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A RECENT JOURNEY THROUGH
PERSIA

BY

THE RIGHT HON. LORD LAMINGTON,
G.C.M.G., G.C.I.E.

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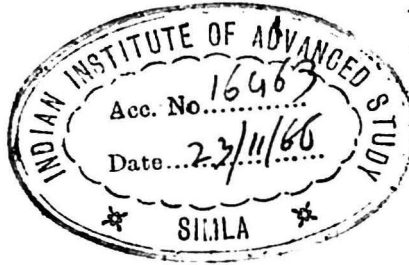
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A RECENT JOURNEY THROUGH PERSIA

THE chair was taken by SIR FREDERIC FRYER.

I need hardly enlarge upon the often-stated theme of the British possession in the Persian Gulf; how it is Great Britain, who has policed those waters, who has adjudicated upon the quarrels between natives on the coast, who has surveyed the waters—in fact has done everything for a hundred years or more to make the Gulf a thoroughfare for trade. This has been done at great expense of money and of lives of our soldiers and sailors, without our acquiring any territory except a very small area indeed at Khism.

Before entering the Gulf one passes the territory of Muscat. Muscat has, in recent years, as this audience will know, been the centre of the gun-running trade, the endeavour to stop which has put us to very much expense and trouble. In the spring of last year we entered into an arrangement with the Sultan of Muscat by which all arms entering the port should be bonded, and should not be allowed to issue except under a certificate, so that their destination might be known and approved of. It would naturally be expected that our co-partners in the *entente* would help us in our efforts to put down this nefarious traffic, but, unhappily, the French Government have not co-operated, and only recently sent a powerful cruiser to overawe the Sultan so that he should not carry out his engagement with us. This necessitated our withdrawing a powerful cruiser from the Far East to counterbalance the effect of the presence of the French cruiser. It happened in the meanwhile that the Balkan War broke out; the course of the French cruiser was diverted to the Aegean Sea, and the necessity of our cruiser going was therefore obviated. The Sultan has shown himself only too anxious to do everything to meet our views to put down this trade, and it is very much to be regretted that our French friends have not thought fit to help us in the matter. On leaving Muscat my ship called at

Linga, and there I found two or three of our cruisers. A council of war had been held on board one of them, because it was expected that an attack in force was going to be made on the town of Linga, where we had landed a small party of troops. This was owing to the fact that a short time before a successful capture of a large amount of arms had been made, and the population in that part of Asia, particularly the Arabs, were very irritated at this interruption to their trade, and it was said that a Jihad had been preached in the interior with the idea of attacking our force in Linga. However, that assault did not eventuate when I was in the country, and I believe it never did take place.

I then went on to Bushire, where I was not allowed to land, because of my being in quarantine. But Sir Percy Cox, our British Resident, came to me and told me it would be very inadvisable for me to try to get into the interior, to Shiraz, from Bushire. You may remember that about twelve months ago Mr. Smart, one of our Consular officers, when going to Shiraz, was attacked whilst he was travelling under an escort of the Central Indian Horse. Ever since that time it has been practically impossible for a Britisher to travel that road, and people of other nationalities can only get there by proclaiming that they are not British. It was certainly a most unfortunate circumstance that the Government thought of sending a regiment of cavalry to Shiraz, one squadron of which went to Isfahan, as the numbers were sufficiently large to irritate and awaken the suspicion of the Persians, and at the same time it was perfectly ineffectual for producing any order in the country. At present we occupy the undignified position of having our cavalry regiment up at Shiraz, and it would be unable to get down to the coast unless they fought their way through. I believe it might be done—and I was assured of this by the Governor-General of Bushire—if the tribesmen knew they were going to leave the country altogether. But our prestige would suffer irretrievably if we withdrew this regiment without previous exacting reparation from the tribe who had delivered the assault. We have a considerable number of Indian infantry landed at Bushire, and it is not very easy to see what particular use they are there; in fact, our half-hearted policy has produced a set of circumstances that may have very serious consequences.

As I was unable to land at Bushire I spent two days by going over to Koweit. As you know, this place bulked very largely in the eyes of the public a few years ago as a possible terminus of the Bagdad Railway. It is not much of a harbour; it is quite open to the north and north-east; and the town itself is situated on the

fringe of the great desert stretching away into the interior. For myself I do not see any particular necessity of the place as a terminus of a railway when much better sites could be found up the Shatt-el-Arab.

The chief trade of Koweit is the export of any merchandise that comes from the interior, and it is also the homes of many of those engaged in the pearl fishing trade at Bahreia. When I was there it was not the fishing season, and there were perhaps 500 or 600 boats laid up in the very primitive harbour that had been made.

My quarantine over, I returned to Bushire, and spent some days there anxiously considering what course I should pursue. I myself could probably have safely got through to Shiraz, but in view of the representations of our Resident, Sir Percy Cox, I did not think it was right for me to attempt it, and in any case the further journey from Shiraz to Isfahan would have been unpracticable.

The other main route to Teheran is by Bagdad and Kermansha, but it was perfectly impossible to attempt that as fighting was going on, and the road was absolutely blocked to travel and commerce. After several inquiries, it seemed possible that I might get through by the Ahwaz-Isfahan route, often called after Mr. Lynch, one of the members of our Society. This road had for some months been raided by the Kughelu tribe, but it seemed practicable at the moment. Also there was a reasonable prospect of traversing in safety the country between Isfahan and Teheran, although for two years or so this, the main route in all Persia, had been blocked by the predatory operations of the celebrated freebooter Naib Hussein. I determined to see whether I could get through by this road. It is remarkable to think that from the Baluchistan frontier right up the Persian Gulf to where the frontiers of Turkey, Persia, and Russia meet there was no other possible means of entering the interior of Persia.

Though I mentioned that I was detained by the quarantine rule from landing at Bushire, it seemed rather superfluous as plague was raging within the town, and very weird was the spectacle one evening from the balcony of the house that the Persian Government had most generously put at my disposal to see a procession of men and women coming along with lanterns and torches, crying, beating their breasts, and invoking the names of the martyrs of Kerbela—"Ai shadidi Kerbela faryadast." The only efforts that had been made to combat the ravages of the plague were carried out under the auspices of the British medical doctor. The whole of the Persian coast on the Gulf though bold

and picturesque is decidedly unpromising, and I understand that, excepting one small stream, no water apparently flows into the Gulf south of the Karun River. I proceeded to Mohammerah, situated at the confluence of the Shatt-el-Arab and the Karun Rivers, and was met by the Sheikh, who was a good friend of our country. He came up to welcome me in a steamer which steamed round and round our boat playing, "God save the King!" till we became giddy. We exchanged visits, and I landed and took a walk in the humid palm-covered plain on which the town is built. The atmosphere was hot and steamy. The small river steamer took me and my party, consisting of Colonel Williams, Mr. Hodson, I.C.S., and Mr. Charters, to Ahwaz. From Ahwaz I paid a visit to the remarkable town of Shuster, built on an island. In ancient times a dam had been built across the main branch of the river, holding back the waters so that they penetrated tunnels cut out of the solid rock, and then descending into excavations at the bottom, revolve wheels which, on the turbine principle, grind corn and other material. The rocks are simply honeycombed with this system of water engineering. When I was there fighting was anticipated, and it did take place within the next day or two, as the Sheikh of Mohammerah and the Baktiari chiefs both claimed the right of appointing the Governor of Shuster. However, a compromise was effected in the end, and I believe that peace now reigns. There I visited the oil-fields of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company at Musjid-el-Suleiman. A large amount of capital is being spent in developing the enterprise in this wild region, and there are several Canadian well-borers at work. A pipe track has been laid for 150 miles to convey the oil down to Abadan on the Shatt-el-Arab to the large refinery, which I imagine is now working. From the oil-fields we had some long and rough travelling to Malamir, where we rejoined the remainder of the party who had gone direct there from Ahwaz. The Baktiaris supplied us with escorts all along the route, which is through wild, rough, and, in places, magnificent country. It was rather disappointing to find how scanty was the vegetation, of which there is very little, excepting in the valleys, till a height of 5,000 feet was reached. Then there was a considerable amount of scrub-oak, and here and there a profusion of wild flowers. The route has been hopelessly neglected, and was washed away in places, and two suspension bridges that had been built when the road was constructed had become very unsafe. We made ascents and descents of two or three thousand feet a day. In some places the track was very precipitous.

On one occasion I saw trunks and cases hurtling down the track, and the mules which had been their bearers only stopped just on the very edge of the precipice. The population is very scanty, and at the season of the year when I was there everybody was on the move from the lower grounds to the higher pastures for the summer. This being the only route, and at that moment the Kughelus not being on the warpath, we passed many herds of sheep and goats proceeding on their annual migration, and some caravans of camels. At Shallamzar and at Ardal the Baktiari chiefs gave me a warm welcome, and we forsook our tents for their houses. The scenery of the Karun River is certainly very impressive. It flows through narrow gorges and is hemmed in by snow-topped mountains. On crossing the watershed one gets into the water system of the Zendeh Rud, on which the city of Isfahan is situated. Wherever it is practicable to initiate irrigation the people are not slow to take advantage of it, and I understand that, notwithstanding the troublous times through which Persia is now passing, no attempt is ever made to destroy or spoil the irrigation.

A great welcome was given me at Isfahan. My entrance to the town was marked by crowds of people all along the route. A magnificent house and beautiful gardens were put at the disposal of myself and my friends; but with all the hospitality afforded me, the impression left on my mind of Isfahan is one of intense depression—the misery of the town is so great, and processions are constantly seen of weeping women imploring one to do something to obtain food for them. As for the beggars in the street, they are beyond number and beyond description. The beautiful ancient edifices in the city have been in many cases despoiled of their valuable tiles by one of the late governors, the Zill-es-Sultan, and the dilapidation of the buildings joined to the wretchedness of the people gives one a feeling of intense sadness. In addition to this, from all the Persians that came to see me there was the repeated plaint of despair at the passing away of the ancient glory of their country, and the wretchedness of their present position, and one and all without exception asking why Great Britain did nothing to save them. The one pleasant feature in Isfahan was to see the work being done by the Armenian community at Julfa, a suburb of Isfahan, where I found excellent schools, and neat and clean scholars, who were evidently well taught. I should mention, too, the little British Missionary Society that carries on excellent work amongst the poor and sick, and which formed a little oasis of joy amid the prevailing depression.

I left Isfahan by a carriage so-called, a kind of rickety box bound together by ropes, and on wheels that wobbled at incredible angles. I passed Montchahah, where we feared there might be some trouble, as lately the brother of the headman of the place had been shot by one of the Swedish officers of the gendarmerie. I fear a grave error of judgment had been thus committed. However, my journey was uninterrupted, and two days afterwards I diverted from the track to lunch with Naib Hussein at Natunz. I have always referred to the depredations for two or three years of this gentleman over the whole of this portion of Persia. All the post-horses have been seized by him, and the whole commerce of this main artery of Persia has been at a standstill. They have been waiting at Isfahan for specie from Kum for months, but nobody dared to bring it along that road. The Government had sent expedition after expedition against him, but he always managed to escape, even when defeated. Finally, the only way of restoring order was for the Government to appoint him Governor of the province. He complained to me bitterly that the post was not remunerative, but the wretched people under him had been despoiled of all their property, and there is no doubt, as he told me, that he found it difficult to feed what he termed his "eight hundred brethren."

I heard two stories of how it was that he became a freebooter. The one generally held is that he became an outlaw owing to his having killed a man at Kashan, but I heard this contradicted as not being a true report; that he was really an aggrieved person in a murder case, and that he took to the road from bitterness of spirit. At all events, he has fully avenged himself, as practically the whole of the country has been laid waste by him.

On my further journey he gave me an escort mounted on the stolen property of the road—on the best horses I had seen, and ridden by a more typical lot of brigands than even Drury Lane stage could produce. It suddenly struck me that the escort was unusually large, and I became anxious lest it should have entered his mind to keep me as a hostage so as to make a bargain with the Persian Government by which he might secure a more lucrative post. These gentlemen, as usual in Persia, amused themselves by galloping over the roughest ground, and whilst going at full speed by shooting off their rifles, so that the bullets struck the ground just in front of your horse's head. It was with some relief, after some hours of this, that I saw another escort awaiting me sent out by the Governor of Kashan. That

same evening I had the unpleasant experience of the deep sand preventing the further progress of my vehicle, and then riding through the darkness in the midst of a sandstorm. The journey seemed endless, but the next day I encountered even a worse sandstorm when it was literally impossible to open the eyes, and one galloped through the murky atmosphere with sand spitting against one's face. A Persian escort and the Governor and his son came out to meet me, and they simply enveloped their heads in their shawls and let the horses take their own line. Kashan I thought the most attractive of the towns that I saw. It contained interesting and picturesque Baktiaris, and the Governor took me out to the Palace of Fim and gave me a sumptuous repast in the beautiful garden in which the Palace is situated.

My further journey became more and more difficult owing to the lack of horses. I had to spend most of one night in walking on foot. Ultimately I arrived at Teheran, and received a kind welcome at our Legation. Teheran has little of the interest that attaches to the other Persian towns, and I must not weary you with any description of it. The only notable feature of one's further journey from Teheran to Enzeli on the Caspian lay in the notable evidence of how the road is practically a Russian road.

I may conclude by saying that, as regards the political position, there is no gainsaying for one moment that no other authority exists in Persia at the present time than that of Russia. Whatever may be executed nominally by the Persian Government, everything is always done with the previous sanction of Russia. How far south of Teheran its authority and control may be extending it is difficult to say, but one was told stories of how their influence and power is making itself felt in the Baktiari country so far as Kerman. There can hardly be anything more unsatisfactory than that a country should be ostensibly or nominally ruled by its own Government, whereas the real force is that of another country, who at the same time has no outward or official responsibility.

There is no doubt that from Tabriz in the west to Meshed in the east, whatever authority is existent, it is that of Russia. I fail to see that, as regards Persia, the Anglo-Russian Convention has resulted in anything else than Russia accomplishing quietly and without friction what would otherwise have been done by exciting the resentment and bad feeling of this country.

DISCUSSION

COLONEL C. E. YATE, M.P. : I should like first of all to deal with the last point Lord Lamington mentioned, that of a loan for Persia. Well, before we can provide such a loan we must have some adequate security that the money will be applied to the purposes for which it is given. I fear that the first thought of the average Persian official in such matters is how much of any loan he can put into his own pocket. We cannot provide funds for Persia until we have a good Finance Minister in charge of the Exchequer, and a guarantee that all expenditure of the money will be under proper European supervision. This is an indispensable preliminary to any action. So far as I can judge there does not seem to be a single high Persian official who can be trusted with the administration of any money whatever.

Lord Lamington has well explained the vast difference between the Russian sphere in the north and the British sphere in the south. He showed that from Tabriz to Meshed the country is garrisoned by Russian troops, and how in those northern regions there is absolute peace and safety for trade. Indeed, the Custom's receipts are larger than they have ever been before, and the whole country is absolutely safe for travellers and traders in every possible way. How different the position is to the south of Ispahan! Every caravan route is closed in the south, and, unlike Russia, in the north we are not preserving the peace and safety of the country. The question is how to preserve our trade and the security of our own subjects and property in the south.

With respect to the Swedish Gendarmerie, I believe the officers are doing good work and trying their best to improve the situation. But everyone of them is unused to dealing with Orientals, and is without knowledge of their language, manners, or customs. Considering these disadvantages, I think they have worked wonders. I entirely support Lord Lamington in his view that it is necessary for us to give Persia a loan of British officers for raising fresh Gendarmerie. We have in India many British officers familiar with the Persian tongue, and we have a very great number of Mahommedan Indian officers to whom Persian is almost the mother-tongue, and who would be able to help their

superior officers in raising Gendarmerie for the purpose of restoring order and ensuring the safety of our trade routes to and from the Persian Gulf. These routes were recognized in the agreement with Russia as constituting the British interests connected with and comprised in the special interests of Great Britain in the Persian Gulf. We are entitled to secure the safety of these trade routes by guarding them with troops as the Russians have done in the north. But for this purpose we should have to send at least 15,000 or 20,000 men, and neither the British Government nor the Indian Government have any desire to send troops into Persia in order to occupy the country in any way. The only alternative I can see, unless our trade is to be absolutely wrecked for ever, is to help Persia to raise Gendarmerie. The suggestion I would make to Government (indeed, I have done so in a question in the House to Sir Edward Grey) is that we should raise a force of at least 5,000 Persian levies under British officers to assist the Swedish Gendarmerie. We have plenty of material to draw from for the purpose, and if any loan is granted to Persia it ought to be given over to British and Swedish officers to be disbursed for the upkeep of the levies. I say this Persian levy force should be at least 5,000 strong to hold the roads and to try and bring about a due measure of safety for travellers in the country.

Lord Lamington has spoken about an application by Russia for a concession from the Persian Government for a line of railway from Julfa to Tabriz, and yesterday it was stated in a newspaper that the concession has been granted. I have put down a question to Sir Edward Grey whether this is the case, and if so, whether, in accordance with existing treaty rights, a similar concession has been granted to Great Britain from Muhamra to Khoramabad. It is most important that we should assert our equal right with Russia in railway construction, for if once we allow this right to lapse it is not likely to be restored. Khoramabad is one of the most vital centres for us in South Persia, not only owing to the oil deposits to which reference has been made in the lecture, but because the concession for the railway to there will go a long way to facilitate our giving peace and prosperity to the adjacent country. You have seen from the slides the difficulties there are in traversing the passes between Bushire and Shiraz. They must have brought home to everyone of us how absolutely useless it would be to send regular troops to preserve order in such wild, mountainous country. It can only be done by local levies, and if we can raise a large force of such levies under British officers that will afford the best chance of keeping the peace. We have to consider that the tribesmen all over the country are now armed, and well-armed, with the latest pattern of rifles. This is the result of the trade in arms and ammunition, which

we have been endeavouring to suppress by gun-running expeditions in the Persian Gulf, due to the Muscat Treaty and the unfriendliness of France in this particular matter, as explained by Lord Lamington. For years there had been a tremendous import of arms and ammunition, distributed from Muscat to the Gulf Ports and sold to the tribesmen. I cannot help saying that we owe a grudge to the French for the way they have treated us in this matter, in taking their stand on the fact that the Treaty with Muscat, signed, I think, in 1868, did not include an express prohibition of the importation of arms, and in consequence we have the latest rifles in use in Persia, all along the Indian border, and in Afghanistan. The French have allowed this serious situation to develop, although it is only a question of the profits made by one or two petty French traders in Muscat. Considering how cordially we have worked with the French for so many years and the friendly feelings between the two countries, this behaviour of the French Government is disagreeable and surprising. I only hope that the present Treaty arrangement may be abrogated, though I have not much confidence that this aim will be secured. Meanwhile the tribesmen have become so fully armed that the only thing open to us now is to endeavour to intercept the supply of ammunition. Our ships are doing their best in this direction in the Gulf, and matters would be helped forward if the Admiralty would yield to my claim that the ships of the Royal Indian Marine, a fully commissioned service, should be re-armed. Hitherto the Admiralty has not allowed these vessels to have guns; but I hope the interdiction may be removed so that the Royal Indian Marine ships may take their full and proper share in the work of preventing gun-running, and of generally policing the Persian Gulf. I look back with regret to the days of the old Indian Navy, and I think the sooner we can strengthen our forces in Indian seas by the step I have proposed to the Admiralty the better it will be for us. (Cheers.)

LORD LAMINGTON: In reference to Colonel Yate's remark on the loan question, my opinion is that a loan might be given by the two Powers under the control of an advisory council. There should be one Russian and one British officer, with a third party, to see that the finances of Persia are properly expended and properly organized. I say that because I quite agree that it would not do to grant a large sum to Persia without making an arrangement as to how it shall be expended, and for ensuring that it is carried out. But I do not agree that there is no Persian capable of looking after the finances of his country. I met at least two or three on my travels whom I would thoroughly trust. But at the present moment everything in Teheran is Russian, and therefore it is perfectly impossible for any Persian,

however honest and incorruptible, unless he was the most wonderful man the world has seen for many generations, to succeed in pulling together the fortunes of his country. But I cannot accept the view that regeneration could not be effected if Persia were not hampered in this way. As to security, the north, as things are, is in Russian hands, and she has the entire trade. Russia does not incur any blame for bad administration outside the part of the country where her interests lie. I fully endorse what Colonel Yate has said as to the desirability of raising Gendarmerie under British officers. (Cheers.)

But they enjoy this advantage without incurring any responsibility, and power without responsibility is bad for all.

SIR FREDERIC FRYER: I am sure we are all indebted to Lord Lamington for the very interesting account of his travels he has given us. It is piteous to hear of the state of anarchy in which Southern Persia now stands. I consider that it raises a doubt whether representative government is really suited to the East. We see the disorder to which Persia has been reduced, and I am afraid that Turkey is following in her footsteps. Both countries have endeavoured to transplant the political systems of the West to the East. Under an absolute monarchy, although, no doubt, the government of Persia was very far from perfect, and there were very great abuses, still there was some government, and now the whole country outside the Russian sphere is in a state of anarchy.

I have had some experience of the task of reducing a country from disorder to peacefulness and safety. I served a good many years on the North-West Frontier, where we had many unruly tribes to deal with, and I also took part in the pacification of Upper Burma. With this experience in view, I can say without hesitation that if only the Government would employ British officers who have served in India, and some of the men, more particularly Mahomedans, who have served under them, the task of bringing Southern Persia into good order could be easily effected. Of course, in the first place, it would be necessary to grant a loan to Persia, because without money nothing can be done.

I endorse what Colonel Yate has said about the Royal Indian Marine. In Burma that Marine manned the Government river steamers, and the Royal Indian Marine vessels were then armed. But as the Admiralty objected to vessels not in the Royal Navy carrying guns, the guns were taken out of the ships of the Royal Indian Marine. If the vessels in the Persian Gulf were now re-armed they could do more effective service. They were most useful in Burma in hunting out the river pirates and in keeping the peace amongst the boats that plied on the Irrawaddy.

I trust that England will do something to restore peace to Southern

Persia, because the people are suffering very deeply, and the commerce of the country is being utterly destroyed. Seeing how much Russia has done in the north, it does not appear that there can be any conceivable reason why England should not take some action in her own sphere.

I now in your name cordially thank Lord Lamington for the very interesting afternoon we have spent. (Cheers.)

