

CHAPTER IX
Politics and Travels

While he was at Eton, Curzon had begun taking interest in politics. At Oxford, politics had become Curzon's prime passion. Certainly the political arena of the country was going through exciting times. Early in 1880 the General Elections had swept the Liberals into power with Gladstone at their head. Though Curzon had a special corner in his heart for Gladstone as an Etonian, his conservative instincts were repelled by his liberalism. Curzon promptly moved in the Union a motion regretting the results of the General Elections. The Cambridge Review reported that a thousand people had crammed into the hall to hear the debate. It went on to add, "the debate ended with a House tumultuously impatient to hear Mr. Curzon's reply, which indeed, was well worth hearing. He carried his audience completely with him, and his motion by a considerable majority."¹ A month later, Curzon was elected President of the Union

¹ Cambridge Review, May 5, 1880 as quoted by Earl of Ronaldshay, The Life of Lord Curzon, 3 Vols., (London, 1928), Vol. I, pp.45-6.

by 308 votes to 193.¹ Asquith and Milner had been among its earlier presidents. That same year Curzon took upon the secretaryship of the Canning Club, the high bench for young Oxford Conservatism. Neglecting his studies, Curzon threw himself wholeheartedly into bringing vigour into the club.

From the very beginning Curzon was an ardent Tory. The monarchy and the Established Church were the institutions that had raised England from a collection of petty principalities to a great Power - and they had to be preserved. An ardent follower of Disraeli, he believed that the world was divided into the classes and the masses, each having a predestined duty to perform as it were. Curzon extended this same type of thinking to foreign affairs. As with men, certain nations were born to rule and others to be ruled. The British were naturally the chosen people but not any and every Englishman was automatically in a position to rule. Only those equipped by birth and education could do so. Having arrived at this conclusion, Curzon found it difficult to tolerate anybody holding views other than his own. While at Oxford he was writing,

At a place and amid institutions whose roots are buried in the past, and whose history is intertwined with that of the nation, whose sons have carried its name to the corners of the world and stamped their own on the fabric of imperial grandeur, it would, indeed, be strange were there found any acquiescence in the sordid doctrines of self-effacement, in a policy of national or territorial disintegration,

¹ Cambridge Review, May 5, 1880 as quoted by Earl of Ronaldshay, op.cit., p.46.

in the new-found obligation to shirk admitted duties, or in the application of the system of a parochial vestry to the policy of a colossal empire.¹

In Curzon's growing up years the political scene had been dominated by Gladstone and Disraeli. Curzon admired Gladstone as a man but was horrified by what he thought was the Old Man's cowardly policy towards the colonies which seemed to be set on eroding the Empire. Britain had suffered a humiliating setback in Afghanistan. In South Africa, Transvaal was won back by the Afrikaners at the battle of Majuba Hill. Worse still, it was believed, General Gordon had been allowed to go back to Khartoum to die. While Gladstone appeared to be bent on dismantling the Empire, Disraeli with his flamboyant showmanship was buttressing and embellishing it for a vast mass of people not merely in England but also in India. Disraeli dazzled his contemporaries by buying up the shares of the Suez Canal. Later when he proclaimed Victoria Empress of India in a magnificent durbar, he had succeeded in firing the imagination of the phlegmatic British who had begun to question the need for colonies.

In the elections of 1885 Curzon contested for Parliament from South Derby, the constituency vacated by his father's old friend Sir Henry Wilmot. Unfortunately for him the Reform Bill had added 7,000 new voters, few of whom were prepared to vote for him because he was the son of a local Lord. As

¹ "The Conservatism of Young Oxford", National Review, June 1887, CP. Vol. 22.

Curzon wryly reported to Brodrick, "My electorate is 11,500, over 7,000 new voters. Of these between 4000 and 5000 are colliers and manufacturers (factory workers) and I haven't even a chance with them. They won't even hear me."¹ It was true. He tried to give them his high-flown oratory in the best Oxford Union style. They threw an egg in his face.²

He never understood his electorate, nor did he try to. On the contrary he viewed them with near contempt. He called himself a politician but never understood the motivation of men. Nor did he try to acquaint himself with them. He relied upon his brilliance and industry to put him ahead of others. His aristocratic lineage and his education at Eton and Oxford had sealed off further a nature which took little interest in individuals as human beings. He remained conservative, orthodox, brimming with a sense of public responsibility suited to running the British Empire - but in an earlier era when it was not threatened by competition and technology. Vansittart was to say of him, "He combined great knowledge with his innocence."³

Curzon at his first election campaign in Derby had raised his voice in the best Oxford Union manner "to maintain

¹ Curzon to Brodrick, Nov. 12, 1885 as quoted by Leonard Mosley, Curzon, (London, 1960), p.34.

² Ibid.

³ Lord Vansittart, The Mist Procession (London, 1958), p.232.

the integrity of the Empire". He had boomed:

The melancholy experience of the past five years with its terrible record of national humiliation, of squandered treasure and of wasted blood - offers a stronger condemnation of liberal policy than can any written or spoken words. The events which have occurred in South Africa, in Egypt and in Central Asia, and which have brought sorrow and shame to many a heart must have convinced the people of England that their interests are not safe in the hands of a Liberal Administration.¹

He got a chilly reception. But he did not stop to ask himself why, he only wrote to a friend, "I wept less for myself than for the ignorance and backwardness of the voter".² Curzon felt genuinely for his electorate. He refused to consider that the fault could be his. He refused to accept that the masses were more interested in problems of their daily lives than in the future of the Empire. One of Curzon's failures as a statesman was his inability and, at times, a dogged refusal to look into the future. Not for a moment did Curzon envisage that there might arise, in his own lifetime, a reversal in the conventional relationship of the classes and masses; the former may not be in a position to lead and the latter implicitly obey. For all his intelligence, Curzon viewed the world as a static entity refusing to anticipate change. Had anybody told him in the 1890s that he would live to see a Labour P.M. at 10 Downing Street, he might have dismissed the idea

¹ Papers concerning Curzon's Campaign in S.Derbyshire and Southport, 1885-95, CA.208

² Curzon to Brodrick, Nov. 12, 1885 as quoted by Mosley, op.cit., p.34.

with contempt. In India too, he was to make the same mistake and not see the writing on the wall for the British. He chose to ignore reality because it was convenient for him to do so. This escapism became a habit.

Nevertheless in his second electioneering attempt from Southport in Lancashire in 1886 Curzon was much more direct and spoke with greater regard for the voters. In stronger, forceful but specific rhetoric, he picked the theme of Home Rule for Ireland and its consequences ~~to~~ daily life. Though he began by denouncing the Liberal Prime Minister's Home Rule Bill as being "the latest attack on the integrity of the Empire", he moved on to what his voters would like to know and said that "the consequent drain of capital from Ireland would drive many of her own sons in exile from the soil, and draft them as competitors into the already overcrowded labour market of England. To the British working classes it would therefore mean, on the one hand increased taxation, on the other diminished wages."¹ This time he succeeded in getting into Parliament. He was 27 years old.

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Immediately after having made his debut in Parliament, Curzon embarked on his first tour of the world. Travelling through Canada and United States, Curzon visited India for the first time in December 1887. He returned to England

¹ Curzon's Campaign in S.Derbyshire, CA 208.

in 1888 only to leave that same autumn for a journey to Central Asia which resulted in his publication of Russia in Central Asia. Next year he was off to Persia and in 1892 published his mammoth 1,300-page treatise on Persia and the Persian Question. In 1892 Curzon embarked on his second journey round the world and produced subsequently Problems of the Far East which met with immediate success. In 1894 Curzon was off again to the Pamirs and Afghanistan.

With his characteristic fastidiousness Curzon, prior to embarking on his long journey, made elaborate lists of things required. His baggage included items as varied as insect powder and Eno's fruit salt to theatrical costumes and opera glasses.¹ During the journey he made a list of all the hotels he stayed in. The parsimonious habits acquired at Kedleston and encouraged at Wixenford made him keep a detailed record of distances and expenditure. He was able to work out the exact difference in expenditure incurred during his two journeys round the world. The first journey undertaken in 1887 cost him an average of £1.15s. a day while the second undertaken in 1892, almost five years later, cost only £1.14s.10d a day.² It spoke volumes for Curzon's thrifty and careful habits.

By and large Curzon's hosts found him irresistible. He was not merely highborn, he had the correct aristocratic turn of disposition which had so fascinated his American

¹ Notebooks of First Journey Round the World, 1887-8 CP.104.

² Notebook of Second Journey Round the World, 1892 CP.Vol.105.

contemporary at Oxford. When he turned on his charm, the combination was staggering. Besides, Curzon was not averse to practising his own little deceptions if they afforded him entry into normally forbidden places. He thus managed to enjoy the hospitality of a wide variety of potentates like the King of Korea, the Emperor of Annam, the Mehtar of Chitral, the Shah Nasr-ed-Din of Persia, the King of Cambodia, the Amir of Bokhara and the Amir of Afghanistan.

Nor did Curzon hesitate to throw his weight about. When he embarked on his second journey round the world in 1892, Curzon had already put in some years as Parliamentary Under-Secretary. His friend and companion Cecil Spring-Rice says there was once a shortage of ponies which delayed Curzon's arrival into Seoul. "Curzon got very angry, explained that he was one of the most important people in England, and that it was a matter of most vital importance that he should see the King next week; and he threatened beating and dismissals all around."¹

Similarly he bluffed the Amir of Afghanistan into extending him hospitality for two weeks. The war-like local tribes viewed the advent of foreigners, even those promised safe-conduct by the Amir, with suspicion. Curzon had entered Kabul in state, magnificently attired in a uniform emblazoned with medals and golden epaulettes on his shoulders.² Knowing

¹ Spring-Rice as quoted by Kenneth Rose, Superior Person, (London, 1969), p.248.

² Curzon, Tales of Travel (London, 1923), pp.231-6.

fully of the oriental potentate's weakness for colourful uniform, Curzon had hired from a London theatrical costumer a collection of splendid stars with which to embellish his attire. This he now put to good use. The effect was gratifying even though the means were not in keeping with the highest standards of imperial life.

The Amir's cruelty had been legend; for crimes like theft and rape he had the guilty blown from canons or frozen alive.¹ Nevertheless the two remained life-long friends and on his marriage Curzon sent him a photograph of Mary. The Amir wrote, "I also congratulate you; my honest friend, that you have only married one wife she is competent... If she should at any time thrash you I am certain you will have done something to deserve it."²

Behind the facade of a clever, charming English milord, Curzon was passionately dedicated to the imperial idea. His travels were a part of an exercise to study at first hand the countries he knew he would one day be called to govern. His friends in Parliament took part in debates, made speeches and did the gilded round of Britain's great country houses. Curzon preferred taking arduous, if not hazardous, journeys to far-flung outposts of the Empire. The travels also filled him with national pride. The sight of Hong Kong, an outpost of the Empire stirred him : "No Englishman can land in Hong

¹ Tales of Travel, p.52.

² Amir of Afghanistan to Curzon as quoted in Tales of Travel, p.67.

Kong without feeling a thrill of pride for his nationality. Here is the furthestmost link in that chain of fortresses which from Spain to China girdles half of the globe," he recorded in his first journey round the world in 1887.¹ The sight of Calcutta filled him not only with national but also family pride: "Calcutta is a great European Capital planted in the East. The sight of these successive metropolises of England and the British Empire in foreign parts is one of the proudest experiences of travel."² He also saw Government House which by a twist of fate had been built almost a century earlier on the model of Kedleston. As noted earlier, on the eve of his departure to India as Viceroy, Curzon was telling the townfolk of Derby that it was this resemblance which made him feel that India was beckoning to him.

Curzon's increasing deification of imperialism, which was one of the driving forces behind his wanderlust, owes something to his loss of faith in Christianity. This is not to say that Curzon at any time of his life abandoned the Christian faith; only he viewed it with greater detachment. According to Lord Ronaldshay, Curzon's loss of faith began with his visit to Palestine in 1882. He says:

It is uncertain when exactly full realisation of this intellectual revolt against the miraculous in the Christian doctrine flooded in upon him; but no one who reflects upon the self-examination

¹ Notebooks on First Journey, CP.104.

² Ibid.

to which he subjected himself as a result of his visit to the Holy Land... can doubt in spite of his vehement protestations at the time, that it was then that the corroding acid of scepticism first bit into his mind.¹

On March 1, 1890, Edward Lyttelton wrote to ask, "They tell me your Church-going habits have broken down and that you have put away religion? Is this so? If so why?"² That may be so, for the Empire had become the new God in Curzon's pantheon. Nevertheless, Curzon remained a Christian. Prayer had been compulsory at Kedleston and Eton, and Oxford tolerated no lapse in church attendance. In India as Viceroy he was known to go to Church.³ But it was the Empire which had become his true religion. On the eve of his departure to India as Viceroy in 1898 he was to refer to "the fascination and, if I may say so, the sacredness of India", with the reverence of a worshipper. He approached his work there as a mission. At the Eton dinner given in his honour prior to his departure for India he was to declare:

The East is a University in which the scholar never takes his degree. It is a temple where the suppliant adores but never catches sight of the object of his devotion. It is a journey the goal of which is always in sight but is never attained. There were always leaders, always worshippers, always pilgrims. I rejoice to be allowed to take my place in the happy band of students and of wayfarers who have

¹ Earl of Ronaldshay, The Life of Lord Curzon, 3 vols. (London, 1928), Vol. 1, p.88.

² Lyttelton to Curzon, Mar. 1, 1890, CA. 152.

³ Mary Curzon, Journal, Feb.1, 1899 MCP.

trodden that path for a hundred years.¹

Seven years later upon leaving India, his glorious Viceroyalty in shambles, Curzon's faith in the imperial mission remained undiminished. His farewell speech in Bombay had that same religious fervour of the past.

Russophobia was no less responsible for Curzon's wanderings. The visit to India made him obsessively aware of the danger to her frontiers posed by the Russian empire and it was to study the threat at first hand that he undertook a journey to Central Asia. The result was the publication of the 400-page Russia in Central Asia. The apparent reason was to describe the 900-mile long recently opened Trans-Caspian Railway but the real intent had been to assess the advent of the Russian giant into central Asia. It was the old obsession with Russia's design on India that made Curzon undertake the long, hazardous, uncomfortable journey from Merv and Bokhara to Samarkand and then bump in a horse-driven carriage for 190 miles to Tashkent. Even as a schoolboy he was aware that the Russian question could not be considered in isolation from European affairs. Knowing this, as Viceroy he persisted pursuing a 'forward' frontier policy for India which was to be embarrassing to the Home Government.

The motive was the same for his Persian travels which began in September 1889. For nearly six months he travelled

¹ London, Oct. 28, 1898, Indian Speeches, 4 Vols. (Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.I, p.VII.

alone riding almost 2000 miles on horseback. Once again, the essence of his interest was to gauge Russian expansion on Persia's northern borders. Curzon's own policy did not envisage the use of arms against Persia; only providing an economic and political blockade to Russian sea-route to India. Persia and the Persian Question was published in 1892 after three years of labour. The two volumes amounted to 1300 pages.

On the trip to Afghanistan in 1894, he rode from Kashmir to Gilgit to the Hunza valley which is riddled by glaciers and surrounded by eight peaks over 24,000 feet high. With a single European companion he pressed on to the plateau of the Pamir at an elevation of 14,000 feet. His purpose was to find the source of the River Oxus and to cross the roof of the world. It was also to gain further reassurance for his ego; to prove that no physical feat was impossible for him. There were glaciers, torrents, snowstorms; he had to ride on narrow paths cut in precipitous mountain ridges. His pony died of exhaustion. Another disappeared down a steep ravine to instant death.¹

It was not so much greed for personal eminence or money that drove Curzon to undertake his travels. He would have been content to do them without these rewards. He looked upon his task as fulfilling the white man's burden. The orientals could be shifty, "shocking thieves and rascals" but their upliftment

¹ Curzon, Leaves from a Viceroy's Note-Book (London, 1926), pp. 147-205.

was a god-given mission to the British.¹ He travelled to gain knowledge, not to strike roots in one place and make a fortune as had done many British nabobs earlier. It was not that he was not in need of money. The allowance that Lord Scarsdale gave him, of £1000 a year, was a pittance compared to that of most people of his circle. He wrote articles and books on his travels but the returns were merely sufficient to cover his travelling expenses.

Nor was a desire for sex a motivating force. Journeys in the remote corners of Empire offered ample opportunities for various types of sexual gratifications which were not easily possible at home without arousing comment and disapproval.

Curzon records in a letter to St. John Brodrick how once during a tour his host, a Sultan, called him a brother and sent him a concubine. Curzon says when he retired to his bedroom he found

... an exquisite little creature waiting for me beside my couch sent there by my brother for my pleasure. It took all the strength of my character to send her on her way, and all my charm and tact to persuade her to go without hurting the sweet child's feelings.²

The story throws light into the other side of Curzon's character where he could be considerate to a point of tenderness. Not only did he send the innocent victim away without hurting her feeling but he also took pains to see that the Sultan would

¹ Diaries and Notebooks of Journey to Persia, CA.277-278.

² Curzon to Brodrick, as quoted by Mosley, op.cit. p.38.

not feel he had spurned her. Curzon adds, "I may say that we allowed a time to lapse before her departure, so that she would not be blamed for having failed to please me."¹

Journeys to remote parts offered other delights to the sexually starved. Ronald Hyam says,

Boy brothels were well-established in Naples, as well as in Cairo and Karachi; paederasty was endemic among the Persians, the Sikhs and the Pathans, and was elevated into an integral part of Afghanistan culture in the form of batsha troupes of dancing boys.²

It is likely that in the course of his travels Curzon may have been thrown in proximity of these sophisticated boy homosexuals. But there is no record to show that they in any way revived his own fleeting adolescent urge of Eton days. He was no saint. He preferred his women to be white and preferably English and upper class at that. From Cairo in 1883 he wrote to his confidant Richard Farrer,

The most charming person I met there was the Baroness de Malortie (English herself but married to a foreigner) whose face, an extremely beautiful one, is familiar from photographs in Bond Street windows. I got to know her most intimately (this for your private ears only) and I count her one of my dearest friends.³

During his travels Curzon saw only what he wanted to see, namely that Great Britain was the greatest instrument

¹ Curzon to Brodrick, as quoted by Mosley, *op.cit.* p.38.

² Ronald Hyam, Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914 (London, 1976), pp.136-7.

³ Curzon to Farrer, March 24, 1883, CA. 140.

for good the world had ever seen. He kept copious notes about his travels in which he constantly venerates the idea of the Empire. But what also comes across is his innate sense of contempt and suspicion for people who had the misfortune not to be born British. While there is admiration for the places visited, particularly for their art and architecture, the people are viewed with singular disdain. "The peasants are devoid of truth and all its attributes - candour, frankness and honesty. They are treacherous and deceitful," he wrote in one of his journals.¹

In his jottings on India, Curzon continued airing his contempt for people who had not the fortune of being born British. He dismissed the deposed King of Oudh because he was "a true son of the East" and because "he devoted his enormous wealth to the construction of a bizarre palace with innumerable pavillions and tanks and glass lamps and bad copies of European pictures of a pornographic type". Curzon patronisingly added, "The life of these oriental despots must have been a curious mixture of pomp and frivolity just as their minds were as a rule about equally compounded of childishness and vainglory."² The Bengalis he dismissed as "not an inspiring or manly race."³ It was perhaps this same detestable presumptuousness which made him as Viceroy tell Calcutta University students that the

¹ Diaries and Notebooks of Journey to Persia, CA.277-8.

² Notebooks on First Journey, CP. 104.

³ Ibid.

Indian concept of truth was inferior.

Strangely, the Japanese had met with his approval, probably because their excessive humility appealed to his inflated ego: "They are neither such robbers nor quite such artful deceivers as their brethren in Cairo or Constantinople."¹ Generally in his code, everyone except the British were liars and deceivers.

Curzon's sentiments were not unusual but were a part of the social arrogance of the governing classes of Victorian England. Almost all of Curzon's contemporaries viewed with irrational contempt anybody who was not of the British upper class and their behaviour often bordered on the barbaric. Alfred Lyttelton once had the audacity to throw a half-sucked orange from a moving train on the face of an innocent Italian gentleman who happened to be standing on the platform in Venice merely to have a good laugh at the man's discomfiture.²

Smug and patronising, Curzon freely passed his judgments as he went along. The Greeks, who had bequeathed the democratic idea to the West, were not suited to democracy because "A people just awakening from the night of four hundred years of Turkish oppression is hardly fit to receive the mead of full enlightenment."³ The Egyptians were not spared either: "Civilization is foiled by a country which

¹ Notebooks on First Journey, CP.104.

² Margot Asquith, The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London, 1920), pp.37-8.

³ Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969), p.82.

refuses to be civilized, which cannot be civilized, which will remain uncivilized to the end."¹

Even the lower order of Englishmen is not spared the Curzonian contempt, unless of course they happen to be manning the imperial outposts. Once on a ship to Canada, Curzon wrote of his fellow passengers, "There are few ladies or gentlemen among them. The social status of the remainder is indicated by the aristocratic names they bear - Tulk, Tottle and Thistle."²

The British colonies however so thrilled Curzon that he would temporarily forget his normally reserved contempt for people of his own nationality belonging to a lower class. He once wrote, "The same high tone exists through the various strata of society and employment, and the clerk behind the counter of the English bank will be no less a gentleman both in birth and education than the Governor in his palace or the Minister in his legation."³

But when he saw the Taj for the first time he was entranced. He wrote, "there is a fascination and poetry" about it "which are quite undescribable". He humbly admitted that before seeing it he had thought it "comparable to the Alhambra at Granada - the most beautiful Sar[acenic] building in Europe." But having seen the Taj, he admitted "I am

¹ Kenneth Rose, op.cit. p.88.

² Notebooks on First Journey, CP. 104.

³ Ibid.

aware no such comparisons are possible."¹

Nevertheless he could not help taking satisfaction in the British presence, for the garden at the Taj was looked after by a Britisher. "It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the beauty of the Garden contributes to and enhances the Taj... It is to the credit of England that this garden is mainly the product of English hands, a burly Yorkshireman named Smith having been its custodian for some 20 years" which for Curzon went again "to prove the dominion of English idea."²

¹ Notebook on First Journey, CP.104.

² Ibid.