CHAPTER XIII

PERSIA ONCE MORE

1919

THE period during which Lord Curzon officiated at the Foreign Office before being definitely appointed Secretary of State, was marked by one distinct if short-lived success. On assuming the direction of affairs in London, he had at once turned his gaze eastwards to those lands where his heart always lay; for, if he was oppressed with a sense of the overwhelming difficulty of restoring peace in Europe, he was also filled with growing apprehension as he caught echoes of the world's unrest reverberating ominously round the whispering-galleries of Asia.

> "The world is very troubled," he wrote on September the 21st, 1919, "and while peace is supposed to have been secured, active and murderous warfare is going on in at least a quarter of the recent areas of struggle. And, if this is the case in Europe, the situation in Asia is worse, and will not subside for a generation. In these circumstances the task of Government is full of incident, but even fuller of disappointment and perplexity"[1]

And as he gazed curiously over the constantly changing kaleidoscope of the Near and Middle East, his eyes came to rest finally upon Persia—that magnetic land of mystery and romance over whose dusty plateaux and through whose ancient cities, crumbling uncared-for into inert but picturesque decay, he had travelled all

[1] Letter to Lord Lansdowne.

but thirty years before. Persia that had provided him with material for the most monumental of all his books ; the decrepit descendant of a mighty nation into whose veins he had striven so hard throughout the seven years of his Viceroyalty to infuse the blood of a new vitality. And, finding himself at last in a position not merely to formulate, but to enforce a policy, he was determined to make a supreme effort to drag her from the slough into which she had fallen, and to make of her what he had always dreamed that, with the benevolent co-operation of Great Britain, she might some day become—a worthy successor to the kingdom of Cyrus and a strong link in a chain of friendly States, stretching from the confines of Europe to the frontier of the Indian Empire.

It was all part of a perfectly definite and logical policy which had taken shape with his first glance at the political map of Asia while still a boy at Eton, and had remained clear-cut in his mind ever since. It rested upon a single and quite simple conception—the creation of a chain of buffer states stretching from the northern confines of India to the Mediterranean sea, to serve as a screen, giving protection against attack to India and the great arterial line of communication between Great Britain at one end and Australia, New Zealand and the Far East at the other. That the source of possible attack had changed, made no difference to the policy ; it remained valid whether the potential aggressor was Russia, as it had long been, or Germany, as it had more recently become. And, with this urgent necessity always in mind, he had laid constant stress throughout the war upon the importance of the Eastern theatre. His view was summed up comprehensively in an Address to members of the Imperial War Cabinet during the critical summer of 1918.

From this Address it is clear that, if others had dismissed from mind certain early indications of the real nature of the ambitions which were revolving in the fertile brain of the German Emperor, Lord Curzon at least had not done so. He had stored them in his memory ready to be produced when evidence was required. Such were the visits of the Kaiser to the Turkish Capital and to Palestine during the closing decade of the nineteenth century These spectacular pilgrimages had naturally excited comment at the time. People had wondered vaguely why an Emperor of Germany should

wish to visit Constantinople and to take under his patronage the feeble and tottering power of the Ottoman Turk. And curiosity, which had remained unsatisfied in 1893, had been revived when some years later, clad in a flowing white robe, he had ridden dramatically through the streets of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the spirit of a crusader and then, incongruously enough, had proceeded to Damascus to address a great gathering and proclaim himself the one and only friend among the Western Powers of the Followers of the Prophet. As time went on people had become accustomed to the theatrical in the Emperor William and had discounted the significance of such displays. Not so Lord Curzon. In the course of his Address he begged those who listened to him not to lose sight, in their anxiety over events on the Western front, of the rapidly growing importance which the collapse of Russia had given to the Eastern theatre. Let them consider the trend of German world policy as directed by William the Second. These almost forgotten gestures with which he had excited the amused interest of Europe a quarter of a century ago had been fraught with a wide and sinister purpose. They had been made in pursuance of a policy designed to place Turkey "in ultimate political and economic bondage to Germany." They had heralded the laying of "the first stones of the causeway that was to lead him to the ultimate conquest of the East... They were the premonitory symptoms of the policy that was impending. The thread upon which all the strings were to be woven together was the Baghdad Railway, which was to place at the disposal of Germany the resources of Asia Minor and to take the Germans by easy stages to the head of the Persian Gulf and the frontiers of India"[1]

This particular line of advance had now been blocked, thanks to the success of our arms in Palestine and Mesopotamia—not "sideshows," as they were sometimes called, even by highly-placed military authorities; but campaigns undertaken "for direct military and political advantages of the most obvious nature." But, with the collapse of Russia, a new avenue of approach had been opened up *via* the Caucasus. And, with his customary lucidity, Lord Curzon explained the dangers to which this new disposition of the pieces

[1]Address at a meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet on June the 25th, 1918.

on the chess-board of the Middle East gave rise. And, finally, he asked his audience, bearing in mind the long-cherished aspirations of the German Emperor, to consider the immense significance of all that he had placed before them. The narrative of events which he had given them meant that Germany, if she were baffled in the West, either as the result of military operations, or even as the result of peace, would turn toward the East.

> "She can afford to give up everything she has won in Western parts, in France and Flanders, if only this door in the East remains open to her. If peace proposals were made now and the representatives of the Powers were seated at a Peace Conference table, Germany could, I venture to submit to you, afford to give back Belgium, to make large concessions in respect of Alsace-Lorraine . . . . and she would still have the illimitable range of future ambition and opportunity which I have been describing."

British statesmanship could never afford to lose sight of the fact that under the inspiration of William the Second the destruction of the British Empire had become an obsession with the German governing classes. The centre of British power in the Eastern world was India—

> "and it is at India, along these lines of advance that I have been describing, that Germany is striking. And, observe, that if she is unsuccessful now, if she does not push her forces right forward as she is trying to do, or if she is held up by our efforts, the object will not be abandoned, but the attempt will be renewed."

How, he asked in conclusion, was this supreme and imminent danger to be countered? Neither Germany nor her Allies must ever again be permitted to occupy Palestine or Mesopotamia; every effort must be made to re-create Russia—"even though it may take ten years or twenty years"—as a bulwark against German penetration toward India; and, finally, "we must endeavour by

every means in our power to secure a friendly Persia and a loyal Afghanistan."

The Address, of which the above is a brief summary, was delivered by Lord Curzon as Chairman of a Committee appointed by the Prime Minister to assist the War Cabinet in formulating their policy in Asia. It was natural that under his guidance the rejuvenation of Persia should play a prominent part in the programme drawn up by the Committee. And Lord Curzon was urgent in pressing it upon the attention of his colleagues. The problem had not become easier with the passage of time. One of the grounds on which he had criticised the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 had been the indifference displayed by its authors to Persian sentiment.[1] Criticism on this ground had been justified by events. From the day of its signature Great Britain had been tarred in the eyes of Persia with the Russian brush. This view of the Agreement between two Powers hitherto at daggers drawn was natural enough. It was fortified by the attitude of the Russian representative at Tehran who, finding himself in the enjoyment of a happy immunity from British criticism, became a virtual Dictator in all matters affecting Russian interests in Northern Persia. And, while British statesmen of all parties were as truly anxious as they had always been to build up, establish and fortify the independence and integrity of Persia, the disintegrating years of war had driven them to action which had inevitably given colour to the view that, with the enactment of the Convention, they had adopted Russian aims and Russian methods.

During the war the British Government had, in fact, been compelled in self-defence to undertake considerable military operations on Persian soil; so that just when the curtain was rung down on the battle fields of Europe, it was rung up on a Persia picketted on all sides with British forces. In the East there was a cordon of troops running up from the Persian Gulf in the south to Khorasan in the north, serving as a screen in front of the Indian and Afghan frontiers. In the West a similar cordon stretched from Baghdad through Kermanshah and Hamadan to the Caspian; while Southern Persia was dominated by a local force known as the South Persia Rifles,

[1] See chapter II, p. 44.

of a country lying on the Indian frontier, it was doubly important now that on the west Mesopotamia had also become a definite British interest. "You have the situation now," he pointed out, "that Persia, instead of being a solitary figure moving about in a chronic state of disorder on the glacis of the Indian fortress, has the Indian frontier on one side of her and what is tantamount to a British frontier on the other." He hoped, therefore, that his colleagues would spend "not five seconds more of thought" in deciding that a policy of retreat was, in the circumstances of the case, impracticable.

It had been suggested in some quarters that we should continue our subsidies and maintain our troops, but should humour the Persian Government, address them with deference, convince them, if that were possible, that we had no other desire than to place ourselves and our resources at their disposal; in short, that "while we remained a financial support, we did not wish to be a political nuisance." In theory such a policy had much to recommend it; but in practice it was almost certain to prove abortive, and it was rejected by all the authorities who spoke with first-hand knowledge of the country.

What, then, was left? The possibility that Great Britain might be invited to act as the Mandatory of the Powers, or of a League of Nations, was too remote to have much bearing on the immediate situation. "I am not at all clear myself that the demand will ever be made upon us. It is by no means certain that Mandatories are going to be created. Before you settle whether there are going to be Mandatory Powers all over the world, you have to constitute the League of Nations to give the invitation." What he himself would suggest was that the Persian representatives, who were understood to be on their way to Europe with the intention of knocking at the door of the Peace Conference, should be addressed with the complete frankness that the case demanded. Such frankness need not be of "a purely minatory character." We could go a long way towards meeting some at least of what were believed to be Persian aspirations. Assurances as to the independence and integrity of the country we should be willing to renew in the most explicit terms. The hated Anglo-Russian Convention we should be only

a large extent a matter of temperament. The two men viewed matters from widely different standpoints. But there was also a certain antagonism between them which neither was ever able wholly to overcome, and which ended three years later in an open breach, and the disappearance of Mr. Montagu from the Government. His dissent from Lord Curzon's Persian policy was summed up in a letter dated January the 6th—

> "I am sorry to have to bother you with further correspondence, but I really feel so alarmed about some aspects of Eastern affairs that I am compelled to write to you. . . . I notice in the draft Minutes (of the Eastern Committee) a statement that the Committee agreed with the Chairman. Surely you will not allow this to stand, for the situation was this. Mr. Balfour was away; I was away; I do not see it recorded that the C.I.G.S. was present; Lord Robert Cecil (I don't know whether he is a member of the Committee or not now) had left before he had heard either Sir Hamilton Grant or Sir Arthur Hirtzel, and therefore the Committee consisted of the Chairman; and the Chairman, of course, not unnaturally agreed with the Chairman."

He proceeded to explain his objection to the proposal that the reorganised Persian army should be placed under a British Commander-in-Chief. Such a suggestion, he thought, was "unnecessarily offensive to the Persian Government and national feeling." And, apart from this specific proposal, he regarded the whole tone of Lord Curzon's intended exposition of the British view of the situation as unduly minatory and dictatorial.

> "Lastly, I cannot regard the policy of the Eastern Committee with regard to Persia as satisfactory unless a genuine attempt is made to put our position in Persia on a footing satisfactory to the Persians by re-establishing their confidence in us as being anxious to help but not desirous to control. I have warned the Eastern Committee more than once of the grave difficulty which I am experiencing, and which I shall experience

more and more in the future, of getting contributions from Indian revenues to expenditure in Persia. I cannot honestly make the attempt in future if the policy is one in which neither the India Office nor the Government of India concur."

Matters turned out much as Lord Curzon had foreseen and hoped. A Persian delegation reached Paris, knocked boldly but vainly at the door of the Peace Conference, and, disappointed of any hopes of success which they may have cherished in this direction, turned a chastened ear to the suggestions which Great Britain had to offer. In Tehran itself, with an Anglo-phil Ministry in power under the control of a leading Persian statesman of conservative views, Vossug-ed-Dowleh, and with the representation of British interests in the capable hands of Sir Percy Cox—the officer who nearly twenty years before had been specially selected by Lord Curzon himself to take charge of matters in the Persian Gulf—negotiations proceeded with gratifying success: so much so that, early in August Lord Curzon was able to inform the Cabinet that an Agreement had been reached. The terms of the Treaty which had thus been successfully negotiated were made public a few days later, and Lord Curzon eagerly scanned the papers for their verdict upon his achievement. There was ready approval of the Treaty, but little mention of its author, an omission which Lord Curzon was quick to notice.

> "The papers give a very good reception to my Persian Treaty, which I have been negotiating for the past year, and which is a great triumph, as I have done it all alone. But not a single paper so much as mentions my name or has the dimmest perception that, had I not been at the Foreign Office, it would never have been at all."[1]

Great credit was, indeed, due to Lord Curzon for the successful outcome of the negotiations. In the course of them he had succeeded in bridging the differences by which in the earlier stages he and the Secretary of State for India had been divided. In their final form,

[1] Letter to Lady Curzon, August 17th, 1919.

he told the Cabinet, the provisions of the Agreement had the approval of Mr. Montagu and Mr. Chamberlain in London, and of Mr. Balfour in Paris. And he gave a brief summary of their effect.

> "What they mean in practice is this: not that we have received or are about to receive a Mandate for Persia; not that Persia has handed over to us any part of her liberties; not that we are assuming fresh and costly obligations which will place a great strain upon us in the future; but that the Persian Government, realising that we are the only neighbouring great Power closely interested in the fate of Persia, able and willing to help her and likely to be disinterested in that object, have decided of their own free will to ask us to assist Persia in the rehabilitation of her fortunes."[1]

The Treaty was, in fact, a simple and straightforward document, the gist of which was the loan by Great Britain to Persia of such expert advisers as might be thought desirable by the Governments of the two countries in consultation; the provision by Great Britain of the officers, munitions and equipment required for the creation of a national army—the question of a British Commander-in-Chief being left open for further consideration; and, in order to provide the Persian Government with funds for financing these reforms, an additional loan by the British Treasury of £2,000,000, to be secured on the Persian customs. The Government of Great Britain agreed further to give support to approved schemes for the construction of roads and railways by Anglo-Persian enterprise, and to the appointment of a joint committee of experts to revise the Persian Customs Tariff in a direction favourable to Persia. These provisions were subject to the reiteration by the British Government of the undertakings frequently given by them in the past, "to respect absolutely the independence and integrity of Persia."

The conclusion of the Treaty was celebrated at a dinner given in London in honour of Prince Nosret-ed-Dowleh, one of the foremost statesmen of Persia who had proceeded to England in advance of the Shah, whose proposed visit to Great Britain was to take place

[1] From a Memorandum written for the Cabinet on August 9th, 1919.

in the autumn. With his flair for stage management, Lord Curzon realised the importance of making the occasion a success.

> "If you can come up to the Government dinner which we are giving to the Persian Foreign Minister on Thursday next to boom the Agreement and to applaud him (he is one of the triumvirate who have concluded it) please do so. It is very difficult to collect people now."[1]

His own speech at the dinner gave a lucid account of the negotiations leading up to the conclusion of the Treaty and of the objects of the Treaty itself. For the student of Lord Curzon's personality it possesses a special interest, for it provides a striking example of that fixity of ideas which was one of his outstanding characteristics. The views which he had formed while still a boy at Eton, of Persia's place in Asia and of the policy which Great Britain should adopt towards her, had never varied. At the age of thirty-four they had been repeated, emphasised, elaborated in his book on Persia; at the age of forty he had begun the sustained attempt to give effect to them which had lasted throughout the period of his Viceroyalty. The attempt had been interrupted but not banished by the conclusion in 1907 of the Anglo-Russian Convention; and with the opportunity which had now presented itself of brushing aside that instrument, it had been vigorously renewed.

> "I was never an ardent admirer of the Anglo-Russian Convention," he told his audience. "On the contrary, I criticised it severely in Parliament and elsewhere. . . . I regard that Agreement as dead. It is only owing to the fact that there has been for some time no Russian Government with whom we were in relations and to whom we could turn, that we have not sought its definite abrogation. But, in my judgment—and I speak probably for the Russians as well as myself—that Agreement may be regarded as having been wiped off the slate. I do not believe that anything like it is likely to be resuscitated by the Government of my country."

[1] Letter to Lord Lamington, September 13th, 1919.

This unhappy interruption in the traditional policy of Great Britain towards Persia having been brought to an end, Lord Curzon passed on to a profession of his own faith in the historic continuity of the relations between the two countries.

> "I have always been a sincere and outspoken friend of Persian nationality. I regard Persia as a country with a great history and a romantic past, one of the few surviving independent Muhammadan States of the world, which it is of vital interest not only to ourselves, but to Asia, to keep alive. I know that country and the people to be possessed of marked individuality and national spirit, too ardent to be suppressed, too valuable to be submerged. Was it not natural that Persia, seeking to establish and stabilise her future, should turn to us? Our boundaries march with hers for hundreds of miles on her southern frontier. For a century we have pacified and policed the Gulf. At Mesopotamia we shall presently be her neighbour on the West. It is an obvious interest to us to have a peaceful and prosperous Persia; and, as regards Persia herself, if it be true—and I do not think the most ardent Persian patriot will deny it—that external assistance of some sort is necessary for her, is it not natural that it should be to this country that she should turn?"

On the whole Lord Curzon was satisfied with the way in which things had passed off. "Yesterday night," he told Lady Curzon in a letter written on September the 19th, "I presided at the Carlton over a dinner to the Persian Foreign Minister—over sixty people—and I made what I believe was regarded as a successful speech about the Anglo-Persian Agreement."

The negotiations for a Treaty satisfactory to Great Britain and of obvious advantage to Persia had thus been brought to a successful issue. Yet Lord Curzon's hopes that he was at last to see realised—and that through his own efforts—the dreams which he had long dreamed, of a rejuvenated Persia freed from the menace of Russian militarism on the north and supported by, and beholden to, Great Britain, were once more doomed to disappointment. The story of failure is told in two speeches delivered by him in the House of

Lords on November the 16th, 1920, and July the 26th, 1921. And it will be convenient to anticipate a little the chronological sequence of events in order to complete the narrative of what was but an episode certainly, but none the less an important episode in the history of Lord Curzon's Foreign Administration.

For some months after the conclusion of the Treaty all went well. The Shah, during his visit to England in the autumn of 1919, gave expression to his cordial acceptance of its provisions. A Military Commission under General Dickson proceeded to Persia to examine the military situation with a view to making recommendations for the creation of a national army; an able Treasury official, Mr. Armitage Smith, headed a Financial Commission charged with the task of reorganising the country's finances; two consulting engineers were despatched in an advisory capacity, and a Persian syndicate was formed for the survey of railway lines in different parts of the kingdom.

The summer of 1920 was, however, a troubled one for Persia, and progress with the reforms was brought to a standstill by convulsions within and aggression from without her borders. The forces of the new and aggressive Communism, which had sprung to life out of the decay amid which the Russian social system had sunk to disintegration, suddenly spilled over from the Caucasus, swamped the Province of Azerbaijan which became a Soviet Republic, and sweeping simultaneously down the Volga, obtained the naval mastery of the Caspian sea. The situation in which the Shah and his Government found themselves, in face of this new menace, was rendered more precarious by the attitude of the Russian officers still in command of the Persian Cossacks, which was so equivocal as to determine the Shah to dispense with their services.

It is never an easy task to unravel the tangled skeins of Persian internal politics, and it is sufficient to take note of the fact, without seeking the reason, that, within a short time of the return of the Shah from Europe, Vossug-ed-Dowleh, the Prime Minister and part author of the Treaty, resigned. He was succeeded by Mushir-ed-Dowleh at the head of a more distinctively Nationalist Ministry, which decided to regard the Treaty as in suspense until the consent of the Medjliss, or Parliament, had been accorded to it.

Here, then, was the first definite indication that the Persian people might yet reject the co-operation of Great Britain which seemed so necessary to their future welfare.

> "I thought myself," exclaimed Lord Curzon, "that it was rather a pedantic and foolish policy on the part of the Persian Government to deny themselves the enormous advantages of the Agreement by which they had already begun to profit. But that was their business rather than ours, and so anxious were we to obtain the approval of the Medjliss, that we acquiesced in the policy, provided only that the Parliament was itself summoned at an early date and the Agreement submitted to it."[1]

The note of pessimism that ran through the speech proved only too well founded. With the fall from power of Vossug-ed-Dowleh, Persia relapsed into a state of traditional instability. Ministries rose and fell with monotonous regularity; and while five different Governments made their entries and their exits, the Medjliss remained unsummoned and, consequently, impotent. Persian respect for Great Britain ebbed with the final withdrawal of British troops from northern Persia; and as her respect for Britain ebbed, so did her fear of Soviet Russia grow. And the fruit of this psychological process quickly ripened. In February, 1921, a new Treaty was entered into between the Persian Government and the Soviet authorities at Moscow.

With this *dénouement* may be said to have been brought down finally to the ground the policy for the regeneration of an Oriental State, which had been with Lord Curzon not the expedient of the moment brought into being by the ephemeral circumstances of the day, but the preoccupation of a lifetime. Persia by her attitude had made her own choice. She had deliberately rejected the chance of recovering her own fortunes with British aid. She had preferred to fall back upon the familiar game of playing off Russia against Great Britain, and in the last resort she appeared to be not unwilling to accept the caresses of the Soviet Government. Over his perished hopes Lord Curzon sang a mournful requiem—

[1] Speech in the House of Lords, November 16th, 1920.

"The picture that I have drawn has been the picture of a country with a great and historic past, a country for which we have had the warmest sympathy, for which we have made countless sacrifices and upon which we have spent many millions of money since the beginning of the war; but it is a country which now appears to be marching of its own accord, with deliberate and logical steps, towards an end which I do not attempt to forecast, but which cannot, I think, be other than most unfortunate. "I wish I could have given a more roseate account of Persia or a more sanguine estimate of the situation than I have been able to do. Of all the speeches that I have ever had to make upon Persia—and they have been many—the one which I make this afternoon has been delivered with the greatest regret." [1]

[1] Speech in the House of Lords, July 26th, 1921