

CHAPTER XI

Mary Victoria

In 1890 Curzon first met "the dearest girl I have met for long. That girl is Mary Victoria."¹ When he first saw her he was 31 and she 20. She had beauty, money and style; he birth, breeding and a brilliant political future. For her it was love at first sight. He was attracted to her for the moment. There was nobody better calculated to bolster George Nathaniel Curzon's confidence in himself than Mary. She said he was, "the most wonderful, the most charming, the most handsome, the most clever of all the men I have met. I almost died when he touched my hand."²

Her father was the Chicago millionaire Levi Leiter, who had vast stakes in real-estate in the Mid-West and was, in spite of his name, a convert from Dutch Calvinism to the Episcopalian Church. The daughter had been baptized a Protestant and named

¹ Leonard Mosley, Curzon, the End of an Epoch (London, 1960), p.47. The Mary Curzon Papers to which I was granted access relate only to the years 1898-1906. I have had to therefore depend upon CP and accounts given by Leonard Mosley, Nigel Nicolson, Kenneth Rose, Lord Ronaldshay and others for information on courtship and marriage to Mary.

² Ibid, p.46.

Mary Victoria after the English Queen. She was also known to be an heiress to quite a large part of her father's fortune.¹

They began writing to each other. He sent her an amulet and she in return a pearl from her necklace, "as emblematic of the tear I shed at leaving London - you, I mean."² But after she had sailed home Curzon's love cooled. He immersed himself once more in his work on his marathon 1,300-page book on Persia.

In London Mary found she was feted. But the one man she cared most for could be very distant and Mary was puzzled and hurt. Back home she tried to tantalize him with accounts of her suitors. But he refused to be baited: "I infer from what you say that you or the Nanlet [Nancy] are contemplating matrimony: your obscurity as to which it is, suggests the possibility of both. That would be disastrous."³ Nancy was Mary's younger sister. Mary would be inhuman if she was not peeved by such casual dismissal of news of her marriage. Was that all she meant to him after two years? Once he did not answer her letter for months and when he did it was only to say woundingly, "Now at last I have sat me down to work off a lot of arrears!"⁴

More torment was to come. In 1892, on another trip around the world, Curzon was in Washington DC. He passed the Leiter House in Dupont circle and yet did not bother to call on Mary.

¹ Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969) pp.278-9.

² Earl of Ronaldshay, The Life of Lord Curzon 3 Vols. (London, 1928), Vol.I, p.216.

³ Nigel Nicolson, Mary Curzon (London, 1977), p.53.

⁴ Ibid.

Instead he went to Virginia and spent a couple of days at the house of a Mrs. Rives, whose daughter Amelia had captivated him. Curzon wrote:

A happy inspiration induced me to guess that Amelia was at her home, a lucky accident confirmed the conjecture by throwing me in contact with her husband at his hotel [New York]; and the 3.30 p.m. train saw me speeding away via Washington to Virginia. Aug.21-23, I spent this day and a half at Castle Hill extremely happy in the liberty of its country life existence with dear white-haired gracious Mrs. Rives...and upon me Amy shone with the undivided insistence of her starlike eyes. Oh Lord the nights on the still lawn under the soft sky with my sweetheart!

But Mary refused to be vanquished. She had followed his travels with care and must have known of his visit to Washington, if not to Amelia Rives. Mary confessed to a friend, "I will have him because I believe he needs me."² She felt no shame in pursuing him and in doing so unconsciously helped to swell Curzon's ego. He could be cruel to her and yet she remained faithful.

Mary was in Paris with her mother in the spring of 1893 when she received news that Curzon was also there returning home from his second trip round the world. She had not seen him for 18 months. He had been to Washington DC and not bothered to contact her. Nevertheless she was too overjoyed to bear a grudge. It was she who took the initiative and arranged a dinner meeting at Hotel Vendome. Curzon came and at last proposed marriage.³ Curzon has left his account of the momentous

¹ Notebook of Second Journey Round the World, CP.Vol.105.

² Mosley, op.cit., p.48.

³ Nicolson, op.cit., p.56.

event:

I had entered the hotel without the slightest anticipation that this would be the issue. She told me her story. How she had waited for nearly three years since the time when we first met, rejecting countless suitors and always waiting for me. I told her that while I felt from the beginning that we were destined for each other I had not dared to speak and had even run the risk of losing her because there was certain work in my scheme of Asiatic travel which I had resolved to do, and which I could not ask any married woman to allow her husband to carry out. Some of it, notably the journey to the Pamirs and Afghanistan still remained undone; and even now when we became secretly engaged, it was on the understanding that I should be at liberty to complete my task before we took the final step.

Curzon's opening statement implies that he had no intention of proposing marriage when he came to dinner but had been flattered by the account of her adoration into doing so. The question must arise as to why did Curzon eventually settle on Mary - an American with a name like Leiter - as a marriage partner? She was beautiful and sophisticated, but the stigma of Chicago could not be brushed aside. She was rich and Curzon surely needed money, but yet the marriage was not merely for money, for this 'superior' young aristocrat could perhaps have found another equally wealthy British debutant. The Tennant sisters were showing him in many ways where their affections lay. But it was Mary, Curzon finally chose. Perhaps it was because of Mary's uncritical adoration. She played to his vanity, assuring him that in their relationship she would willingly accept him as her master.

The morning after the proposal he had sent a note

¹ Nicolson, op.cit., pp.56-7.

around to Mary. It was March 4, 1893. He said, "you were sweet last night, Mary, and I do not think I deserved such consideration. While I ask you and while you consent to wait, you must trust me, Mary, wholly, even as I trust you, and all will be right in the end. I will not breath a word to a human soul".¹ Curzon seemed to want to have his cake and eat it too. Once again Mary obediently complied with Curzon's suggestion that the engagement should remain secret. She did not question the importance of his journey to Afghanistan. He knew by now the whole East except that buffer state. She realised how vital it was to the career he had fashioned for himself. She realised the heavy risk entailed and told him that if he died on his travels she would never marry but retire to a convent.²

Soon after all these solemn promises, Mary got reports from London to say that Curzon continued to move through society as if he were a free and independent bachelor. So full of abandon was he that a few weeks after his secret engagement, his old Master Dr. Jowett was asking when Curzon intended to exchange All Souls for one body!³ Mary took her beloved's errant behaviour also with equanimity. There seems little reason however for such callous behaviour on Curzon's part. He wanted perhaps to tantalize Mary, make her suffer and find if she came through the ordeal satisfactorily. Perhaps his overweening vanity needed to be pampered by the knowledge that Mary

¹ Curzon to Mary, March 4, 1893 as quoted by Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969), p.280.

² Mary to Curzon, as quoted by Nicolson, op.cit., p.57.

³ Curzon to Spring-Rice, May 17, 1893, CA. 263.

would be prepared to wait no matter what he did. He wrote smug letters, "I am spared all the anxiety of courtship, and I have merely, when the hour strikes, to enter into possession of my own."¹ Such observations were hardly flattering to his betrothed but she did not object.

Back in England at last in January 1895, Curzon journeyed to Kedleston to inform his father of the engagement. In spite of an almost two-year secret engagement, Curzon had not spoken to his father about Mary. He was then 36 years old and an Under-Secretary in the Government. Leonard Mosley has explained Curzon's hesitation to broach the subject to his father as indicative of a defective parent-child relationship.² I however feel that because of Curzon's strong attachment to his father, it was very important for him that his father approve of the match. Curzon had perhaps feared that his father might object to the Leiters being of Jewish origin because of their name. Curzon happily wrote to Mary. "...a sight of your lovely face on the smaller Miss Hughes photo [profile, white dress, hand behind back] completely convinced him".³ The Leiters set their seal of approval upon the nuptials by making a marriage settlement of £140,000 upon Mary and which upon her death would pass down to her children.⁴ Levi Leiter also made a yearly stipend of £ 6000 upon his son-in-law to enable them

¹ Curzon to Mary, Sept. 3, 1893 as quoted by Rose, op.cit., pp.280-1

² Mosley, op.cit., pp.56-7.

³ Ibid, p.57.

⁴ Nicolson, op.cit., p.72.

to move in the circles which would help with Curzon's political advancement. Curzon could provide only £ 1,000 a year, a paltry sum, I fear, but my family is poor."¹

The date was fixed for April 22, 1895, the place St. John's Church, Washington DC. But now when everything was sailing smoothly, Mary began to feel qualms of uneasiness and she, for the first time, put Curzon to anxiety in their courtship. Cecil Spring-Rice, Curzon's old friend, who was at Embassy in Washington and had been a suitor for Mary, had told her of Curzon's philandering habits. Spring-Rice told her that Englishmen do not set much store by marriage: "A man chiefly has a home to stay out of it".² Curzon, who was in bed at Kedleston with his back trouble, was much alarmed. He wrote:

You must not let Springy [Spring-Rice] talk Nonsense to you, darling. So far from my people or my friends objecting to my marrying, they are one and all delighted, and so far from their daring to object to you (which is a childish idea) they are all simply enchanted...I am so glad you spoke out to me so frankly about him. He has said disloyal things about both you and me. He writes me the most charming letters and I know he has a great regard for me. But he cannot forget that he loves you and he cannot get the better of his jealousy. I think we should be lenient, darling, I do not understand jealousy myself....Then, about your beauty (oh, that man is black with jealousy, that is it), it is going to be not merely my heart's treasure, my arms' possession, but my glory and my crown.

It is interesting to note that what Curzon says about jealousy is true. He did not understand jealousy himself. Perhaps he was too egotistical to be jealous.

¹ Nicolson, op.cit., p.72.

² Ibid.

³ Mosley, op.cit., p.59.

Mary's doubts persisted and Curzon for the first time in his dealings with Mary found that he was not really spared all the anxiety of what is called a courtship. He had to bring his persuasive charm to play. In bed with a bad back he collected himself to write:

Sweet child you ask whether I am prepared for a somewhat demonstrative affection! Darling, I should be miserable if I did not get it. Perhaps also I shall show a creditable capacity for returning it; when you are lying in my arms, you will not think me too phlegmatic. I will cover not your lips but all your limbs with kisses.¹

Curzon sailed to Washington DC on April 18. With him had travelled his brother, Frank, carrying the Kedleston diamonds for Mary to wear.² The Curzons were married on April 22, 1895 in Washington D.C. after five years of courtship.

When they returned to England Lord Scarsdale rose to the occasion by receiving his new daughter-in-law with a ceremonial befitting a future mistress of Kedleston. The lavishness of the reception was in itself an indication of how deeply the father cared for his eldest son. Lord Scarsdale had received the newly weds at the station in two great barouches and personally escorted them two and a half miles to Kedleston to the accompaniment of church bells chiming welcome. He set aside his frugal habits and gave a fabulous feast. Five hundred and fifty tenants were invited and they gave the bridal couple a huge silver tray. A band stood in attendance while Curzon went around

¹ Mosley, op.cit., p.58.

² Nicolson, op.cit., p.75.

shaking hands and joking with the guests.¹

The marriage that had begun as a seemingly calculated match turned out to be an extremely happy one, for Mary stepped into her role as the subservient partner. As she once wrote proudly to her father, "George will do with his career what he chooses and nothing on earth can alter his iron will. I have long since realised George's iron will and never crossed it."² Curzon's view towards marriage was very Victorian. A wife was to be fussed over and amused but not allowed to become an equal. But though Mary could not succeed in becoming his pre-occupation, she came quite close to it. In India, he discovered how much she meant to him. But Curzon was already so fixated in his views that even Mary could not persuade him to change from a course of action taken, however harmful the consequences.

Back in London, with the help of his father-in-law's bounty, Curzon was able to take a lease of 4 Carlton Gardens built in the Regency style by architect Nash.³ It was one of London's most aristocratic town houses and situated near Buckingham Palace. Later, the same year, the Curzons also took a place in the country, The Priory in Reigate, Surrey, a place for weekends and country-house parties.⁴ At long last now Curzon was in possession of two beautiful homes, considerable wealth and a lovely devoted wife. He was in a position to live and entertain

¹ Nicolson, op.cit., pp.80-2.

² Rose, op.cit., p.289.

³ Nicolson, op.cit., p.89.

⁴ Ibid.

in a style he had always longed to and which he considered necessary for his political advancement.

In his characteristic manner, Curzon took over the arrangement and management of the houses. The training under his father and under Dunbar at Wixenford had made him fussy and meticulous, almost like a woman. He reported to Mary,

The house [Carlton Gardens] looked charming today. The drawing-room pretty, the staircase (now quite finished), a little dark but decidedly handsome, the other rooms nice. I am going to have the colour of the outer hall slightly altered. All carpets and curtains to be in by Christmas.¹

Getting good servants to come and work for him, however, was to become one of the more taxing problems of his life. Mary did not seem to mind her husband's interference in what was then strictly a woman's domain. Her unabashed adoration continued unabated. Advising her younger sister who was contemplating getting engaged, Mary wrote:

I always think the sweet test of affection is if you feel that when he comes into a room the band is playing the star spangled banner and that the room is glowing with pink lights and rills are running up and down your back² with pure joy...which I feel when George appears.

She was indeed a great ego-booster for Curzon.

¹ Nicolson, *op.cit.*, p.90.

² *Ibid.* p.93.