CHAPTER X

RUSSIA AND ENGLAND FACE TO FACE


The antagonism which exists between Russia and England throughout Asia has been developed by force of circumstances and without the seeking of either nation. Unlike the rivalries among most Powers, it is neither due to racial hatred nor to that craving for martial glory which has been responsible for so many of the bloodiest wars in the history of the world. It has arisen by slow degrees from small beginnings, until it has become a second instinct along the frontiers on which the rule or interests of the rival nations touch.

That this should be the case is the more remarkable when considered in connection with the leading characteristics of either Power. Russia is the most backward of the realms of civilisation. Her resources are undeveloped, her territory vast and thinly populated. The obvious aim should, one would suppose, be to educate her people and develop her heritage; to strengthen her empire, and to join the march of progress in the company of her neighbours. England, with her vast population and her
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restricted area, might well seek opportunities for the enlargement of the territories beneath her rule, and the further development of her trade. And yet these suggested policies are reversed. Russia, with her surplus of land and her paucity of people, her undeveloped wealth and her exhausted budget, is ever agog for yet more territory, the acquisition of which will still further impoverish what she has, and deplete her resources beyond their present limit. Great Britain, with every inducement to forge ahead, refrains from conquest and restricts her efforts to the further development of what she owns, resting content with the mission she has set herself, to benefit the people over whom it is her destiny to rule.

The rivalry between Great Britain and Russia for dominion in Asia is of recent growth. The opening up of India coincided with the discovery of Siberia, and while each nation was busy with the furtherance of its schemes on opposite sides of the continent, neither followed the actions of the other, nor, one would have supposed, was there the slightest chance of a death struggle arising between them. But as each extended its influence and enlarged its boundaries, the distance between became diminished, until, encouraged by the successes she had achieved, Russia cast envious eyes around, and hungered for the more favoured territories possessed by her neighbour in the south. And so was heard at the beginning of the present century the scheme for the conquest of Hindostan, which, once uttered, took hold of men's minds, and has never since been dropped.

The resources of Great Britain were able to cope with any alarm resulting from such a threat. But all the same it was desirable to be prepared, and from time to time steps were taken to explore the country which separated British India from Asiatic Russia. The results attained were satisfactory. The territories beyond the British border consisted, for the most part, either of mountain ranges or of sandy deserts, interspersed here and there with oases of varying extent peopled by fierce and warlike nomads, impatient of control, and likely to