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George Nathaniel Curzon

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE FAR EAST

The youth who daily farther from the East
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended.

WORDSWORTH, *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*.

ASIA has always appeared to me to possess a fascination which no country or empire in Europe, still less any part of the Western Hemisphere, can claim. It has been the cradle of our race, the birthplace of our language, the hearthstone of our religion, the fountain-head of the best of our ideas. Wide as is the chasm that now severs us, with its philosophy our thought is still interpenetrated. The Asian continent has supplied a scene for the principal events, and a stage for the most prominent figures in history. Of Asian parentage is that force which, more than any other influence, has transformed and glorified mankind—viz. the belief in a single Deity. Five of the six greatest moral teachers that the world has seen—Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Mohammed—were born of Asian parents, and lived upon Asian soil. Roughly speaking, their creeds may be said to have divided

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the conquest of the universe. The most famous or the wisest of kings—Solomon, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Timur, Baber, Akbar—have sat upon Asian thrones. Thither the greatest conqueror of the Old World turned aside for the sole theatre befitting so enormous an ambition. ‘*Cette vieille Europe n’ennuie*’ expressed the half-formed kindred aspiration of the greatest conqueror of modern times. The three most populous existing empires—Great Britain, Russia, and China—are Asian empires; and it is because they are not merely European but Asian, that the two former are included in the category. From Asia also have sprung the most terrible phenomena by which humanity has ever been scourged—the Turki Nadir Shah, the Mongol Jinghiz Khan.

Yet for such crimes as these has Asia paid to us no mean compensation. For to her we owe the noblest product of all literature, in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures; the sweetest of lyrics, in the epithalamium of a Jewish king; the embryos of modern knowledge, in the empiricism of Arabian geometers and metaphysicians. In Asia the drama was born. There the greatest writer of antiquity chose a scene for his immortal epic. There, too, the mariner’s compass first guided men over the pathless waters. In our own times alone it is with her aid that we have arrived at the evolution of three new sciences—comparative mythology, comparative jurisprudence, and philology. From Asia we have received the architecture

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of the Moslem—that most spiritual and refined of human conceptions—the porcelain of China, the faience of Persia, Rhodes, and Damascus, the infinitely ingenious art of Japan. On her soil were reared the most astonishing of all cities, Babylon; the most princely of palaces, Persepolis; the state-liest of temples, Angkor Wat; the loveliest of tombs, the Taj Mahal. There too may be found the most wonderful of Nature's productions; the loftiest mountains on the surface of the globe, the most renowned, if not also the largest, of rivers, the most entrancing of landscapes. In the heart of Asia lies to this day the one mystery which the nineteenth century has still left for the twentieth to explore—viz. the Tibetan oracle of Lhasa.

Of course, in displaying this panorama of Asian wonders or Asian charms, while claiming for her an individuality which her vast extent, her Homogeneity historic antiquity, and her geographical features go far to explain, I do not claim for her any absolute unity of product or form. On the contrary, the distinctions of race, irrespective of climate, are perhaps more profound in Asia than in any other continent. There is, on the whole, less exterior resemblance between a Japanese and a Persian than there is between a Prussian and a Spaniard. A Dutchman is more like a Greek than a Turkoman is like a Malay. There is a wider gap between the finest Aryan type and the aboriginal barbarian in the recesses of Saghalin, Formosa, or Laos, than there is, for example, between the

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Egyptian and the Hottentot, or between the Frenchman and the Lap. Not less marked are the distinctions of language and habits, of caste and creed. The Western world in the Feudal Ages was less sundered and split up than is Hindustan at the present moment. And yet, after visiting almost every part of Asia, I seem, as soon as I taste her atmosphere or come within range of her influence, to observe a certain homogeneousness of expression, a certain similarity of character, certain common features of political and still more of social organisation, certain identical strains in the composition of man, that differentiate her structure from anything in Europe or even in America, and invest her with a distinction peculiarly her own. The sensation is strengthened by the impression left upon most minds since the days of childhood by the two best books that have ever been written upon the East—viz. the Old Testament and the Arabian Nights. If I strive still further to analyse it, I find that in scenery, as I have elsewhere endeavoured to explain,¹ the dominant note of Asian individuality is contrast, in character a general indifference to truth and respect for successful wile, in deportment dignity, in society the rigid maintenance of the family union, in government the mute acquiescence of the governed, in administration and justice the open corruption of administrators and judges, and in every-day life a statuesque and inexhaustible patience, which attaches no value to time, and wages unappeasable warfare against hurry.

¹ Vide *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. i. pp. 13-15.

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The impact between this solid amalgam of character and habit, and the elastic and insinuating force which we denominate civilisation, is a phenomenon which now in many countries I have set myself to examine, and which, I venture to think, surpasses all others in human interest. In Asia the combat is between antagonists who are fairly matched. It resembles one of those ancient contests between the *gladiator* and the *retiarius*, the man with the rude blade and the man with the supple net, that filled with straining crowds the Imperial arena at Rome. For though craft and agility and superior science will, in the long run, generally get the better of crude force and the naked weapon, yet there are moments when, in the twinkling of an eye, the tables are turned, when the swordsman slashes the netman in twain, when the untutored Oriental makes short shrift with the subtleties and sophistries of the West. If Japan, for instance, illustrates the easy victory of the European, China so far registers an equal triumph for the Asiatic. In Africa and America, where no serious contest has been possible, because of the vast moral and intellectual disparity between the organisms engaged, but where civilisation advances like the incoming tide over the castles built by children with wooden spades in the sand, the spectacle is devoid of any such interest.

The same train of reflection may lead us to avoid a common pitfall of writers upon the East—viz. the tendency to depreciate that which we do not our-

selves sympathise with or understand, and which we are therefore prone to mistake for a mark of inferiority or degradation. Mankind has built for its moral habitation different structures in different lands and times. It has adopted many divergent styles of architecture, and has entertained widely opposite views upon material, ornament, and design. Sometimes the fabric would seem to have been erected all askant, or even to have been turned topsy-turvy in the course of construction. And yet, just as there are certain common laws observed in all building that has endured, so there are points of contact in all civilisations, common principles which lie at the root of every morality, however contradictory its external manifestations. It is among the ancient races of Central Asia and in China that these reflections are chiefly borne home to the traveller's mind. When he meets with a civilisation as old, nay older, than our own, when he encounters a history whose heroes have been among the great men of all time, religions whose prophets have altered the course of the world's progress, codes of morals which have endured for centuries and still hold millions within their adamant grip, a learning which anticipated many of the proudest discoveries of modern science, and a social organisation which has in places solved the very problem of reconciling individual liberty with collective force, whereupon the new-fledged democracies of the West are expending their virgin energies—he feels that it is absurd for him to censure, and impertinent in him to condemn. The East has

not yet exhausted its lessons for us, and Europe may still sit at the feet of her elder sister.

No introduction is needed in presenting the Far East to an English audience,¹ since, on the whole, it is better known to them already than the The Far East Near East, or than the Central East, if these geographical distinctions may be permitted. Asia Minor, the Caucasus, Persia, Beluchistan, and Transcaspia, are each a *terra incognita* to the majority of our countrymen compared with the coasts of China and the cities of Japan. The situation of these, on or near to the ocean highways, and the advanced state of civilisation to which their inhabitants have attained and which has long attracted the notice of Europe, and the extent to which they have in recent years been made accessible by steam-traffic by land and sea, have diverted thither the stream of travel, and have familiarised men with Tokio and Canton who have never been to Syracuse or Moscow. Comfort too plays a large part in the discrimination of travel. Were there a railroad from the Caspian to Teheran, more people would visit the capital of the Shah. Were there an hotel at Baghdad, we might shortly hear of Cook's parties to the ruins of Babylon.

¹ It may have been forgotten by most readers, but it is nevertheless the fact, that the historical connection of England with the Far East was antecedent to her connection with India. The East India Trading Company had trading stations in the Malay Peninsula, in Sumatra, Java, and Borneo, before they had opened a single factory in Hindustan, the spice trade being the bait that drew them so far afield. The British advance of the past century has therefore been merely a reappearance upon a scene where the English flag first flew nearly 300 years ago.

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Nevertheless there are portions of the Far East which the precise dearth of those communications of which I have been speaking has still left isolated and almost unknown. The number of Englishmen who have travelled in the interior of Korea may be counted upon the fingers of the two hands. I know of none who have selected Annam as the scene of their explorations. Perhaps, therefore, in including them in my survey of the Far East, I may help to fill a gap, at the same time that I subserve the symmetry of my own plan.

There are certain main distinctions which separate this region from those parts of the Asian continent that border upon the Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea. Much of it, comprising the whole of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, lies south of the Tropic of Cancer, and accordingly presents us with a climate, peoples, and a vegetation, upon which the sun has looked, and which possess characteristics of their own. Greater heat has produced less capacity of resistance; and just as in India all the masculine races have their habitat above the 24th degree of latitude, so in the Far East is there the greatest contrast between the peoples of China, Korea, and Japan, lying north of that parallel, and those of Burma, Siam, Malaysia, and Annam, which lie below it. The one class has retained its virility and its freedom, the second has already undergone or is in course of undergoing absorption. Throughout the Far East there is abundance of water, and the scorched and sullen deserts that lay their leprous touch upon

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Persia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, are nowhere reproduced. In the Near East, *i.e.* west of the Indus and the Oxus, there are absolutely only two rivers of any importance, the Tigris and the Euphrates; and the main reason of the backwardness of those countries is the dearth both of moisture and of means of communication which the absence of rivers entails. A further striking difference, of incalculable importance in its effect upon national development, is that of religion. Western Asia is in the unyielding and pitiless clutch of Islam, which opposes a Cyclopean wall of resistance to innovation or reform. In Eastern Asia we encounter only the mild faith of the Indian prince, more or less overlaid with superstition and idolatry, or sapped by scepticism and decay; and the strange conglomerate of ethics and demonolatry which stands for religion in China and its once dependent states. Neither of these agencies is overtly hostile to Western influence, though both, when aroused, are capable of putting forth a tacit weight of antagonism that must be felt to be appreciated. Finally, whereas in the Near East population is sparse and inadequate, in the Far East it is crowded upon the soil, cultivating the well-soaked lands with close diligence or massed behind city-walls in seething aggregations of humanity. These conditions augment the complexity of the problem which their political future involves.

Midway between the two flanks of the continent whose rival differences I have sketched lies India, sharing the features, both good and evil, of both.

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She has wide, waterless, and untilled plains ; but she also has throbbing hives of human labour and life.

India the pivot Her surface is marked both by mighty rivers and by Saharas of sand. Among her peoples are Mohammedans of both schools, mixed up with diverse and pagan creeds. Of her races some have always subsisted by the sword alone ; to others the ploughshare is the only known implement of iron. She combines the rigours of eternal snow with the luxuriant flame of the tropics. Within her borders may be studied every one of the problems with which the rest of Asia challenges our concern. But her central and commanding position is nowhere better seen than in the political influence which she exercises over the destinies of her neighbours near and far, and the extent to which their fortunes revolve upon an Indian axis. The independence of Afghanistan, the continued national existence of Persia, the maintenance of Turkish rule at Baghdad, are one and all dependent upon Calcutta. Nay, the radiating circle of her influence overlaps the adjoining continents, and affects alike the fate of the Bosphorus and the destinies of Egypt. Nor is the effect less remarkable if examined upon the eastern side, to which in this book I am about to invite attention. It is from jealousy of India and to impair the position which India gives to Great Britain in the Far East that France has again embarked upon an Asiatic career, and is advancing from the south-east with steps that faithfully correspond with those of Russia upon the north-west. The heritage of the Indian Empire has