

CHAPTER XII

"We might as well be monarchs"

The formal announcement of Curzon's Viceroyalty came on August 11, 1898. When Curzon had first come to hear of it in July he had promptly sat down to write to his father, as though to share with him the good news: "Lord Salisbury has offered me with the consent of the Queen the Viceroyalty of India and I have accepted it. I have told no one else but Mary."¹

The Viceroy-designate had held no high office. At the time of the announcement he was Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. In fact the Marquess of Lorne, a son-in-law of Victoria's daughter, Princess Louise, was tipped for the post. Curzon had written to his chief, Lord Salisbury, to press his claim for the post. He said:

I have long, however, thought that were the post in India to fall vacant while I was still a young man - I shall be 40 by the end of Elgin's term - were it to be offered to me, I should like to accept it...I have for at least 10 years made a careful and earnest study of Indian problems, have been to the country four times, and am acquainted with

¹ Curzon to Lord Scarsdale, July 22, 1898, CA.266/1-3.

and have the confidence of most of its leading men... I have been fortunate too in making the acquaintance of the rulers of the neighbouring states, Persia, Afghanistan, Siam, friendly relations with whom are a help to any Viceroy.

Both Curzon and Mary were delighted and triumphant when Salisbury told him that the position was his. Mary in a letter to her parents gushed like a callow school girl:

It takes my breath away. For it is the greatest position in the English world next to the Queen and the Prime Minister, and it will be a satisfaction, I know to you and Mamma that your daughter Maria [sic] will fill the greatest place ever held by an American abroad.²

In fact they were both so overwhelmed by their new glory as to never quite recover their equilibrium. The Curzons waited on the Queen at Windsor where the eighty-year-old monarch put on her large pair of glasses to inspect Mary. Obviously satisfied with what she saw, the Queen told Curzon, "I must congratulate you for your wife is both beautiful and wise."³

A title was necessary for the Viceroy-designate for he was the sole representative of the Queen in India. Curzon was not very happy at the thought for it meant giving up his position in the House of Commons on his return from India. Several times as a Parliamentarian he had tried to

¹ Curzon to Salisbury, April 18, 1879, as quoted by Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969), p.322.

² Quoted by Nigel Nicolson, Mary Curzon (London, 1977), p.103.

³ Mary: to her parents, letter undated, [1898], MCP.

find a solution to the custom that required a member to give up his seat on succeeding to a peerage.¹ Finally he chose an Irish title with the family name of Curzon since it did not qualify him for the House of Lords. When the news was made public, Lord Scarsdale said, with unconcealed pride, "I begin to realise what a splendid position you have deservedly won. Congrats pour in from every quarter, and the country generally are as proud of you as I, your father, am, and more I cannot say."² Curzon was overwhelmed.

The young Curzons suddenly found themselves catapulted into the glare of limelight. From the time of the public announcement until their departure Mary found, "We begin to be treated like grandees." If they travelled by train, "station masters always meet us, carriage reserved, low bows and crowds staring."³ It was an exhilarating experience. Hitherto as an Under-Secretary Curzon enjoyed little position or publicity. Now suddenly a dazzling role had come within his grasp. As Mary exulted, "From nobodies we have jumped into grandeur."⁴ Curzon was feted at a Court Ball at Buckingham Palace and at Oxford and Southport. In October over 200 Etonians met at Cafe Monico in Piccadilly Circus to bid Curzon farewell. Curzon harked back to Sir James Fitzjames Stephen who had fired his imagination

¹ Peers' Disabilities, (London, 1894) CP.Vol.19.

² Lord Scarsdale to Curzon, Nov.25, 1898, CA.270.

³ Mary to her parents, undated, MCP.

⁴ Ibid.

with the fascination and the sacredness of India.

Lord Elgin had told him of the vast establishment that awaited the new Viceroy in India. "It is a very big concern," he had said, "for a census just taken in Simla showed an establishment to number 700 in all."¹

In December the Curzons set sail on S.S. Arabia for India. The golden clouds of glory were gathering over their heads. On Xmas day when they halted at Aden, Mary could not help exclaiming, "the beginning of our Kingdom."² As Mary told her father:

On Friday we land at Bombay...I will send you papers of all our doings...George and I drive in a state carriage with four horses, postilions outriders and escort and behind two sayses running holding parasols over our heads...all this time salutes of thirty-one guns will be firing and all the warships in the harbour cannonading - so it will be thrilling...Harmsworth of the Daily Mail has two correspondents in this ship...so we have the searchlight of publicity full upon us.³

It was all true. In Bombay the Curzons got their first taste of the pageantry that was to accompany them throughout their stay in India. The entire landing was carpeted in crimson velvet and the seven-mile route from the jetty to Government House was lined by crowds. As they rode in their open carriage, a regal umbrella of gold towered over their heads.

That evening the Governor, Lord Sandhurst, gave a dinner for 112 people to welcome the new Viceroy. There was more

¹ Lord Elgin to Curzon, Aug.31,1898, CA.182. 9th Earl of Elgin, (1849-1917), Viceroy of India (1894-9).

² Mary to her father, Dec.26, 1898, MCP.

³ ibid.

to come. As Mary remembers:

The next day we did nothing and at 5.30 went in state to the station - escort-state carriages - etc. and the crowds were enormous. The station is the finest one I ever saw in my life - troops were drawn up and red carpets everywhere and we marched to the special train to "God save the Queen" & troops presenting arms and lowering colours to George...The general traffic manager was on the train to look after the Royal family! At Calcutta we were met by Lt.Gov.of Bengal & Lord Elgin's staff and drove away in the royal carriage with body guard escort, I never saw such crowds as there were in the streets if you think of the crowd at the crowd at the Capitol on inauguration day & double and treble it you can think what it was all the way to Gov.House; we bowed and bowed & all cheered and it was a marvellous sight. At Govt. House all the swells in India were lined up the Grand staircase - & we marched up the broad red carpet at the top was the Viceroy - he introduced George to officials and Col. Durand and Lord Elgin's Mil. Sec. [Military Secretary] introduced me - there were the four great Maharajahs Patiala - Scindia - Kashmir - in magnificent jewels. No.1 had a breast plate of enormous diamonds & necklace after necklace. No.2 had emeralds to make your eyes water and No.3 had twelve rows of pearls as fine as Consuelo's biggest! My fine feathers paled before this magnificence.¹

It was indeed a journey to heaven. The Curzons had made regal entry with the cannons from Fort William setting off the welcoming boom of a 31-gun salute. The dramatic ascent from a junior Minister to Victoria's sole representative of the entire Indian subcontinent was to have far-reaching consequences for Curzon. It was to further shake an already shaken mental equilibrium.

At the turn of the century, a Viceroy's position was awesome. The Viceroy was made to feel he was the monarch

¹ Mary to her parents, Jan.4, 1899, MCP.

of all he surveyed. Calcutta was 7000 miles from London; the journey took seventeen days. Removed from the cramping quarters at Westminster and with the clouds of glory floating about his head, Curzon began to feel that he was now in a position to enact the role of a benevolent despot.

The Curzons soon settled down to their ceremonious life at Government House, built on the model of Kedleston. It was in the white and gold Marble Hall with tinkling chandeliers and its marching file of 20 fluted columns that Curzon received his official visitors, in a ceremonial stiffened by the strictest of protocol. Like a potentate from the Arabian Nights, he received them from his silver throne, with gold-heads for arm-rests shielded by a canopy of scarlet velvet. They were enchanted by the imperial pomp and circumstance. Mary bubbled, "all very wonderful." She said, "George is treated exactly like a reigning sovereign. Everyone bows & curtesys - ADCs precede him - the only difference is that he has a great deal more power than most kings, and ruling India is no sinecure - and a Viceroy has it in his power to be a very great force..."¹

At the parties they were called upon to host, it was the guests who had to assemble first. The ADCs then came to escort the Viceregal pair downstairs announcing their arrival to the cry of "Their Excellencies"! The standing guests would bow. Even at the more informal dinners, male guests were expected to stand until the Viceroy sat down and "to jump up every time he does." Mary was thrilled by the protocol

¹ Mary to her parents, Jan.17[1899], MCP.

and did not mind one bit having to conform to the etiquette of letting her husband precede her. She happily wrote, "It is difficult to remember always to allow him to go through a door first..."¹

A number of attendants waited upon them. The starry-eyed Mary reported that if somebody wanted a bath, "one man heats your bath water, another brings it and a third pours it into the tub - a fourth empties it," and at mealtime, "there is a waiter for every person at table" and they all "glide about in red livery and bare feet and a dinner of a hundred or one of eight are wonderfully smooth and perfect."²

Being treated like a ruling sovereign soon made Curzon believe he was one. There is the instance when in England the Queen cut down on the magnificence of her ADC's uniforms. This automatically entailed a corresponding reduction in the grandeur of the Viceroy's entourage. Curzon wrote off a letter of protest to the Queen's Private Secretary, Sir Arthur Brigg. He was, however, overruled: "The Queen fully realises what you said...but H.M. does not feel sure if it would be advisable to have different uniforms for her ADC to those of the Viceroy."³

In spring and autumn the Viceroy toured the Native States. Everywhere he went, he got an overwhelming response. "For all the fuss & ceremony we might as well be monarchs," Mary had happily reported to her parents.⁴ In her Journal

¹ Mary to her parents, Jan.12, 1899, MCP.

² Mary to her parents, Feb.9, 1900, MCP.

³ Brigg to Curzon, Jan.13, 1899, CA.85.

⁴ Mary to her parents, Feb.9, 1900, MCP.

she wrote:

...preparations for the Viceroy's camp entail such hundreds of coolies and mules, and a general turning upside down of the whole country. Miles of path are cut on any hill the great Sahib may walk on, and underbush cut down and a grand clean-up made of the country. This is done in each small state we go through, and as crowds follow us everywhere every bird and beast flies before this invading army.¹

Trains were rescheduled and vast spaces cleared to put up tent cities. Tigers were rounded up for a Viceregal shoot. Palaces were overhauled, quantities of expensive furniture imported and once even a silver bath fitted to pamper a visiting Viceroy. Tours of the Native States began by scarletbound programmes being distributed by the Military Secretary beforehand, outlining every detail of journey. At the station, a crimson carpet would be laid from the precise spot where the Viceregal carriage door would open. It stretched all the way to the carriages waiting to escort them into the city. The arrival of the train would be a signal for the gun to thunder a royal salute.²

In Hyderabad, they had been met by the Nizam and escorted through dense crowds waving welcome. They drove in state in an immense canary-yellow chariot, with a golden-damask canopy supported on silver poles, and drawn by four white horses, covered with gold and silver harness and trappings, ridden by yellow postillions and led by innumerable runners and grooms.³

¹ Mary Curzon, Journal, MCP.

² For greater details see Yvonne Fitzroy, Courts and Camps in India (London, 1926).

³ Mary Curzon, Journal, MCP.

In Trivandrum they cruised over the backwaters with the Maharaja having provided them with boats each shaped like "a Lord Mayor's barge" having 20 rowers. So great however was their following that 40 boats were required and it made a mile-long procession.¹ Durbars were held everywhere for the visiting Viceroy. Resplendent in his robes of office, Curzon would from his throne receive the tributes of native chiefs.

The tours must have taken their physical toll. Mary was driven to exclaim, after one particularly exhausting visit:

I am so glad that our tour is coming to an end. The strain of it is very great and our days are filled with politics, - - philanthropy and charity, and our evenings with society... oh! the fatigue of night after night of dinner parties, frightful music & worse food, and company with whom you have nothing in common. It is all I can do to fill my part. We have been surrounded by plague and cholera, but every precaution is taken for us. George goes through agony with his back, but only I know it.²

But they were also exhilarated by the heady adulation they encountered everywhere. They were the most honoured guests in each capital they visited. In fact so carried away was Mary by her husband's omnipotence that she told her sisters who had come on a visit not to call him George except when they were alone.³ She also instructed them to give him precedence, as she did herself, when they entered a reception room.⁴ The princes indulged and humoured them and they

¹ Mary to her parents, Nov.24, 1900, MCP.

² Ibid., Dec.10, 1900.

³ Nigel Nicolson, Mary Curzon (London, 1977), p.129.

⁴ Ibid.

wallowed in the adulation. It was not unnatural. The Viceroy to them was as Victoria was to her nobility; his word was law. The Curzons were made to feel as though they were the most regal of a royal company. The dizzy heights of the gold and silver howdahs which carried them was a far cry from horseback rides at Kedleston Hall. The son of a Derbyshire country squire and the daughter of an American real-estate dealer had indeed come a long way. There was considerable truth in Lord Beaverbrook's observation: "...for all the rest of his life Curzon was influenced by his sudden journey to heaven at the age of thirty-nine and then by his return to earth seven years later, for the remainder of his mortal existence."¹

In India, Curzon enjoyed near plenipotentiary powers. In the attention and adulation he found a soothing balm for his ego. "The Marquess Curzon was born grandiloquent", wrote Viscount D'Abernon, adding that Curzon "gave orders to a footman in a language which would have not disgraced Cicero addressing the Roman Senate."²

Vansittart, Curzon's assistant at the Foreign Office, was to say of his chief, "He designed himself as the most anachronistic of 'grand seigneurs' outlined against the sunset of the breed."³ Curzon's somewhat archaic love for ceremonial

¹ Leonard Mosley, Curzon (London, 1960), p.77.

² Viscount D'Abernon, An Ambassador of Peace, (London, 1929) p.48-51.

³ Lord Vansittart, The Mist Procession, (London, 1958), p.262.

found its fulfilment in the colour and pageantry of India. As an overlord of the princes, he had taken it upon himself to lecture to them about their duties. It was a sort of a sermon they had scarcely ever heard before. At a speech in Gwalior he said, "The Native Chief has become, by our Policy, an integral factor in the Imperial Organisation of India. He is concerned not less than the Viceroy or the Lieutenant-Governor in the administration of the country. I claim him as my colleague and partner."¹ Having however called them his equals, the Viceroy proceeded to lecture to them as though they were errant boys :

He cannot remain vis-a-vis of the Empire a loyal subject of her Majesty the Queen Empress, and vis-a-vis of his own people a frivolous and irresponsible despot. He must justify and not abuse the authority committed to him; he must be the servant as well as the master of his people. He must learn that his revenues are not secured to him for his own selfish gratification, but for the good of his subjects, that his internal administration is only exempt from correction in proportion as it is honest; and that his 'gaddi' is not intended to be a divan of indulgence, but the stern seat of duty. His figure should not merely be known on the polo-ground, or on the race-horse, or in the European hotel.²

Curzon was correct in believing that considerable harm was being done to India by those Native Princes who went to Europe only in pursuit of wine and women. The chief had a duty to his people and Curzon tried his best to see that he fulfilled it. He said in a letter to the King:

¹ Gwalior, Nov. 29, 1899, Indian Speeches, 4 Vols. (Calcutta 1900-6), Vol.I, p.168.

² Ibid.

Patiala, who was in many respects a good fellow and a fine sportsman, has just died of delirium tremens, before the age of 30, the prey of English jockeys and pimps. The Rana of Dholpur, a magnificent rider, is slowly dying from the same cause. The Maharaja of Ulwar has had to be suspended for persistent sodomy. The Raja of Jind, who was under a British Officer as guardian, has just married the illegitimate daughter of the illegitimate wife of a German Aeronaut. The late Nawab of Bahawalpur fell under European influence, married a European woman of low character, and died at the age of 30, a confirmed sot.¹

There was considerable truth in what Curzon had to say and much of his criticism was justified, but he spoilt it by his hectoring tones. Even Victoria had been driven to protest:

The Queen-Empress quite agrees with the Viceroy that too frequent visits of the Native Princes to England is not always desirable, but she thinks that this should not be done in too peremptory a manner. It would hardly do to refuse them to come for a short time.²

The Viceroy was however in no mood to listen to strictures from the Queen. He was in the process of issuing some himself and some of them even to the Queen! He objected to her giving a reception at Buckingham Palace for the Maharaja of Kapurthala whom Curzon called a third-class chief. The Viceroy created such furore with the Secretary of State's office that the A.D.C. at the

¹ Curzon to King-Emperor, June 19, 1901, CP. Vol.136.

² Queen-Empress to Curzon, Sept. 13, 1900, CP. Vol.135.

India Office, was given a sharp rap on the knuckles.¹

Curzon had persuaded himself to believe that he knew better than his monarch how to treat a Native chief and to keep him in his place. He could not resist telling Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, about his prowess. He boasted how native chiefs would not dare to take liberties with him, citing the example of one who, while considering himself to be a favoured guest at Windsor, "regards it as a high honour to be asked to dinner at Government House."²

When Hamilton chided him for being too much of a school-master with the Princes the Viceroy retorted:

For what are they in the most part, but a set of unruly and ignorant and rather undisciplined schoolboys. What they want more than anything else is to be schooled by a firm, but not unkindly, hand; to be passed through just the sort of discipline that a boy goes through at a public school in England... to be weaned, even by a grandmotherly interference,³ from the frivolity and dissipations of their normal life.

But helping the princes on the straight and honest path was also good imperial policy and Curzon was not unaware of it. He defended his stern reproofs saying :

We do so, not so much in the interests of the Princes themselves, ... as in the interests of the people, who are supposed to like the old traditions and dynasties and rule. But supposing we allow the confidence of the people in their rulers to be snapped; supposing we allow Native India to be governed by a horde of

¹ Godley to Curzon, Nov.22, 1900, CP. Vol.159.
Sir Arthur Godley (1847-1932), Permanent Under-Secretary of State for India, 1883-1909.

² Curzon to Hamilton, June 19, 1903, CP. Vol.162.
Lord George Hamilton(1845-1927), Secretary of State for India, 1895-1903.

³ Curzon to Hamilton, Aug.29, 1900, CP. Vol.159.

frivolous absentees who have lost the respect and affection of their own subjects, what justification shall we have in such a case for maintaining the Native States at all?¹

The Coronation Durbar of January 1903 brought into critical focus Curzon's passion for display of pomp and splendour in which he played the central symbolic figure. Within a few hours of the death of Victoria, Curzon had written to the new King suggesting that he come out and crown himself Emperor of India. Curzon declared:

To the East there is nothing strange, but something familiar and even sacred, in the practice that brings sovereigns into communion with their people in a ceremony of public solemnity and rejoicing after they have succeeded to their high estate.²

The King could not come and for a while it was mooted that the Prince of Wales come instead. Curzon was dismayed. He was not prepared to play second fiddle. He argued:

The Viceroy represents the Sovereign. He is treated everywhere in India exactly as if he were the Sovereign; and this not by Europeans only but by all the Nobles, chiefs, and Princes of India. The appearance of no one on the scene, even though it be the heir to the throne, can deprive him of his position as representative of the Sovereign. He cannot, a Governor elsewhere, step down and take second place.³

¹ Curzon to Hamilton, *op.cit.*

² Simla, Sept.5, 1902, *Indian Speeches*, 4 Vols. (Calcutta, 1900-6) Vol.III, pp.18-9.

³ Curzon to Hamilton, Jan.9, 1902, CP.Vol.161.

Eventually, it was the King's brother, Duke of Connaught, who came. In keeping with protocol he was next to the Viceroy on Indian soil and he accepted his lesser position with grace.

The Coronation Durbar was a chapter in the ritual of state. Curzon with his characteristic thoroughness had supervised its organization to the last detail.¹ Curzon and Mary had made their State entry into Delhi riding atop the largest elephant in India. As they approached, the band burst into "God save the King" and the multitudes were up on their feet, the troops presenting arms, the European men with their topees raised and the ryots salaaming. In the centre of the scene, sat Curzon: serene, dignified, with right hand uplifted, accepting the salute.² Here at last, atop the glittering howdah with the golden umbrella, a symbol of royalty, Curzon felt he was the true British Maharaja. It was the supreme moment of his career. No honour could be comparable to what he experienced that day.

The Durbar of 1903 formed the climacteric of Curzon's career as an eastern potentate. A shadow no doubt had been cast over the Durbar by the Home Government's refusal to accede to Curzon's request to announce a remission of the salt tax, which he felt would be in keeping with the accession of a Sovereign in eastern minds. But he could not have been oblivious to its appeal to himself. To the masses of India, the king they accepted was the king they saw delivering the

¹ Curzon to Hamilton, Oct.26, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

² For greater details see Mortimer Menpes, The Durbar (London, 1903).

largess. Hamilton had argued that such an announcement would set off an "awkward precedent":

A reduction of taxation and the accession of a new Sovereign, though in accord with Eastern ideas, would establish a most awkward precedent; a similar benefit would be expected at the commencement of every reign, and unpopularity be caused if the expectation was not fulfilled.

But Curzon felt he knew better what was right and had said so, "These, as I have before told you, are my views, and no abstract reasoning in the world could convince me that they are not the soundest and most statesmanlike advice that is open to me to give you."² When the Cabinet remained adamant, Curzon petulantly threatened not to hold the Durbar. "Well, I say frankly that I would sooner not hold the Durbar at all than hold it under the conditions which you desire to prescribe for me..."³

The Cabinet, perhaps resentful of the power he had begun to wield in India, refused permission. Angry at being thwarted, Curzon had gone over the Cabinet to wire directly to Sir Francis Knollys, the King's Private Secretary, asking for royal intervention in the matter. He also threatened resignation if he did not have his way.⁴

Curzon complained to Balfour, the Prime Minister:

I have served you well out here for four years.

¹ Hamilton to Curzon, Sept. 24, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

² Curzon to Hamilton, Oct.22, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

³ Ibid. Nov.13, 1902.

⁴ Curzon to Knollys, Nov.15, 1902, CP. Vol.136.

I have sacrificed everything in that time - health, ease, leisure, and very often popularity - for the sake of the duty imposed upon me. And now you go and ask me at the end of my fourth year to throw away the results of all this labour and devotion, and to injure the cause, viz; that of binding the Indian people to the British throne which is dearer to me than my life, by thrusting upon me the duty of announcing this great disappointment to the Indian people; and you do it for no reason of which I have yet been informed or can imagine. Is this fair? Is it generous? Is it just? You have never served your country in foreign parts. For your own sake I hope you never may. English Governments have always had the reputation of breaking hearts of their pro-consuls from Warren Hastings to Bartle Frere.¹

Curzon had concluded his letter with another threat. He said. "If a public servant has lost the confidence of his master, they have the right to recall him and you can exercise that right in the present case."² But the Cabinet had refused to budge. Balfour also chided his old friend:

I cannot really assent to your view that, because the position of the Sovereign was (in your view) affected by the course to be taken at the Durbar in reference to taxation, you were therefore justified in carrying on an independent correspondence with him on a point of high policy without the knowledge or assent of your colleagues. You seem to think that you are injured whenever you do not get exactly your own way.³

Wolley Dod had made a similar complaint about Curzon to Lord Scarsdale at Eton 30 years ago!¹

With the Durbar, therefore, Curzon's relations with the

¹ Curzon to Balfour, Nov.20, 1902, CP.Vol.161.

² Ibid.

³ Balfour to Curzon, Dec. 12, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

Home Government had gone steadily from bad to worse, and the correspondence between them became increasingly acrimonious at the time of Curzon's clash with Kitchener. In 1905 when Curzon was forced to quit India he felt it was because the British Cabinet sided with the Commander-in-Chief against the Viceroy. In September 1903, Balfour had brought Brodrick to succeed the retiring George Hamilton as Secretary of State in India. Curzon and Brodrick had been close friends for 30 years. But the Brodrick that took over as Secretary of State was not the admiring friend Curzon had known. But it took a long time for Curzon to realise the fact. With all his gifts, Nature had denied sensitivity to Curzon. Many years later Curzon was to write with a corroding bitterness:

St. John Brodrick was a greater friend of mine at Balliol and in after life than at Eton. He was in some respects my closest friend in public until an evil hour he became Secretary of State while I was Viceroy. In two years he succeeded in entirely destroying both my affection and my confidence. Burning to distinguish himself as the real ruler of India, as distinct from the Viceroy,... he rendered my period of service under him one of incessant irritation and pain and finally drove me to resignation.

¹ Notes on Early Life, CA. 20.