Eastern problems at the close of the eighteenth century

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EASTERN PROBLEMS

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BY
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INTRODUCTION

The history of the world, in its largest aspect, is the history of the intercourse between East and West. This intercourse has been potent in many important directions; in affairs of race, religion, and trade, the vital relation between Asia and Europe has either created or solved difficult problems in human existence. It has also been continuous, and though there have been years when this interchange has seemed of small effect, the true interpretation of world history can be given only when the struggle between Orient and Occident is recognized as an ever present factor. Then the simplest events of daily life in regions where the forces of two civilizations have joined battle for dominion become significant of great issues. The struggle is, furthermore, a signal example of the unity of history; older than historical chronicles, the contest touches the lives of men and nations to-day as it did when Jason sailed in search of the Golden Fleece, or when the champions of Greece crossed over to Asia in pursuit of Helen.

This conflict between East and West is an essential part of the thought and life of the ancient world. The Homeric epic derives from it; it is embodied in the story of Zeus and Europa, who is shown as the daughter of an Asiatic king; it is the inspiration of Herodotus and Xenophon; Marathon, Salamis, and Platea tell of the antagonism of two continents. The struggle between Hellas and Persia is the first
historic expression of that antagonism; the story of that conflict is the first chapter in the history of the Eastern Question, and the lasting glory of Alexander is that he levelled the ground for Western institutions in the border lands of Asia, and marked the flood-tide of European influence in the Orient. But even in his lifetime and with his consent the forces of the East made known their conservative strength, and in three centuries pushed the focal point of the struggle back even to Epirus. For the place of Actium among the world's great battles is only half realized unless the stake of empire between the opponents is truly estimated. Rome, as the later champion of the West, the shield and sword of Europe, fought in Antony the Asiatic peril and a leader inspired by an Orientalism which would have made Egypt the ruler of both worlds. Virgil and Horace became the poet apostles of a Roman empire which should wage war against a despot about whom were grouped the forces of the East from Arabia, India, and "ultima Bactria." The victory of the West, and the epochal day when the entrance of Egypt into the empire transformed the idea of Roman dominion, gave clear title to a high calling in the mind of the Roman people. The feeling of the later republic became conviction of duty in the heart of Augustus, and he dreamed to make of himself an Alexander. Thus the march of the Roman legions along the road of the "Great King" lifted the affairs of Asia Minor, the Armenian Question, the battles against the Parthians on the Euphrates frontier, to a position of world importance in the second phase of the Eastern Question. In the place of Hellas and Persia stood Rome and Parthia. For whatever meaning the expansion and the fall of the Roman Empire held for the people of western Europe, the fate of the eastern imperial frontier was pregnant for all the world. That border line became the defence of a Europe unprepared to meet the threat of Asiatic dominion. The victory of Tours was won against a mere flanking party; the brunt of the battle against Asia was borne by a much maligned