

CHAPTER VIII

Oxford 1878-83

Curzon went up to Balliol College at Oxford in 1878 when he was 19 years old. Old friends had already begun to refer to his tenure there as the brief interval which must intervene between Eton and the Cabinet.¹ Within a short while, Curzon was to become the acknowledged leader of the Young Conservatives at Oxford. He soon made his mark at the Union. Once again he saw himself knocking off honours as he had done at Eton.

Lord Scarsdale had personally escorted his son to Oxford for the entrance examination. Before leaving Derby he had written to Oscar Browning, "I intend going down to Eton, for George has to be in Oxford on Thursday the 22nd for his Exam. at Balliol."²

St. John Brodrick, already settled at Balliol, welcomed Curzon, sympathizing with him over his spinal trouble. "I was grieved to hear of all you have been going through-physically with a most troublesome weakness and with actually so terrible an upset of all your plans and ambitions."³ Brodrick even

¹ Brodrick to Curzon, May 29, 1878, CP. Vol.9. .

² Lord Scarsdale to Browning, Nov. 18, 1877, OB.1/437.

³ Brodrick to Curzon, Oct. 7, 1878, CP. Vol. 9. .

communicated with the Scarsdale family entertaining them to dinner in London. "I have met your people two or three times", Brodrick wrote from London "and they dined with us one night this week. I was very pleased to make your sister's acquaintance and was struck by a variety of family traits."¹

Balliol was from 1870 stamped by its brilliant Master, the Reverend Dr. Benjamin Jowett. For seventeen successive years, from 1888 to 1905, all Indian Viceroy's were Balliol men. Between 1878 and 1914, more than 200 Balliol men joined the Indian Civil Service.² Balliol under Jowett exercised a profound influence on national affairs. It produced more scholars, philosophers and statesmen than any other college in the University. Always immaculately turned out in a tail-coat, his cherubic face and high-pitched voice were a familiar part of the Oxford scene. Mathew Arnold, Tennyson, Swinburne were among those who were frequent visitors to his home. A popular jingle about this scholar of imposing intellect went as follows :

First come I. My name is J-W-TT.
 There is no knowledge but I know it.
 I am Master of this College,
 What I don't know, isn't knowledge.³

Jowett's essay on The Interpretation Of Scripture which came out in 1860 had increased the cry of heterodoxy against him. For years people thought he was a great heretic presiding

¹ Brodrick to Curzon, May 16, 1879, CP. Vol.9

² Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969), p.47.

³ Ibid, p.48.

over a college of infidels. "His crime lay in saying that the Bible should be criticised like other books."¹ In his introduction to the Republic of Plato, Jowett said :

'A Greek in the age of Plato attached no importance to the question whether his religion was a historical fact. Men only began to suspect that the narrations of Homer and Hesiod were fictitious when they recognised them to be immoral. And in all religions the consideration of their morality comes first, afterwards the truth of the documents in which they were recorded, or of the events, natural or supernatural, which are told of them. But in modern times, and in the Protestant countries perhaps more than Catholic, we have been too much inclined to identify the historical with the moral; and some have refused to believe in religion at all unless a superhuman accuracy was discerned in every part of the record.'²

In fact by the middle of the 19th century a great many intelligent people had begun questioning the traditional theology of the day. Darwin's Origin of the Species in 1859 and Descent of Man in 1871 had struck a hard blow to the central biblical belief that man was a special creation wholly different from animals. But while faith in Christianity waned, the vacuum, for some, was filled by faith in the Empire. In this transition too, the hand of Jowett is discernible. The highest ideal for a young man, according to the Master, was to direct boyish aspirations to training in public service to the country and the Empire.

Nevertheless the hold of the church, by that strange

¹ Margot Asquith, The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London, 1920), pp.109-10.

² Ibid.

Victorian paradox, survived the openly avowed disbelief in faith. Even Jowett for all his intellectual heresy did not give up his holy orders and his last words a few days before his death to his celebrated friend, Margot Tenant, were, "My dear child, you must believe in God in spite of what the clergy tell you."¹ Similarly Curzon, though he seems to have lost faith in Christianity, never renounced religion.

Though Jowett came from an impoverished background, he did not question the Victorian division of society in classes and masses : the duty of one being to govern and the other to obey. For all his efforts to bring students into the same social scale, at heart Jowett had a pathetic reverence for the fine manner, high tone, wide education and lofty example of the British aristocracy.

Generous, hospitable, encouraging with alternate sarcasm and praise, Jowett - a bachelor all his life - gave himself unsparingly to his pupils. It was inevitable that Curzon's own sense of destiny be rekindled by the Master's spark. Along with Milner, Curzon was to rise to be amongst Balliol's most prominent proconsuls. Sensing in Curzon a promising pupil, Jowett had followed his progress with interest and on occasions not hesitated to tender painful advice. About Curzon's elaborate diction, Jowett told him, "I think you have many advantages and one disadvantage 'Too much to say' in a speech or in conversation. It is a good fault if corrected, but a most serious one if left uncorrected because it destroys

¹ Asquith, op.cit., p.136.

the impression of weight and of thought and gives the impression, probably very undeserved, of conceit and self-sufficiency."¹

Nevertheless, Curzon could not break free from a prolixity of speech. Words rolled from his tongue like great waves of an ocean. They sounded well on the stage and in an Oxford Union debate or in Parliament. But that stately patrician manner became an anachronism when carried into the 20th century. His archaic and affected mannerism won him much ridicule but having set himself up in the style of a grand aristocrat, Curzon would not change his ways.

The clouds of glory from Eton continued to blaze their trail at Oxford. Curzon's striking appearance and self-confident, if not arrogant manner, coupled with his distinguished Eton record gave him a special position among his contemporaries. Curzon got a full quota of adulation at Oxford. Not yet branded as a homosexual, Oscar Wilde became one of his many admirers. An American undergraduate wrote to him requesting for a photograph. By way of explanation for a stranger making such a request, the American wrote,

As an undergraduate at Oxford I attended the Union debates and noted the best speakers. As an unprejudiced observer I was interested more in studying the types of men than in weighing their political arguments. You were the only man I found who perfectly filled my ideal of what a young representative of the Conservative, and especially the aristocratic party should be. It was the intense aristocratic turn of your disposition which forcibly struck me; for which, indeed I had been abundantly prepared by works of fiction, but which I had never seen exemplified... You

¹ Jowett to Curzon, Dec.31,1884, CA.145.

were to me a type.¹

Like most young men of his background, Curzon's University education did little to equip him to earning a livelihood. He read the Classics which were divided into parts called the Mods and the Greats. He was required to spend six terms in each. For Mods he had to read Greek and Latin. The Greats included History and Philosophy. Richard Farrer took it upon himself to warn Curzon to concentrate on his studies. He said, "You are still young in Oxford life, and do devote the best of your faculties during the remainder of it to securing University honours: they are worth a great deal more hereafter than one has any idea of at the time. I speak with feeling as having once underrated them and now regretting the mistake. They are not to be knocked off promiscuously like Eton prizes."² It was good advice but Curzon was not inclined to follow it. Though in the Mods Curzon had disproved Farrer's fear by taking a First, he was not so confident with the Greats. He was aware that he had spent disproportionate time over the Union and the Canning Club. As the time of reckoning appeared closer, Curzon applied himself vigorously to study hoping that his unorthodox methods, a hangover from Eton, would see him through. He confessed to Farrer, "My history is pulling me up, backed by my translations. My logic and philosophy are remorselessly pulling

¹ L.R. Johnson, as quoted by Ronaldshay, The Life of Lord Curzon, Vol.1 (London, 1928), pp.42-3.

² Farrer to Curzon, Jan. 11, 1880, CA. 148.

me down. Which will win? Honestly, I think either. I tell you the truth. I do not think I am absolutely out of the chance of a first; but, upon my word, I am far from it...bearing in mind the superior importance attached to philosophy... I am inclined to believe that the betting is in on a second."¹

Nevertheless, he was considerably pained to discover when the results were out that he had not got a First. His friends were quick to try and console him. Alfred Lyttelton wrote, "Of course you could have got the first class for certain had you denied yourself the Union, the Canning, and those other literary, social and political enterprises which have earned you the name of the most famous Oxonian in my knowledge of Oxford that I can remember."² Curzon had hoped to excel at both, believing himself to be extraordinary. His friends had rushed to reassure him. Edward Lyttelton said, "No one has ever got a first class and given himself up to so many other things as you and the real thing to think of is that you have got more out of the University than 99 out of 100 first class men, and that will not make the slightest difference in your numerous and trusting friends."³ His father gloomily wrote, "I had a presentiment all along that you would not get that we wished for; although with very many a second would be highly thought of, I am quite aware that it has little value in your eyes: for there is, no doubt, in the estimation

¹ Curzon to Farrer, May 28, (1882), CA. 140.

² Lyttelton to Curzon, July 4, 1882, CA. 151.

³ Lyttelton to Curzon, July 4, 1882, CA. 152.

of the public, an enormous difference between the two distinctions."¹

While Curzon was still at Oxford the damaging 'superior person' verse had been put out about him. As an undergraduate Curzon seemed to give the impression of a self-contained, almost precocious, individual with fully-developed ideas, opinions and habits. Curzon's room at Balliol, like that of Eton, was characterized by a degree of lavishness and fastidiousness which added to the impression of smug self-satisfaction. A contemporary wrote, "They were furnished rather more elaborately than was usual; they were always kept spick and span, and gave a sort of impression of opulence and of that 'superiority' which became crystallized in a famous phrase."²

Jolted by his results to find that he was not the superior person he had begun to believe himself to be, Curzon felt something had to be done to vindicate his position. That summer Curzon was scheduled to go on tour of Greece, Egypt and Palestine. He decided to use his nights working for an essay towards the coveted Lothian Prize for History, Oxford's highest academic award to an under-graduate. He worked in the utmost secrecy, without the knowledge of his friends. He could not bear the mortification of another failure. The prize did go to him. What afforded him even greater pleasure was being once again able to prove to his friends that he

¹ Lord Scarsdale to Curzon, July 4, 1882, CA.142.

² J.W. Mackail as quoted by Ronalashay, op.cit., Vol. I, pp. 58-9.

could succeed in whatever he chose to do and in his way.

As he put it to his friend Farrer,

You will perhaps have seen in papers or have heard from some card that I was lucky enough to pull off the Lothian and if so you will perhaps have wondered why you have neither now nor before heard anything about it from me. The fact is that I kept it universally dark. It would have distressed me to publish to the world another rebuff...and no one knew anything about it except the Brodder. [Brodrick] who detected my reading at the Brit Mus [British Museum] before starting abroad, and Edward and Weldon who often saw me writing while with them.¹

It was this same desire that prompted him to try for another prize in History - the Arnold Essay on Sir Thomas More. The desire was whetted by the sight of a Balliol contemporary, Anthony Hope Hawkins, a runner-up for the Lothian, taking notes at the Bodleian Library. Curzon assumed Hawkins had set himself up to win the Arnold Essay and thereby avenge his earlier defeat at the Lothian by Curzon. Curzon's competitive interests were aroused and he promptly entered for the essay. He admitted, "the undertaking was no light one, for I knew next to nothing about Sir Thomas More."²

Curzon entered for the prize in December 1883, the rules dictating that the essay be submitted by the midnight of March 31, 1884. For the next three months he worked like a fiend. He records:

My day was spent as following: I rose at ten in the

¹ Curzon to Farrer, May 27, 1883, CA.140.

² Reminiscences by Curzon of his Early Life, CA.75.

morning and breakfasted before 11. At 11.15 to 11.30 I was in my seat in the Reading Room of the British Museum. At 2.30 I took half an hour's interval for lunch and went to a stroll... At 5.30 fifteen minutes were allowed for a cup of tea.

He left the Museum at 8 p.m. but by ten o'clock he was home again and back..."...in my chair from which I did not rise again until 4.30 or 5.30 in the morning."¹

He completed his essay on March 31, and in a deliberately flamboyant gesture took the evening train to Oxford. Just as the clock was striking the midnight hour, Curzon woke up the custodian and handed him the essay. Curzon says, "I apologised for my intrusion on the grounds that I was incommoding him in the interests of the prize winning essay."² The audacity won. Curzon did get the prize. Once again he felt he had disproved the verdict of his examiners who had not thought him good enough for a First.

Actually Curzon had been elected Fellow of All Souls in the autumn of 1883, an honour sufficient to erase any pain left by his failure to get a First. Still he could not let go any opportunity to prove himself. In the meantime, his platform oratory had won him attention in the Tory circles. In March 1884, within days of winning the Arnold Prize, Curzon had been adopted as Conservative candidate for South Derbyshire. Edward Lyttelton had slyly said, "I scent in your letter

¹ Reminiscences by Curzon of his Early Life, CA.75.

² Ibid.

that you are making play not without success, among the celebrities of the world, notably those of your own party - it is a capital thing to be doing, and no better field can be chosen than Hatfield."¹

It was true; Curzon's efforts paid off. The Prime Minister invited him to become one of his assistant private secretaries.²

¹ Lyttelton to Curzon, April 22, 1884, CA.152.

² Curzon, Diary: Jan. to Feb. 1886, CA.224.