

## CHAPTER X

### A Very Superior Person

A 'superior person' verse about Curzon had been afloat while he was still at Oxford. Lord Ronaldshay says the original version was a parody of a song written by Curzon himself for Waifs and Strays, an Oxford poetry magazine.<sup>1</sup> That parody had first seen print in the Balliol Masque, a collection of rhymes mainly by J.W. Mackail, later Professor of Ancient Literature to the Royal Academy, and H.C. Beeching, afterwards Dean of Norwich. The version in the Balliol Masque went:

I am a most superior person, Mary,  
My name is George N-th-n-l C-rz-n, Mary,  
I'll make a speech on any political question of the  
day, Mary,  
Provided you'll not say me nay, Mary.

A better-known version, ascribed to Cecil Spring-Rice,

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Ronaldshay The Life of Lord Curzon, (London, 1928),  
Vol.I pp.41-2, for all information on origin of 'superior  
person' verse.

ran as follows :

My name is George Nathaniel Curzon,  
I am the most superior person,  
My cheek is pink, my hair is sleek,  
I dine at Blenheim once a week.

A variant of the above verse is attributed to Curzon himself:

Charms and a man I sing, to wit - a  
most superior person,  
Myself, who bears the fitting name of  
George Nathaniel Curzon,  
From which 'tis clear that even when  
in swaddling bands I lay low,  
There floated round my head a sort of  
apostolic halo.  
At Oxford I made speeches which  
might well provoke a fit  
In persons jealous of the name and fame  
of William Pitt;  
And if the school's examiners deprived  
me of a First  
It was because with envious spleen  
those blinking owls were curst.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency to make jokes at one's own expense was to rebound badly and Curzon was to become a martyr to his own ridicule. The jokes he made about himself were repeated as examples of his pompousness and conceit. Years later he was to regret the 'superior person' verse, bitterly believing that it had been responsible for all the great misunderstandings about

<sup>1</sup> Ronaldshay, op.cit.,pp.161-2.

him. In a frank talk with Lord Riddell towards the end of his political career, he said:

I have always been misunderstood. It has been assumed that I am a pompous person, loving display and ceremony and devoid of any sense of humour. This is due, in great measure, to the well-known skit about George Nathaniel Curzon being 'a most superior person'. The facts are that I have always loved social intercourse and in my younger days was an active member of several little groups renowned for their gaiety and liveliness. The skit was not written with any malicious motive. It was one of twenty or thirty others written by different people about their intimate friends. It arose out of the fact that one night, owing to fog, I was compelled to stop at Blenheim. This led to a lot of good-humoured chaff. I think the skit was written by Beeching. In some way it got out. Journalists have a way of pigeon-holing information and producing it from time to time. When I went to India, the skit followed me there... My reputation is due in some measure to the fact that for many years I have been braced up with a girdle to protect my weak back. This gives me a rigid appearance which furnishes point to the reputation of pomposity.

A year and a half before his death Curzon wrote to his second wife, "Mackenzie King the Canadian Prime Minister came in to say goodbye... He said he had come to the conference with a violent prejudice against me based on the newspaper pictures of the superior person... Oh! How these cursed papers have killed me..."<sup>2</sup>

But at the time he had done nothing to check the tide. A superior person was what he was and what he wanted

<sup>1</sup> Lord Riddell, Lord Riddell's Intimate Diary of the Peace Conference and After (London, 1933), pp.410-11.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon to Grace, Nov. 18, 1923, CA. 287.

to be acknowledged as. He saw no reason to abate his vanity or to conceal it. Reginald Brett had warned even while he was at Oxford: "dear boy ... guard against flattery, if you will of people who desire to please you."<sup>1</sup> Curzon did not think it necessary to follow the homily. On the eve of his marriage in 1895 Brodrick, the most tenacious of his flatterers, was to write:

You know how high I rated the promise of your life as well as our friendship from the moment you set foot in Oxford - But probably your best wishers hardly contemplated a more brilliant career than you have achieved. You have won the ear of the House of Commons and of the country on certain subjects on which your reputation is unique; you are universally marked out for high office; you command great audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually it was Brodrick who was instrumental in the humiliating termination of Curzon's viceroyalty.

In childhood and adolescence however practically every force surrounding Curzon had told him that in physical appearance and intellectual powers he was an excellent human being. How could he not but feel superior? "Out of his large family," wrote Irene, "my father seems to have kept for himself all the gifts of statesmanship, erudition and rhetoric that made him what he was in later life; he left his brothers and sisters at the post at school and University."<sup>3</sup>

By his early twenties Curzon had grown into an

<sup>1</sup> Brett to Curzon, Feb.14, 1878, CA.144.

<sup>2</sup> Brodrick to Curzon, April 7, 1895, CP. Vol.10.

<sup>3</sup> Baroness Ravensdale, Little Innocents: Childhood Reminiscences (London, 1932) p.9.

extraordinarily handsome young man. His face still had a boyish pink and white complexion even though it had lost its schoolboy roundness. His chiselled lips had the correct disdain. His face was now lean and sensitive. He could appear cold and haughty to strangers but he was capable of breaking into infectiously gay laughter in congenial company. Alfred Lyttelton said longingly, "I would very much enjoy the sight of your shapely figure."<sup>1</sup> Another admirer was Margot Tennant who wrote flatteringly to Curzon after a visit: "It was so delicious seeing you again after such ages and you were in such splendid form .... you quite shook up the whole evening. Alfred said you gave us all a new lease of life."<sup>2</sup>

At 23 Curzon found doors of most of England's great houses opening up for him. He began 1886 by staying with the Wenlocks' for a York Ball. In the first week of January he was at Hatfield, home of Prime Minister Salisbury. The party included besides the family, Randolph Churchill and his wife, Henry Chapter, Arthur Balfour, Lord and Lady Cowper, and the new Turkish Ambassador Rustom Pasha.<sup>3</sup>

Curzon and his friends gaily sailed along in this circle which was presided over by Prince Edward. But they had also formed another exclusive coterie of their own which came to be known as The Souls. Ambitious, clever, well-read,

<sup>1</sup> . Lyttelton to Curzon, June 7, 1879, CA.151.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Asquith to Curzon, Dec.23, 1888, CP.Vol.12.

<sup>3</sup> Diary, Jan. to Feb. 1886, CA.224.

witty, elegant and highborn, and more important, being aware they were so, The Souls were among the smartest young sets of London. Lord Charles Beresford gave them their name: "You are always talking about your souls", he exclaimed, "I shall call you the souls."<sup>1</sup> The leader of the group was the urbane Arthur Balfour. The Tennant sisters, daughters of the wealthy Sir Charles Tennant who had a vast baronial mansion in Scotland and a stylish London house at 40 Grosvenor Square, were a focal point of this group. St. John Brodrick, Curzon's Eton friend, and his wife Hilda, were also a part of The Souls, so were Lord and Lady Pembroke of Wilton. The Souls were however unappreciated outside their charmed circle. It was not so much their supposed intellectual pretensions as their precociousness that annoyed their contemporaries. They were intelligent, wealthy, and commanded positions of power. The Prince of Wales included many of them among his personal friends. Nearly all could afford to offer that sybaritic hospitality which was the surest road to the Edwardian heart. But that only aroused further jealousy.

Margot Tennant says about their group, "No history of our time will be complete unless the influence of The Souls upon society is dispassionately and accurately recorded."<sup>2</sup> The question of Home Rule for Ireland was raging fiercely over London but Margot claims that at the homes of The

<sup>1</sup> Charles Beresford, as quoted by Kenneth Rose, Superior Person, (London, 1969), p.176.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Asquith, The Autobiography of Margot Asquith (London, 1920), pp.139-40.

Souls, everyone met, even the bitterest enemies in Parliament.

She says,

... at our house and those of the Souls, everyone met - Randolph Churchill, Gladstone, Asquith, Morley, Chamberlain, Balfour, Rosebery, Salisbury, Hartington, Harcourt and I might add, jockeys, actors, the Prince of Wales and every ambassador in London. We never cut anybody - not even our friends - or thought it amusing or distinguished to make people feel uncomfortable, and our decision not to sacrifice private friendship to public politics was carried in every capital in Europe. It made London the centre of the most interesting society in the world and gave men of different tempers and opposite beliefs an opportunity of discussing them without heat ... The unconscious and accidental grouping of brilliant sincere and loyal friends gave rise to much jealousy and discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Margot makes somewhat tall claims. Certainly it was a powerful salon in London but whether its fame had spread to the continent was doubtful. Curzon on a visit to Germany in 1896 had sought an interview with the German Emperor which he was summarily denied.<sup>2</sup>

Curzon was also a much-sought-after member of the all-male Crabbet Club. Founded by Wilfred Scawen Blunt, traveller, writer, politician, it was the centre of a sort of flippant intellectualism

<sup>1</sup> Asquith, op.cit., pp.139-40.

<sup>2</sup> Rose, op.cit., p.312.

which was the fashion of the early eighties. Once a year several rising young politicians met at Crabbet, the country seat of Blunt in Sussex. The members "meet to play lawn tennis, the piano,... and other instruments of gaiety. To write bouts rimes, sonnets and make sham orations... You will find young Radicals and Tories, amateurs of poetry and manly sports. The President presides at dinner in the costume of the Arab Sheik..."<sup>1</sup>

Curzon was beginning to relish female company. Even before he was out of Oxford he had more than one woman set her heart on him. He had captivated all the Tennant sisters but was not prepared to get captured himself. With his talents and his prospects he appeared a particularly eligible bachelor. His brush with promiscuous male attention at Eton had not soured his feelings for women. He enjoyed flirtations at country-house parties and, as we have seen, confessed in a letter to Richard Farrar on March 24, 1883 while on a tour abroad that he had an affair with a baroness in Cairo. Attracted by and attractive to women, he was however, reluctant to commit himself. In a privately circulated pamphlet of the Crabbet Club he put forth in humorous verse his views on marriage.

For me no mean ignoble stage --  
 give me the whole wide world,  
 The seas of either hemisphere must  
 see my sails unfurled.  
 I have seen the houris of Tom

<sup>1</sup> W.S. Blunt, as quoted by Ronaldshay, The Life of Lord Curzon, 3 Vols.(London, 1929), Vol.I. p.160.

Moore in the streets of Ispahan,  
 There has trembled on my lips  
     the kiss of the maidens of Japan  
 My looks are of that useful type--  
     I say it with elation--  
 They qualify me well for almost any situation--  
     I've sometimes been mistaken for a  
         parson, and at others  
 Have recognized in butlers and in  
     waiters long lost brothers.  
 Perchance with all these gifts  
     You'll say, its strange I am not wedded,  
 And preach a sermon on the woes  
     of life when single-bedded,  
 But if Clarisa I adore, and rashly  
     go and marry her,  
 To Chloe's subsequent embrace  
     it may erect a barrier.<sup>1</sup>

Though he did not settle down in life till the age of 36,  
 Curzon successfully conducted several flirtations simultaneously.  
 Four Tennant sisters adored him and he gave something of himself  
 to each one of them. Charty, married to Lord Ribblesdale, wrote  
 to him, "you love several, but I feel proud to be amongst them."<sup>2</sup>

Margot was probably his most ardent admirer. Four days

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Morley, Curzon, the End of an Epoch (London, 1960) p.45.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Ribblesdale to Curzon, June 6, 1885, CP.Vol.11.

after her marriage to Henry Asquith, she wrote to Curzon:

Dearest George, Your letter was a great delight to me and I shall keep it for my life. If I cd.[could] really think I had brought 'real good' to one who spreads everything dear that the world can give around him why I sd.[should] feel deep down pride but oh! George I'm not good I'm only living and I love you.<sup>1</sup>

In her autobiography published in 1920, the same Margot was to give a rather uncharitable description of her old friend:

He was a conspicuous young man of ability, with a ready pen, a ready tongue, an excellent sense of humour in private life and intrepid social boldness.

He had appearance more than looks, a keen, lively face and an expression of enamelled self-assurance. Like every young man of exceptional promise, he was called a prig. The word was so misapplied in those days that had I been a clever young man, I should have felt no confidence in myself till the world called me a prig.

He had ambition and - what he claimed for himself in a brilliant description - 'middle-class method': and he added to a kindly feeling for other people a warm corner for himself... He was chronically industrious and self-sufficing; and even though oriental in his ideas of colour and ceremony, with a poor sense of proportion and a childish love of fine people, he was never self-indulgent. He neither ate, drank<sup>2</sup> nor smoked too much and left nothing to chance.

Margot's uncharitable assessment may have owed something to the fact of her having been spurned by Curzon. Leonard Mosley claims that Margot married Henry Asquith on Curzon's recommendation. Not wishing to get himself entangled, Curzon had told her that Asquith would give her "devotion, strength,

<sup>1</sup> Asquith to Curzon, May 10, 1894, CP.Vol.12.

<sup>2</sup> Asquith, op.cit., pp.174-5.

influence and a great position."<sup>1</sup> This seems to be true. Margot followed the advice and on acquaintance was reporting to Curzon about her future husband, "Mr. Asquith who improves with success. I think he is more flexible and can be delightful company."<sup>2</sup>

More serious, however, was the attention Curzon had begun paying the beautiful Lady Sibell Grosvenor. Four years older than Curzon, Sibell Grosvenor had married the son and heir of the Duke of Westminster in 1874. Reported to be as sweet natured as she was beautiful, Sibell continued to have a bevy of admirers even after her marriage. While he was at Oxford, Curzon had begun paying court and had managed to attract Sibell. Alfred Lyttelton reported to Curzon in April of 1883, "I went to Eton not long ago and made great friends with Lady Grosvenor, upon whose table I saw a photograph of you."<sup>3</sup> Widowed in 1884 with three children, she chose for her second husband the soldier poet George Wyndham. But the fair Sibell did not seem to have made more than a slight dent in Curzon's heart. She and George Wyndham remained his life-long friends. Part of Sibell's attraction may have been the large fortune she was supposed to bring with her. Curzon's friends had however rushed to console him and tried to provide a balm to his wounded pride. Charty Ribblesdale immediately wrote on hearing that Sibell had chosen Wyndham:

My beloved George, you have been so persistently

<sup>1</sup> Mosley, op.cit., p.27.

<sup>2</sup> Margot Asquith to Curzon, Dec. 28, 1892, CP.Vol.12.

<sup>3</sup> . Lyttelton to Curzon, April 19, 1883, CA. 151.

and continuously in my thoughts ever since I heard the hard, stern, tough news. I have thought of nothing but my dearest George and his numbed heart and cruel blow. I am disappointed in Sibell. She has descended fathomless fathoms in my estimation. Was Alfred right in his ancient verdict that she would succumb to any being who was persistent enough.

Curzon's self-confidence could not but bounce back in the face of such comfort, all doubts he may have entertained about his inadequacy receding into the background.

Curzon married at 36. Late marriage among Victorian empire-builders was not an unusual phenomenon. Viscount Milner who served in Egypt and South Africa did not marry until his retirement as Colonial Secretary in 1921. He was then 67 years of age. Other notable empire-builders like General Charles Gordon and Cecil Rhodes also remained inveterate bachelors. Lord Kitchener of Khartoum died a bachelor though he is supposed to have relished the company of great ladies. But he was never known to have had a physical liaison with a woman; Captain O.A.G. Fitzgerald was his constant companion. His biographer Philip Magnus claimed Kitchener's sexual instincts were sublimated in work.<sup>2</sup> He preferred young and unmarried officers in his staff calling them 'my happy family of boys', took a fancy to Botha's son and the sons of Lord Desborough, cultivated a great interest in the boy scout movement and embellished his rose garden with four pairs of sculptured bronze

<sup>1</sup> . Ribblesdale to Curzon, Dec.19, 1886, CP. Vol. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Magnus, Kitchener, Portrait of an Imperialist, (London,1958), p.10.

boys.<sup>1</sup>

Curzon was determined not to marry until his career was established and then only to someone who would help him by way of money in furthering it. His annual income of £ 1000 from his father was a pittance compared to that of his set. Besides, being dominating by temperament, he needed a spouse who would be tender and gentle. In 1890 there came into his life an enchanting young American heiress, Mary Victoria Leiter. He was 31, she 20. For her it was love at first sight. He was attracted. Mary was achingly lovely. But he was reluctant to be drawn. She had the money he badly needed. Marriage to a girl who made it abundantly clear that she was madly in love with him would make life very satisfying to his insecure nature. But for five years Curzon refused to commit himself. He tantalized Mary by showing her that he cared but he would not broach the one question she most wanted to hear. It was as though he got a vicarious pleasure from playing a cat-and-mouse game with her. Even after getting engaged, Curzon insisted on the engagement remaining a secret. While binding Mary, he continued with his philandering ways.

In the chapter on Eton we have noted Curzon's vague masochistic tendencies. We do know that after his spinal injury he increasingly derived satisfaction from self-denial and expiatory physical suffering. Psychologists maintain that a careful study of the phenomena of sadism and masochism shows there is

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Hyam, Britain's Imperial Century, 1815-1914, (London, 1976) p.137.

no real demarcation between the two and that there are constantly found traces of both in the same individual.<sup>1</sup>

Sadism, as originally intended, denotes achievement of sexual stimulation and gratification through infliction of pain on a sexual partner. The term sadism derived from the name of Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) who for sexual purposes inflicted such pain on his victims as to be declared insane. The pain may be inflicted by such means as whipping, biting and pinching; the act may vary in intensity from light pats to severe mutilation and in extreme cases to even murder. Now whereas the association between love and pain is said to exist amongst the most normal civilized men and women possessing well-developed sexual impulses, it is very easy for the sexual energy to pass over normal limits into the realm of cruelty.

The subject of our study was no sadist in the accepted definition of the term. But there are occasions when he seems to have enjoyed hurting his loved one. The pre-marital five-year association with Mary is characterized by much tantalizing on Curzon's part. Moreover, the manner of his termination of a six-year affair with actress-writer Elinor Glyn in 1916 was marked by a cruel lack of regard for the lady.<sup>2</sup> In his relationship with his second wife Grace, Curzon then well past his 50th year, displays another side of the same manifestation. He seems to derive a vicarious satisfaction

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Dr. Ashit Seth, M.D. (Psychiatry); also Havelock Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 2 Vols. (New York, 1942), Vol. I, Part II, p.104-28.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Sir Brandon Rhys-Williams, M.P. and grandson of Mrs. Elinor Glyn. Also see Anthony Glyn, Elinor Glyn (London, 1968), pp.226-8.

from the humiliations Grace rendered to him. Early in 1922 when Curzon was struck with a bad affliction in the right leg and was ordered by the doctor to go to France for a cure, he begged of Grace to come and be at his bedside. But busy preparing for her Lansdowne Ball, Grace did not come. Alone and racked by pain, he roused himself to write her a pathetic letter:

As I lay awake last night and thought of each stage of your party - going in to dinner, coming out, the arrival of guests and the beginning of the dance, Gracie taking a turn with the 'juicy bucks' and so on hour after hour.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Curzon to Grace, July 19, 1922. C.A. 286.



Newly-weds at Kedleston, 1895