instruction on the question. The Turks themselves were interlopers in the country and were detested by the inhabitants. We had freed the Arab population from Turkish misrule and had solemnly assured them that never again should they be given over to the hand of the oppressor. The Viceroy of India had himself proceeded to Basra and had there repeated this pledge in a public speech. For the first time for centuries, even while war was in progress, order and good government were being evolved out of chaos and oppression. The great mass of the Arab tribes had already come over to us. They would throw in their lot with us more definitely still when the impending attack by Turko-German forces was thrown back—"for it is an incurable trait of the Arab character that he likes always to be on the winning side; he is the political Vicar of Bray of the East."

Slowly but surely an Arab State was being built up to which Great Britain herself desired to entrust the future destiny of the country. But time and patience were required if out of the disorder and oppression of centuries a stable indigenous Administration was to be created. If these lands were to be set on their feet again—"as Egypt was set on its feet after a Turkish misrule not less gross; if indigenous institutions are to be created among a people who have almost lost the idea of what freedom is, and if the splendid and natural resources of the country are once again to be revived after centuries of neglect and decay, the responsibility of the undertaking must be assured by a civilised Power. The only civilised Power that is either equipped for the task, or is interested in it, is Great Britain, and if she were to throw it up, the result would not only be detrimental and even dangerous to herself, but positively disastrous to the native peoples."[1]

[1] Memorandum dated September 21st, 1917.