

The Meaning of the Eastern Question for the British Empire and the Whole World.

The great Eastern question is at this hour occupying the keenest attention, it may be truly said, of the whole civilized world. Every thoughtful man is filled with the strongest sense of its extreme gravity. The financial exchange of every country are agitated by it with stormy tumult. Private persons and wide communities find their fortunes profoundly affected by the telegraphic tempests which roll over them from hour to hour. Individual men and great States are compelled to reckon with the possibility that at any moment a sudden turn in Eastern events may force them to look ruin and insolvency in the face. Powerful governments are the prey of anxiety; for there is a sense of vague, terrifying boundless danger involved in the fearful issues raised by insurrectionary movements of apparently trifling significance. There is no part of the world which may not be caught up by this storm ere the passing year shall have reached its completion. And if ever there was a Colonial question of paramount importance, most assuredly this is one. The future of the mighty Colonial States in the Eastern regions, as well of the vast Indian dependency of the British Empire, is brooding, for great good or great evil, in the issues which time is developing in its womb. There is not an Englishman in the whole Empire whom it does not directly and personally concern to watch and think over the events which are now going forward and their consequences.

To what is this surprising, this momentous interest, to be ascribed? The conviction that radical changes in the constitution of the Turkish Empire are at hand beyond doubt lies at the bottom of every man's thought at this supreme hour. Hence it is in the highest degree necessary to search out the real nature and meaning of these possible revolutions. Turkey is a land of immense extent. It touches Europe on vital points on one side; it reaches well nigh to India on the other. Such a country cannot experience alterations in its organization without coming into vivid contact with interests of the highest order all round. Then, again, Turkey presents a peculiarity which is capable of developing results of the wildest range. It is the centre of one of the greatest religions amongst mankind. That religion is singularly susceptible of the widest and most intense fanaticism, and human nature has shown on many terrible occasions, how such fanaticism may seize upon the most widely spread communities and generate the most destructive violence and fury. It is not outside the range of possible contingencies that the Mussulman element of the population of India might feel the convulsions of such wild madness. This one fact, by itself alone, invests the Turkish question with great gravity for all Englishmen.

Nevertheless these considerations still fall short of exhausting the full significance of the overwhelming crisis which is going on under our eyes. Large perturbations have swept over the world, military struggles of sharp and enduring violence have raged ere now, troubling men's minds with agitations, but yet not reaching the intensity of the anxiety which now beset all thinking men. The contest between France and Germany begat tears and feelings in England of a very stirring kind, yet the Turkish question is far graver still. It is dimly seen that more serious interests are involved in it for all

mankind. There is something absolutely special in its very nature. Everyone will think of the aggrandizement which the ultimate issue may bring to one single power; yet even the fact that Russia may come forth from the commotion with a broad expansion of fresh territory does not exhaust the problem. What, then, is the hidden, but formidable disaster, which the Eastern question may bring forth in its course on the whole world, and not least on the British Empire, on England and her Colonies?

It is a matter of the deepest concern—we add, emphatically, of the strongest duty—for every Englishman, who has any capacity for thinking, thoroughly to study and understand this most serious of questions; to make himself master of what it really means, of what lies at the bottom of it. A dim sense of the possibilities involved rises up in most minds; but a real investigation of their true nature and a clear perception of what they mean, as realities, are lamentably rare. The key of the whole situation lies in the geography of Constantinople, in the narrow stream of water which divides Europe from Asia, and the broad expanse of the Black Sea beyond. The secret of the problem lies there. What influences may these seemingly insignificant portions of the earth's surface bring to bear on the future of the world, on the independence and happiness of mankind? This is the point to learn and master. That Russia at Constantinople would be inconveniently strong; that the balance of power among the nations of Europe would be seriously disturbed; that her voice in the councils of the world would be intolerably mighty; that her power to interfere with the internal government of other nations might be mischievously exercised, as it manifestly was by the Emperor Nicholas; that Russia would be painfully felt and headed at Paris and Berlin and Vienna and Rome; that holy alliances might reappear to war down liberty and free thought and national independence; that Egypt might be endangered, and the Suez Canal compromised—all these are ideas which are swarming on every side in the journals of every European country. But that is not the whole matter. These are perils of a kind which the human race, as it goes along down the ages, must encounter; and there will arise a feeling—a sound feeling, and a just one, we fully admit—that the difficulties and dangers of the day will be met, successfully met, as in the past, by the energy and intelligence of free nations. To our judgment, the danger of the present hour lies imbedded in the prevalence of these generally just feelings; they blind the mind to peculiarities in the case which, if not taken into full account, may work out mischief which hereafter will be irretrievable.

The one duty now incumbent on all Europe, and most of all on England, is to determine what Russia firmly established on the Bosphorus means? what this fact necessarily implies? Russia at once becomes a Naval Power of the first order. From being frozen up on the Baltic for eight months of every year, Russia will have a fleet in the best conceivable situation, with a vast sea to exercise it on, in full communication with her whole Empire through railways and might rivers, and utterly inaccessible to foreign attacks. But is this a matter for overwhelming alarm? We say firmly, that it is. We desire to speak in entire calmness. This is a subject on which passion and excitement are utterly out of place. The thing to be done is to ascertain dry hard facts, and to comprehend what they import. Russia on the Dardanelles gathers up necessarily all

Asia Minor. Palestine stands next to be absorbed, and then Egypt, and with it the Suez Canal. There is no military power that can stop her irresistible course. But there will be England and her fleet, it will be said. We answer with complete assurance that England and her fleet will be unable to arrest these conquests. Russia at Constantinople means, as time rolls on, Egypt and the whole of the Levant gone; England will be unable to do anything. For consider what will happen. The vision of an irresistible Empire will ever be present to Russian eyes; the ambition of being the supreme Power amongst men will burn in every Russian breast. For the realisation of this ambition, a fleet is the indispensable instrument; and the Bosphorus and the Black Sea will give Russia a fleet with which that of England will be incapable of coping in those waters. An inextinguishable ambition will steadily and inevitably build up 100, or 200, or 300 ironclads in those secure seas, ready at all times to sail forth with a might which no force in those waters will be present to resist. It will be easy to Russia to have a fleet always ready for action in the Levant which shall double or treble in size those of all other European Powers combined; for peace to her will signify incessant ship building for war. England cannot maintain 100 ironclads as a war force always present in the Levant; but Russia could. England has not a million of soldiers to land at any time in Asia. Nor do ironclads require a vast commercial navy to feed them, as line-of-battle ships of yore; the majority of their crews might always be landsmen. For England to force her way up the Dardanelles to crush the enemy in his nest will be impossible; torpedoes and ironclad forts will see to that effectively. And when the terrible fact burst upon the world in full recognition that the Russian fleet must be master in those waters, the fate of the whole Levant, and of Egypt, and of the great sea-road of all nations to the East will be irrevocably sealed. And for how much, then, will the navies of France and Italy, and Spain and Austria count under such circumstances? To us it seems incapable of dispute that Russia, rooted at Constantinople, will wield the greatest force on earth, and may and probably will, aspire to an Empire of the range of the Macedonian or the Roman. Russia at Constantinople would be also Russia at Marseilles, Toulon, Algeria, Trieste, Venice, Alexandria, and Port Said, not to speak of great Russian fleets such as those of France and Spain in bygone days, in the Bay of Biscay, and even the British Channel. That Russia must not be allowed to establish herself at Constantinople has thus become the highest and most commanding principle of all European statesmanship. We believe that this great truth actually lies seated in the mind of England; but not so consciously as to give Russia and the other Powers the full assurance that England will always be ready to march when the danger becomes visible. Russia's surprise at the refusal of England to join the Berlin Conference had for its root the belief she had conceived, as did the Emperor Nicholas, that England had assented to the treaty awake and thought in earnest about the peril that hung over the Dardanelles. England has not an hour to lose to bring home to her own consciousness that Russia must and shall never be permitted to possess Constantinople, and to make this her determination unmistakably known to all the world. On the performance of this supreme duty by the people of England hangs the future of a large portion of the human race.